

Pleasure & Pain

July 31, 2012

We're practicing the middle path, or the middle way, between indulgence in sensuality on one side, and self-torture on the other, but it's best to think of the middle way as not lying on a continuum halfway between those two points. In other words, we're not here doing a little bit of pain, a little bit of pleasure, middling pleasure and middling pain. We're trying to find a state where there is no pain or pleasure. As we practice the path to that state, we're actually trying to raise ourselves above the continuum. Because the continuum basically, on one side, takes sensual pleasure as an end in itself, and the other side sees pain as being something inherently good. Instead, the Buddha wants you to use pleasure and pain for something that's even better.

We use just enough sensual pleasure to get by, in terms of food, shelter, clothing, medicine, but we don't take sensuality itself as a part of the path. We try to find a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure that comes from concentration. This, the Buddha said, is a pleasure that's blameless. In other words, it doesn't harm anybody and it doesn't fog the mind. This is a pleasure off the continuum.

The pleasure that comes from a centered and broad state of awareness actually enables you to see things more clearly. There's a lot to be learned about the mind by getting it to settle down. That's because the process of getting the mind to be concentrated, in and of itself, requires some discernment.

For example, when you're dealing with distraction, you want to figure out why the mind gets distracted, why it can lie to itself when it's about to run away and yet pretend that it's not going anywhere, that it's going to stay right here. How does that happen? Why are there these different layers in the mind? And who's fooling whom here? Can you learn to detect the points where the mind is ready to go, when it hasn't quite left the breath yet but it's on its way?

When you can do that, you've learned an important skill. And you've learned a lot of things about the layers in the mind, the layers of dishonesty: where one side of the mind is getting ready to do something, and another side of the mind is pretending not to notice; the part that's complicit and yet would deny up and down that there's any complicity. That's what you've got to watch out for. When you learn to uncover that, you've learned some important things about the mind.

And it's the same as you go through the various levels of concentration. You learn different ways that the mind fabricates around its object, how it relates to the sense of the body, to what extent the sense of the body is a creation. When

things get very, very, very still, both in the body and in the mind, you realize that the movement of the breath energy, the subtle breath energy, through the different parts of the body is what creates your sense of where the body is. When that movement grows still, the sense of the boundary of the body begins to dissolve. You have the choice of maintaining the perception of that boundary or dropping it. And you begin to see how artificial the whole thing is. That, too, gives you some important insights.

So don't think that concentration practice has to be one thing and discernment practice is something else. In the process of maintaining your concentration, you're going to learn a lot about the mind. Try to maintain the sense of being centered, having a sense of well-being inside. It's not just a dead end path, as some people seem to say. If you learn how to use it properly, you can learn a lot about the processes of fabrication in the mind. And that's what insight is all about: how the mind fabricates things—its sense of the body, its sense of the mind, how it fabricates speech as you try to carry the concentration into the day. It may not be full absorption at those times, but at least you have a center that you can try to maintain.

Like that image of the man with a bowl full of oil on his head: You try to balance this bowl of oil and you don't want to spill even a drop. Try to maintain your concentration as you go into the day, and at first you find that you're spilling it all over the place in the beginning. But don't get frustrated by that. Take it as an opportunity to learn: What are the things that cause you to spill your bowl of oil? And don't blame sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations outside. It's the movement of the mind out to those things that spills the oil. And so what does the mind want out of sights?

If you keep these questions in mind you can learn an awful lot simply by doing your best to maintain your state of concentration. You see this flow of the mind outside, and if you look for it enough, you'll be able to catch it at times when the flow is about ready to go, but you're not flowing with it. You can observe it as something separate. You begin to realize that your willingness to go along with the flow is what kept it alive. If you don't play along, it goes for just a short distance and then it just drops. That, too, is an important insight that can be gained from sticking with the pleasure of concentration.

So you use the pleasure. You're practicing the concentration not for its own sake, but as a tool. It gives you a sense of well-being so that you're less likely to want to run out after cheap pleasures. And it gives you a standard of measurement. When you're very, very still, you can see very subtle movements. And when you have a set intention that you carry, not only into your meditation,

but also into your daily life, you begin to see how that intention is knocked around by other intentions. The more you're able to resist those other intentions, the more you see through them. Because that's the only way you're going to be able to resist them. You can't do it just through force of will. In the beginning, that's what maintains it: your determination. You want this to work. But it's only by seeing into how the mind deceives itself that you're really going to have any solid concentration, a solid sense of center as you go through the day.

So this is how we learn to use pleasure.

As for pain, it's a similar sort of thing. We're not here to pursue pain as a good in and of itself. But it is a useful means. It's a useful tool. As the Buddha says, if you find that living by your pleasure, unskillful qualities are beginning to proliferate in your mind, you have to be willing to make the practice a little more painful. That may mean giving up certain things you like, sitting for longer periods of time, basically forcing the issue.

Now, the pain isn't going to do anything on its own. In other words, sitting with the pain doesn't burn away old karma. And just trying to be very still in the presence of pain isn't going to burn away old karma, either. But when you're sitting with pain, things are going to come up in the mind, and you get to see them. You're forcing the issue. Your old habits that you used to indulge very easily get frustrated by the pain. This is particularly true here in the modern world, where we're trained to be consumers, trained to have things come quickly. You want something and you just click on it, and it comes. It's good to have a few obstacles to your desires so that you can see them. Otherwise, they blend into the background, they move under the water, and you don't have any sense of them at all.

A similar principle applies to sitting with unskillful thoughts that are causing stress or pain in the mind. Simply sitting with the thoughts and bearing with them isn't going to do anything. You have to be inquisitive, to figure out: "What is it about this thought that keeps me attracted to it?" Sometimes people think that "If I think unskillful thoughts enough, I'll see the pain, and that'll get me past them." But that's often a trick of the mind. It wants you to think the unskillful thoughts so it gives you a sense that by sitting here engaging in these unskillful thoughts, you're engaging in the path. You're not. It's very rare that intentionally pushing yourself in that direction, or allowing that to happen when you have other ways of dealing with it, really impresses upon you the fact that this kind of unskillful thinking is causing suffering. Because the mind does have a tendency to discount the suffering because it's enjoying the unskillful thinking so much. That's something you have to watch out for.

You have to take an inquisitive attitude toward it: “What here is the pleasure in this thinking? Why am I attracted to it? Why does it capture my imagination? What about it makes me feel that it’s worthwhile?” If you find you’re beginning to get answers to that, then it’s worth investigating. Otherwise, if no answers are coming up, it’s a sign that the unskillful thinking is just going to run circles around you. So you’ve got to get the mind still, to figure out some way of extracting yourself from that unskillful thinking, to get back to the breath.

So, again, pain is not an unmitigated good. It’s a tool you have to learn how to use. And when you can take this attitude both toward pleasure and pain, you find that it does lift you up above that old continuum of running back-and-forth between indulging in pain, indulging in sensual pleasure, and then turning around and indulging in pain again. You’re learning how to cut the loop by realizing that there are other alternatives.

So often we get stuck in a situation where we think there are only two or three alternatives, and we run around the circle among them. It’s good to be able to imagine that there are other alternatives totally outside of that circle. And it’s often in those other alternatives, where you don’t have to choose x or y , that you get released from the issue.

There are other choices out there. It’s in realizing that there are those other choices: That’s where the path lies.