

Mastering Pleasure & Pain

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There's a passage in the Canon where Buddha is talking to a materialist. They get onto the topic of what it means to be developed in body and developed in mind. The materialist thinks that being developed in body means that your body is healthy and doesn't have any disease. The Buddha says, "No, that's not what it means—and if you think that's what it means to be developed in body, there's no way you're going to know what it means to be developed in mind."

Then he goes on to give a definition. When you're developed in body, he says, you're able to experience pleasure but not have your mind invaded by pleasure. The pleasure cannot invade the mind and remain, in the same way an enemy army can be repelled in such a way that it doesn't invade or remain in your fortress. As for being developed in mind, that means that pain can't invade and remain in your mind.

The materialist challenges the Buddha. First he says, "I assume then that pain and pleasure haven't invaded your mind and remained?" And the Buddha replies, "Ever since I left home to go forth into the wilderness, neither pain nor pleasure have invaded the mind and remained." The materialist goes on to say, "Well, maybe that's because you never experienced any great pain or pleasure."

This becomes the setting for one of the Buddha's longest autobiographical accounts of his quest for awakening. He tells how he went through a lot of intense pain, self-torture, but he didn't let the pain invade his mind and remain. He also experienced intense pleasure. He experienced the pleasure of jhana, he experienced the pleasure of the various knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening, and even the pleasure of awakening itself. But, in every case, he said, he didn't allow his mind to be invaded by the pleasure.

The two qualities go hand in hand. If you're the sort of person who gets easily invaded by pleasure, then pain is going to invade easily as well. You've got to learn how to train your mind to be resistant to both these things, but it's not a matter of avoiding them. The practice will involve pain. There will be physical pain sitting here. Your legs go numb. Your legs can hurt. There's mental pain when things are not going the way you want them to be. You're not getting the mind to settle down as quickly or as steadily as you'd like. So there is pain encountered in the practice, and you don't want to avoid it, you want to learn how to face it. Confront it directly.

The same with pleasure: Sometimes you're told to avoid getting the mind in a deep state of concentration, because the pleasure is very strong. But the Buddha never said that. He said that this is something you actually have to do as part of the path, to develop the pleasure that comes with concentration.

Now, you do try to stay away from getting involved too much in sensory pleasures, the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. You don't want the mind to get overwhelmed by those. In fact, you need the pleasure of concentration in order to get past those other kinds of pleasure. Why is that? Because it's under the influence of sensuality that we do a lot of unskillful things.

This is an important principle to remember as we think about pleasure and pain. The mind is not just simply on the receiving end of pleasures or pains. It plays a role in shaping them, and does things under their influence—and what it does is important. When the Buddha taught the four noble truths, he taught that there are duties that go along with each truth. In other words, the truth is not there simply to know. It's there to act on. If your mind is overcome by pleasure or pain, then it's not going to act on its duties: to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize the cessation of suffering, and to develop the path.

So there are two reasons why you want to work on learning how not to be overcome by pleasure even though you are pursuing the pleasure of concentration. One is so that the mind won't be open to being invaded by pain, and the other is so that you can actually do your duties, to find pleasure that's better even than the pleasure of concentration. More lasting. More totally enveloping.

So we work on the pleasure of concentration as a means.

Ajaan Lee has an interesting statement: He says we should regard pleasure and pain as words we speak in jest. For most of us, pleasure and pain are really earnest, serious matters. But to grow up, to be mature about pleasure and pain, we have to learn how to go beyond them and see that they're things we can use. You can use the mental pain of realizing that you have a goal that you haven't attained yet: to spur yourself on, to want to practice even more. When you say that your mind is not in the state that you'd like it to be, you don't just sit there and wallow in self-pity or cast around and start casting the blame on other people. You realize there's work to be done and so you try to find the strength inside to do it.

