

Pleasure & Pain

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Our lives, for the most part, revolve around pleasure and pain, trying to run away from and avoid pain, trying to enjoy pleasures as much as possible. The texts say that if you ever develop the ability to remember your previous lives, that's one of the big issues you're going to remember: You remember your name, you remember your food, and then you remember your experience of pleasure and pain, the big pleasures and the big pains, mental and physical, as generally the story of your life. We tend to think of pleasure as an end in and of itself, and pain as an evil in and of itself. The main use of pain is to warn us away from dangerous things. But if you look at the actual pains we experience in life, we have a lot of pains that don't seem to have any relationship to dangerous things at all. We have more than our share of pain.

There's a great scene *Catch-22* where Yossarian is talking to a prostitute and telling her that if God really loved the world, he wouldn't have invented pain. He would have found other ways of warning us away from harmful activities, like placing lights in our forehead: a green light for good things and a red light for bad things. No merciful God could create pain.

And pain really is the big issue if you think there's a Creator out there, someone who designed the world with a purpose of any kind at all. Why does pain have to be part of that purpose? Fortunately, the Buddha never got involved in that issue. He was more interested in: What can you learn from pain? What can you learn from pleasure?

In other words, instead of seeing pleasure as an end in and of itself, he looked at pleasure to see what can be learned from it. He looked at pain to see what could be learned from it. That totally changed his relationship to pleasure and pain.

He started with the four noble truths. What's the duty with regard to the first noble truth of stress and pain? Our duty is to comprehend it, to understand it, which is very different from the way we normally react to pain. Usually, when pain arises in the body, we do our best to push it away or to will it away. All we can think of is how to get rid of it. But the Buddha says that what you've got to do is learn how to comprehend it.

Now, if you're really suffering from it, it's hard to get in a position where you can be cool and collected enough to comprehend pain, which is why pleasure has its role in the path—not sensual pleasure, but the pleasure of a concentrated mind. As the Buddha once said, right concentration is the heart of the path. And

one of the main factors of right concentration is pleasure. Another one is rapture. The reason they're so important in the practice is that they put you in a place where you can actually look at pain without feeling threatened by it.

The Buddha also observed that we tend to be attached to sensual pleasure because we can't think of any other escape from pain. Well, this is what right concentration does: It gives us another escape from pain, so that we're not so concerned about indulging in the pleasure of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. We give rise to an inner sense of pleasure as we work with the breath.

This is why we emphasize this point so much over and over again: You've got to get the breath so that it's comfortable. Notice what way of breathing can maintain comfortable sensations in the body and then learn how to maintain those sensations without getting drowsy or blurring out. What often happens is that once you get a little pleasure in the body, you just jump into the pleasure and you forget the breath. The mind becomes a blur. So it's important that once you find pleasant sensations, you learn how to breathe in such way that you're not harming them, not putting pressure on them or destroying them. You're just allowing them to stay that way. You keep tabs on the pleasure but your main focus should be on the cause, which is the way you breathe. If there's a pain in any part of the body, focus on the areas that are pleasant or, at the very least, neutral. Allow them to stay pleasant, allow them to stay neutral, without pulling the breath in too long, without pushing it out too long. Find just the right balance.

In fact, if you do it right, there comes the sensation that also comes when you're drowning: a sense of fullness, but you're not drowning. You're simply learning how to be more sensitive about how you breathe, learning how to allow that sense of fullness to expand and flow through the blood vessels, flow through the nerves to wherever it can go. If you force it or push it, you destroy it. It's more a matter of allowing it to spread. Then, when you've allowed it to spread as much as you can and you find there still pains in the body, you're in a much better position to understand them. That's because one of the basic principles of discernment is that you're going to need a very steady focus in order to understand anything. And when you try to understand pain, you can't make it your agenda that you want to make it go away. You simply want to watch it.

You'll find sometimes that your level of focus is not steady enough. When that happens, you're just getting entangled in the pain again. That's a sign that it's not time yet to focus on the pain. It's time to focus back again on the breath, on that sense of comfort wherever it is. In other words, you have to know how to retreat before you start attacking. You have to know where your position of safety is before you start venturing into dangerous territory. And you have to be able to

leave the dangerous territory when you realize it's more than you can handle at this particular point in time.

