

Pleasant Practice, Painful Practice

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There's a sad story about a young American who went to Thailand and became a monk. He went to stay with Ajaan Maha Boowa, and one of the first questions he asked Ajaan Maha Boowa on arrival was, "What meditation theme can I follow that will lead me to awakening?" Ajaan Maha Boowa said, "I don't know. You have to find out for yourself." Unfortunately, the young monk thought that Ajaan Maha Boowa was saying that he didn't know the way to awakening, so he got discouraged and left, and ended up disrobing. He tried Zen for several years, disrobed from that, and ended up being a professor of Buddhist studies here in the States.

The sad thing, of course, is that he misinterpreted Ajaan Maha Boowa's statement. Ajaan Maha Boowa didn't say that he didn't know the way to awakening. What he didn't know was which technique would work specifically for that young monk, seeing that there's no one technique guaranteed to take every meditator to stream entry or once returning or non-returning or arahantship. The technique that works for any individual person is a matter of individual temperament.

There are two main practices as the Buddha defines them. There's painful practice and there's pleasant practice. By this he doesn't mean that you sit here with a lot of pain or or a lot of pleasure. Painful practice is having to contemplate the body as your main theme. It's painful because it's not a pleasant theme to follow. Pleasant practice has to do with getting into the jhanas and working with the sense of ease and refreshment that come from getting the mind really still.

Now, this doesn't mean that with body contemplation you don't get into jhana. In both cases, the Buddha said, what determines whether your practice is going to be pleasant or painful is which kind of contemplation leads you to develop the five strengths and the five faculties: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration and discernment. The concentration in both cases means the jhanas, but the theme leading you to develop those jhanas, and from there on into discernment, is something that varies.

Some people can just work with the jhana itself. You look at whatever state of concentration you have settled into and you examine it

to see: Where is there still any stress here? You look for what you might be doing that causes the stress, and you notice that by noticing the rise and fall of the level of stress in the mind in concentration. If you catch the activity of the mind that brings that on, right then and there, drop that activity. When you do this, you're learning the basic skill that will take you all the way, at the very least, to stream entry, because it's all about seeing and developing dispassion for the activities of the mind.

The same holds true with the concentration that comes from contemplating the body. At first, you're focused on your image of the body. But then there comes the question, "Well, what is the perception that makes you want to give rise to, say, an unpleasant image of the body, as opposed to an attractive one? And what is thing, this perception of attractive and not attractive?" You learn to turn around and look at that. Take that apart.

In both cases, you're learning how to look at the role of perception in your mind, the role of feeling and fabrication, which are the central aggregates in any attempt to free the mind from the aggregates. That makes you more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing to deceive itself, what the mind is doing to create unnecessary suffering for itself. As for which of the two main types you fall into, you don't know that beforehand. This is one of the reasons why we practice both body contemplation and breath meditation.

Contemplate the thirty-two parts of the body. You can add other parts of the body if you like. For some reason, eyes are not mentioned in the list, but if you want, you can visualize them to yourself: what the eyes look like without the eyelids. Or you can just go down the standard list. When you focus on a particular body part, ask yourself, "Where in my body, my sense of the body sitting right here, is that part right now?" This is to drive home the fact that the body part is not just something in an anatomy chart or in a picture you may have seen out there. It's something right here in your body. You've been living with your liver, you've been living with your lungs all this time without really thinking much about them. Go through the various parts until you find one part that really captures your interest, that really seems to hit you: "My gosh, my body has that too and I've been carrying it around right inside me"—anything that helps you question your attachment to the body, so that you can stop taking it for granted that your body's a really cool thing.

This is not to say the body's a bad thing. After all, you've got to use the body for the practice. What you're trying to cut through are all your unhealthy positive and negative images of your body. Unhealthy negative images center around the idea that, "It's just me who's ugly. My body's not beautiful like all those other people I see in the media." An unhealthy positive image is saying, "I've got this really cool body here. I'm pretty sharp. People find me attractive, so my body must make me better than other people." Both of those are unhealthy because they lead to unhealthy mind states. A healthy positive image is that, "I've got a body that I can practice with." A healthy negative image is one that says, "We're all equal in terms of what we've got in our bodies and none of the parts are really all that attractive when you take them out. So the value of the body doesn't lie in its appearance. It lies in what you do with it."

So it's good to do this practice on a regular basis to help loosen your attachment to the body. It helps with a lot of defilements, not just with your attachment to lust. It's interesting to note that the Buddha's analysis of lust is that you start with the fact that you like your body and then you go to the body of the opposite sex or whatever the sex you're attracted to. But it starts with your body. This analysis is not just for lust. It's also for pride, such as the pride of racism. Skin is just skin, and nobody's skin is attractive when it's put in a pile. Whatever kind of attachment you have to the body—it may be the unwillingness to do without food or to do without sleep for fear that it's going to harm the body—you tell yourself, "Well, the body's here to be used. And there comes a point where you're going to throw it away anyhow. So use it in a good way while you've got it."

People put so much energy in trying to preserve their bodies. What are they preserving them for, usually? In most cases, they're just preserving them so they look good until they admit to themselves that they can't really look good anymore. That doesn't accomplish anything. So you have to ask yourself, "To what extent am I unwilling to use the body for something that will really have a good impact on the mind?" Then look at the various parts of the body and see that there's really nothing here that's worth holding onto for its own sake. Learn to see the body as a tool. This is all very helpful.

Whether it turns out your practice is going to be painful or pleasant in terms of the theme that actually sparks your awakening, either way you've got to do this kind of contemplation on a regular basis.

The same in the other case: Even if your practice is painful, the Buddha says that you've got, at the very least, to have the breath as your escape, because there are times when body contemplation can get the mind really disturbed. It can lead to unskillful mind states, and that's when you've got to drop that theme for the time being and come back to the breath. Give yourself a sense of wellbeing, of refreshing the mind, because the mind needs its refreshment on the path.

After all, it's going to be feeding anyhow. And if it doesn't have something really good to feed on in terms of the concentration, it's going to go slipping out, jumping over the wall, finding something outside to feed off of, to find its hit of pleasure. So give it something good right here, something that's visceral, immediate, and skillful; something that's going to help anchor you in the present moment and puts you in a position where you really can see what's going on in the mind—because the breath is the closest thing in the body to the mind.

It's through the breath, or the energy of the breath, that you can actually move your body and be sensitive to what's going on in the body. So staying with the breath focuses you right at the mind at the same time creating a good relationship between the body and the mind.

So whether your practice is going to be painful or pleasant, it's good to have some experience with both sides, both because nobody can know which side you're on, and because it helps give balance to both sides.

Be alive to the fact that there are lots of different ways, lots of different themes for training the mind. There's many different themes in the suttas. It's even possible to work with metta or any of the brahmaviharas as the basis for your concentration. As long as you then use that concentration as a basis for further developing the factors for awakening—and in particular, discernment about what you're doing as you create a state of mind—that, too, can be one of the pleasant ways of gaining awakening.

But it all has to come down to your ability to watch your own mind as it's creating unnecessary stress and suffering through its perceptions and feelings and fabrications here in the present moment. Whichever theme leads you to that level of awareness and makes it easy for you to see what you're doing and where the unnecessary stress is and how you don't have to create it: That'll be the method that works. A part of the Buddha's greatness as a teacher was his realization that there are many different personality tendencies and there are these different ways of

dealing with your different tendencies so that regardless of your tendency, there is a way for you to reach awakening.