So the pleasure of simply being miserable is nothing you develop, but if the mind happens to be miserable, you don't just sit with the misery. You develop the pain of the realization that there's work to be done, but you can do it. It's then that you find the pleasure that comes from the practice. Once the pleasure comes, you learn how to develop it. In some cases, when the mind settles down, the pleasure is rather mild; in other cases, it can be really strong. Part of this will

depend on how hungry the mind has been up to that point. Some people complain that when they first get the mind in a strong concentration it's really intense—the rapture is very strong—and then after a while it's not so strong anymore. It's like the difference between drinking a glass of water after you've just come out of the desert for a week without any water, as opposed to drinking glass of water when you've had a glass of water just a few minutes ago. The impact on the body, the impact on the mind, is going to be very different.

But it is important that you learn how to keep your focus, even in the midst of the pleasure. Otherwise, your concentration turns into drowsiness, or what Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration. The mind is still, you're not asleep, but you're not very clear about where you are: concentration lacking in mindfulness and alertness.

That's what you've got to watch out for as the pleasure begins to grow. But again the important point is that you don't avoid the pleasure. You actively cultivate it. You learn how to be a connoisseur of the pleasure, learning to appreciate how really nice it can be to breathe, with a sense of fullness in the body, how refreshing that can be, because you're going to need that appreciation to deal with your thoughts of sensuality.

So appreciate the breath. Savor the breath. As the Buddha says, when the mind settles down, indulge in it, but make it an indulgence where there's also a part of the mind separate from the pleasure. It stays with the breath, stays with the cause separate from the pleasure. The mind stays with the breath despite the pleasure, and lets the pleasure do its work.

You want to actively cultivate the part of the mind that can be with the pleasure—can be with intense pleasure—and not be overwhelmed by it, because that's when you get to use the pleasure well. You get to do your duties with regard to the path. After all, the pleasure of concentration does make you more sensitive to levels of stress you would've overlooked otherwise. For a person who's lived in a lot of pain and a lot of unhappiness, even a little bit of pleasure seems wonderful. But if you learn how to develop a pleasure that's higher than that, when you look back at that little bit of pleasure you had before, you realize there's stress buried in it.

That's what you want to see. That's how you come to comprehend suffering, by getting more sensitive. It's strange: We're trying to develop almost a resistance to the pleasure so that we're not overcome by it, but at the same time we want to be very sensitive to it. It's actually a very balanced state of mind that you're trying to develop: sensitive but tough; sensitive but resilient; actively working at pleasure but not being overcome by it. A large part of the skill of meditation comes from

achieving that balance so that you can get the full benefits of the pleasure. You learn how to use it properly.

A lot of it has to do with your attitude. In the beginning, it's very easy to get hungry for the pleasure and get very attached to it. But after a while you should begin to realize, okay, it's there, you can tap into it when you need it, but there are times when you can't be developing it. You have other duties to do. Or even though you can try to maintain a sense of well-being as you go through the day, part of the mind can be fixated on the pleasure, while another part is fixated on the other duties you have to do. This way you become mature about pleasure and mature about pain. You began to see that neither one is a big deal. That's when you grow up.

It's like becoming a good musician. You learn how to be very sensitive to how you play, but at the same time you have to be conscious of not simply enjoying the music as you make it. You also have to be aware of what you're going to do to make the next note sound right, and then the next note, and then the next note.

So you're working in the midst of the pleasure. When you can do that, that's when the path begins to come together: insight working together with stillness; discernment working together with concentration. These are not radically separate things. They require special balance. But they have to work together if you're going to get the best results. Discernment without concentration lacks a lot of power. Concentration without discernment goes nowhere. It just sits there. It's when you can get the two of them working together that the meditation will have power and make progress.

So don't be afraid of the pleasure of jhana. Learn how to actively pursue it, but remind yourself: It's not an end in and of itself. It's a means to an end. Make sure you have that part of the mind that's not invaded by it, not overwhelmed by it. When you can keep the mind on an even keel like this, you can live with pleasure and you can live with pain, and they don't have power over you. After all, this is how other people get power over you to begin with: They either threaten you with pain or promise you pleasure. You become a slave to them through your desire for pleasure and your fear of pain.

What the Buddha wants you to do is learn how to use these things, not to be enslaved to them. You want to be the master. It's as soon as you develop this kind of mastery that you can really be free.