Driven by Pleasure & Pain

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Our minds are driven around by pleasures and pains. We try to run away from pains and run toward pleasures. And other people, when they exert control over us, use that. They use pleasure and pain. And the different members of the committee of the mind use pleasure and pain to drive us around. One of the purposes of meditation is to learn how to gain some freedom from that. Even though there’s pleasure or there’s pain, the mind doesn’t fall under their control. The Buddha calls this being trained in body and trained in mind. Pleasures can come, but they don’t overwhelm the mind. Pains can come, but they don’t overwhelm the mind. So why is it that when we’re meditating, we’re trying to breathe in and breathe out in a way that gives rise to pleasure? It’s because the Buddha realized you can’t get past pleasure and pain without comprehending them. That’s what he said about the truth of suffering or the truth of pain. You’ve got to comprehend it. But the same applies to pleasure as well. And how do you comprehend it? Well, you try to give rise to it and begin to realize it. Realize that the extent to which your intentions actually shape the extent to which you will feel or appreciate a pleasure. Because pleasure comes from two sources. One is potentials from the past. In other words, the things you’ve done in the past. And this can be the past day or the past week or the past lifetime. They give rise to the potential for pleasure or pain. And then what you do with it right now, your intentions now and your intentions in the past, these are the things that shape these feelings. So the fact that you’ve got the body sitting here right now with certain pleasures and pains, that’s largely past karma. But there’s a lot of present karma going in here as well. What we do as we meditate is to figure out exactly how much of that is present karma. We intentionally try to breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. Now, for some people this is difficult. No matter how much they try to make the pleasure come, it doesn’t come. There are a couple of reasons for this. One is that it might be the way that you’re trying to change the breath, trying to change your pleasure. You’re a little bit too rough-handed. In other words, you’re manhandling these things. And as the body and the mind feel manhandled, they begin to clam up. They don’t respond. In cases like that, you’ve simply got to let the body breathe on its own. Be involved. If the body wants to breathe, it can breathe, but I’m not going to force it. And see what happens. At the same time, you have to realize that there’s this area of our awareness that we’ve learned to desensitize. We’ve been breathing in uncomfortable ways for so long that just to get around, we have to desensitize ourselves to the line that goes down through the torso, right into the heart, and down further. That’s very sensitive to the way you breathe. And if you breathe in uncomfortable ways, that gets desensitized. So look into that. Maybe you’ve got to learn how to be a little bit more sensitive to that part of the body, to appreciate how it feels when a nice breath comes in and nourishes that part of the body. And when you find that, you stick with it. For as long as you can. As the Buddha said, the pleasure that comes from concentration has no drawbacks. It’s blameless. Which means you can sit with it for long periods of time. If you find that concentrating on a particular kind of pleasure gets uncomfortable after a while, then that’s not the right way to breathe. Change the way you breathe. Adjust things. That’s what evaluation is all about. These are your fabricators in the present moment that work with the breath, that work with the pleasure. Basically, you’re talking to yourself about the breath, asking questions, proposing answers, then testing them. Then when you get good results, the next question is, “What do you do with those results?” You can sit there and just indulge in them. But as John Lee says, that’s like getting a coconut and eating the thing. You’ve had one stomach’s worth of coconut and that’s it. But if you get a coconut and decide to plant it, then you get a coconut tree. And the coconut tree gives lots more coconuts. And you can plant those. You eat some of them, but you plant some of them. And eventually you become, as he says, a coconut plantation millionaire. In other words, you’ve got to learn how to use the pleasure. And this is one of the important aspects of getting the mind beyond just being overcome by the pleasure. Part of it, of course, is when you’re staying with the breath. If you let yourself get overcome by the pleasure, you lose your focus. Then you get with the pleasure and it lasts for a little while and then it begins to dissipate because you’ve lost the cause. The cause was your attention to the breath. You try to stick with it, making it like a smooth silk thread that comes in, goes out, and has no little frayed parts along the way. If you can stay with the breath and not get distracted by the pleasure, that’s one step in learning how to get past being driven around by pleasures. And, of course, the fact that you’ve got this pleasure that comes from within, this pleasure of form, of the body as it’s felt from inside. That gives you a lever to pry yourself away from sensual pleasures. And then you begin to see that this pleasure actually has its uses. It’s not just to be indulged in. You can take the sense of ease that comes with a pleasant breath and spread the breath around. And that spreads the pleasure around as well. And again, even though it’s spread around, you can get it so it fills the whole body. You don’t want it to overcome you. You want it to overcome the mind. In other words, you learn how to not be overcome by pleasure by learning to use it, maximizing it. Some people say you can get past being attached to concentration by not doing it. You say, “Okay, I’ve tasted a little bit of concentration. I won’t do that again.” That’s not getting the mind past pleasure. Because when the mind finds that it’s hungry, it just goes back to its old ways. You want to give it this kind of pleasure, but also learn how to raise the mind above it. The advantage of this is that as you learn how not to be overcome by pleasure, you also learn how not to be overcome by pain. They’re two sides of the same coin. As the Buddha said, when pain changes, there’s pleasure in the fact that it’s changed. It’s like going in for one of those Chinese medical treatments. They take bamboo whisks and first they rub oil into your skin until it’s raw, and then they start beating you with whisks. And when they stop, it feels really good. Of course, part of its feeling really good is the fact that you’re not being beaten by bamboo whisks anymore. So when pain changes, there’s pleasure. When pleasure changes, there’s pain. The two go together. So you want to look into that. Again, you realize that how you relate to the pain makes all the difference in the world. There’s a potential or a series of potentials coming in from your past karma for painful feelings. Just like today, if you stuck your finger into the fire this