This is one of the reasons why learning how to let go of distractions is such an important part of learning meditation—being able to choose your focus, instead of simply allowing whatever comes in with the strongest force to grab your attention. There will be times when the pain is intense, and you're not ready to deal with it yet: What are you going to do then? If you can be very clear, mindful, and alert about where you're focused, and very consistent in maintaining your focus no matter what, then you're in a position to withstand the pain, to gather your forces for the next attack.

And what is the attack? You want to untangle all the many layers of pain, because it's not just a physical sensation. There are also perceptions, and there's your awareness. The perceptions are the labels you put on things. Then there's your basic consciousness. You're learning how to untangle these things: the actual physical sensation of the pain, the labels you place on it, and the awareness that's in the midst of these things. All these things tend to get glued together in your ordinary consciousness. What you want to do is to be able to untangle the different threads of sensations in the body: the feelings of pleasure and pain, and your perceptions. In other words, untangle all the five khandhas that are tangled up in the sensation of pain.

There are different tricks for doing that. Start with some questions: Is the pain constant? Is there any inconstancy in the pain? Is the pain infiltrated by other sensations? A large part of the pain comes from the perceptions that take different scattered sensations—say, in your knee or in your leg or wherever—and connect the dots, and ignoring anything else that's there. So you have to ask yourself, is there another level or another type of sensation, painless, there in the midst of the pain? Can you see it? Can you focus on it?

When you do this, you begin to see how much your way of perceiving things glues things together, creates sensations that otherwise wouldn't have to be there—in other words, how much your own ignorance adds to the pain. So you start untangling all the various threads of pain, perception, and awareness, and see them as separate things. Sometimes this can actually make the pain go away. There's a weird sensation of the pain getting sucked into your heart and disappearing. Other times, though, the pain stays there, but you're focused on a different level of sensation, or different series of threads going through the pain, so you're not overwhelmed by it, you're not harmed by it.

This is why it's called discernment. You begin to see the differences between the different aggregates that make up your larger sense of pain, your larger sense of

suffering. When you take things apart this way, they're much less imposing. They place much less of a weight on the heart. And when pain then becomes much less of an issue, it's very liberating for the mind. After all, that's the big thing we're afraid of. When you realize that, instead of having to run away, you can simply understand it in a new way, it loses its power.

As you begin to take apart all these various strands of fabrication in the mind, you're going to run across something that's unfabricated, at the point where the mind has no intentions at all to weave things together. When that happens, it's very dramatic. Things open up in a totally new way. That's one of the main benefits that come from learning how to approach pleasure and pain in a very different way from the way you normally do. Instead of seeing pleasure as an end in and of itself, and pain as an evil in and of itself, you see that they have their uses.

You see what kinds of pleasures are really worth avoiding because they get in the way of the pleasure that comes from concentration. Then you learn to maximize that pleasure from concentration so that you can understand pain. You see these things as part of a causal network. You develop the pleasure of concentration so that you can understand the fabrication that goes into pain. In that way, you learn how to realize the cessation of pain, the cessation of suffering. In other words, you're doing all the duties, all the tasks that the Buddha assigns in association the four noble truths. They're all right here in how you react to pleasure, pain, and the habits around pleasure and pain that you picked up even before you knew language at all. By undoing those habits, you learn a lot of valuable lessons and you can actually bring the mind to freedom.

This is the actual Dhamma. You're dealing with very everyday, normal things, not any exalted concepts. It's one of the reasons that when the Buddha talked about false dhammas, he used the word *saddhamma patirupa*, which literally means sophisticated dhamma. It's very easy for us to get dazzled by intellectual games and fancy concepts. But the real work of the Dhamma is dealing with everyday, ordinary stuff: pleasure and pain and how you react to them. So don't get distracted by fancy concepts. Look at what you're doing to pleasure. Look at what you're doing to pain. Everything you need to know will get untangled right there.