afternoon, it’s going to be sore tonight. There’s not much you can do about that. You can’t change that. But you can change the way you relate to it. You can think of the breath going into that area. You can think of the breath going through the area. So whatever sense of tension you build up around it that aggravates the pain gets smoothed out, cleaned out. And then when you have this sense of pleasure that you can develop in the body, it puts you in a position where you don’t feel quite so threatened by pain. And that enables you to get curious about pain. To investigate it, to look into it, to try to comprehend it. What is this pain? What is the nature of pain? And here it’s important to realize that, as the Buddha said, just as feelings have a huge power over the mind, perceptions have a huge power over the mind as well. What are the perceptions you have that go along with that pain? How do you visualize it to yourself? How do you talk to yourself about it? What labels do you apply? To what extent do the images and the words aggravate the pain? And can you make a distinction between the physical pain and the mental pain that goes with it? Then the question becomes, if you can separate those two from each other, to what extent does the perception aggravate the mental pain? Can you change your perception around the pain? You ask a lot of good questions about this. You say, “You’ve got a pain in your finger. Is the finger the same thing as the pain?” Well, no. What’s the difference? Your sense of the finger as you feel it from within. There’s earth, water, wind, fire. In other words, solidity, coolness, warmth, energy. None of those things are the pain. The pain is something else. Can you separate that out? When you can separate it out, you begin to see the physical pain moving around a lot more than you might have imagined. Before that, you tended to glom it onto the solid parts. But if you can hold a perception in mind, they don’t have to be glommed together. It moves around a lot. This is the part of the pain that sometimes scares us, because you begin to wonder, “How far is it going to move?” But if you’ve got the breath on your side, you’ve got the pleasure that comes from breathing on your side, you know that you have a tool to use against that potential. So you hold that perception in mind, that the breath can take care of it. And when you don’t feel threatened by the pain, again, you’re more in a position where you can investigate it and see that it was that series of perceptions that caused all the trouble. If you can drop those perceptions, you’ll see either that the pain disappears or that it disappears in a very strange way. It comes into your heart and goes. Or the pain will be there, but the mind can be in the presence of the pain and not be pained by it, not suffer from it. These are very important skills. Because as we chant again and again, day after day after day, we’re subject to aging illness and death. There’s a lot of pain around that, physical pain. And then we add the mental pain on top. The physical pain is part and parcel of these processes in the body. But you find that the extent to which the mind is going to be sensitive to the pain and the extent to which it’s going to suffer from the pain, that has a lot to do with what the mind is bringing into the present moment. We talk about the potential for pain as coming in from the past, but when you look at the core arising, our experience of the present actually starts with our present karma, our intentions and perceptions we bring to things. And then after that, we experience what’s coming in from past karma. We tend to think, “Well, the past karma is already there and we’re coming in with our present karma to change it.” But actually, it’s the present karma that we experience first. That’s our first-order level of experience. And then there’s the input from the senses. The problem is that that first level of our intentions that we bring to the experience are hidden in so many layers in the mind that we don’t see them clearly. This is why we have to meditate. This is why we have to get the mind quiet for long periods of time. So you can see these things in motion. Sometimes they come as waves, sometimes they come as little blips. But it’s only when the mind is quiet that you can catch them. And you can see the extent to which they’re what is actually causing you to suffer. And this is actually good news, because this means that if we learn how to train the mind to bring the right things to the present moment, then no matter what input it gets from its past karma, it doesn’t have to suffer. This is why the Buddha never talked about people deserving to suffer. He taught not to suffer to everybody. Just because you’ve got some past karma doesn’t mean you have to suffer from it. It may show its results in the body, but they don’t have to have an impact on the mind. You want to remember this as you get older and as you get sick and as you approach death, that there’s going to be a fair amount of physical pain coming in just from the simple fact of having a body. As I say, it’s part of the package deal. You get a body and it looks nice and does good things for you in the beginning, and then you begin to notice that other people, as they get old, their bodies wear out. At first you say, “Well, that’s just old people.” And then you begin to realize that it happens to you too. It’s part of the package deal. We didn’t look at the fine print when we signed on. But the Buddha’s guidance on suffering is special in that it shows us we don’t have to suffer from the ending of the body, the disintegration of the body, the death of the body. That’s its issue. The question of whether or not we’re going to suffer from that, that’s our issue. And we can learn the skill so we don’t have to suffer, so we’re not pushed around by pleasure, we’re not pushed around by pain. We can see they have their uses. Pain has its uses. Of course, on the one hand, it warns us about things that are dangerous. But secondly, it’s a really good option for us to focus on so we can understand our minds. Because when pain comes, all the bad habits and good habits of the mind just cluster around. And here we’re in a position where we can tease them out and strengthen our good habits so that we don’t have to suffer from the pain. The mind then isn’t burdened. It’s not driven around all the time. And when that’s the case, then it’s really free. It’s not shaped by these things anymore. It’s not pushed around, pulled around. You can find its own sense of well-being. It’s a different kind of well-being when it gets to that level. As the Buddha said, it’s not a feeling. There’s a sense of well-being. He uses the same word sukha that he uses for a pleasant feeling, but he said it’s not a feeling. It doesn’t drive the mind around because it’s there. It’s just there. Nothing needs to be done to create it. It’s because it’s just there. This is why the Buddha said that nirvana is the ultimate pleasure, ease, bliss, well-being, however you want to translate sukha. There are no drawbacks to it all. And it’s a pleasure without compulsion. It’s a pleasure that’s totally free.

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