

# *Pleasure & Pain*

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Pleasure and pain are big issues in our lives — so big that you'd think we would understand them better. It's because we let ourselves get pushed around by these things without really looking into them: That's why we suffer so much. And one of the reasons we don't look into them is because it's hard. Pain especially is hard to look at. We've been dealing with pleasure and pain ever since we were born, and a lot of our habits for dealing with pleasure and pain are things we learned before we could even talk, before we could understand anything at all. So there's a lot of ignorance here that we haven't explored. Meditating is basically making up our minds to try and understand these two issues — which are basically one issue: the issue of feeling.

We start out by establishing a beachhead for ourselves. In the midst of all the chaos of the world, we have our little corner here. That's what Ajaan Suwat liked to call the monastery here: "our quiet corner." You have to make a quiet corner in the mind as well. If you wait for the world to settle down and be a good place to live in, where everybody's fair and just, you'll never have your chance to straighten out your own mind. You'll die first. This is why you have to start here, creating this little corner and giving all your attention to this one spot where you're focusing on the breath or whatever your meditation object is. The purpose is to create a little space, at least, where you can put aside the madness of the world — where you feel solid, secure, where there's a sense of wellbeing.

So you find a spot that's relatively comfortable and you work to make it more comfortable. You learn how to recognize when the breath is too long or too short — because it doesn't *feel* right. Nobody out there can tell you that this kind of breathing is too long or that this kind of breathing is too short, too shallow, too deep, or whatever. You've got to notice these things on your own. Learn how to be sensitive just to this process of breathing and figure out for yourself: What is the sign of a breath that's too long or too short? You've got to develop your own sensitivities.

This is what insight is all about: developing your inner sensitivity to pleasure and pain, so that you can detect them on their subtlest levels. If you wait until they're really strong, you get overwhelmed. So start on this subtle level here: just the breathing. Then when you've got a spot here that feels good — the breath comes in, it feels good; the breath goes out, it feels good — you can let the sense of boundary around your little spot dissolve away. Think of the sense of ease spreading out from that spot, flowing along whatever channels there are in the body that pleasure can flow, permeating in all directions.

Again, this is up to you to decide what works in your sense of the body. Teachers can give pointers, but you've got to take the pointers and put them into practice and see what works and what doesn't work for you. It's a matter of developing the right sensitivity. You can't take someone else's insights and just slap them onto your experience and claim to have wisdom. Discernment comes in three forms: the discernment you learn from other people – the things you hear, the things you read – that's one level; the things you think through – that's another level; and then finally the things you learn by trying to develop mindfulness, alertness, and other good qualities of the mind. The third level is where the insight really becomes your own – it's your own sensitivity showing you these things.

Once you've developed your beachhead, your quiet corner, work out from there. See how it relates to other things going on in the body – particularly other feelings of pleasure, other feelings of pain. Some kinds of pain you can work through. As you expand the sense of the comfortable breath, it begins to dissolve the pain away. Or if there's a sense of tension around the pain, you can dissolve the tension away. Even though the pain may stay there, dissolving the tension around it can help a lot. It makes it a lot easier to live with these things.

So get as much of the body as comfortable as you can. That's when you can really look into the pains still remaining, because you've got your foundation, and you've been developing sensitivity. You can begin to see which part of the pain is physical and which is mental – in other words, which part of the pain comes from actions of the mind, the way the mind reacts to the raw data of physical pain, the way it puts a label on it, the way it constructs dialogues around it. All the wild beasts in your savannah here are going to come gathering around the waterhole of the pain. That little child who is always feeling wronged, the little child who feels – whatever: You find that when you get in touch with your inner child it whines a lot. And especially here, right at the pain. If you can learn not to identify with it, you learn a lot of interesting things. You sense how when *this* particular thought comes and surrounds the pain, it makes the pain worse. *This* particular thought makes it better. You see these things through your own sensitivity, by having a place to stand and watch where you're not totally threatened by the pain.

At the same time, you learn how to deal with pleasure. It's so easy, when there's a sense of pleasure in the body, just to drop the breath and forget about your meditation and to indulge in the pleasure. That's something you also have to work to overcome. It's not that you want to destroy the pleasure, it's just that you learn how to be with it, how to use it and not get sucked in by it. In other words, you learn how to change your relationship both to pleasure and to pain. If you approach pleasure the right way, you can use it as a foundation for stronger and stronger powers of concentration and more and more stillness. The greater the stillness, the more sensitivity you can bring to discerning pleasure and the pain.

So in both cases you're trying to learn how to deal with pleasure and pain and not be overwhelmed by them, to watch how your mind reacts in unskillful ways to them, so you can begin to unlearn a lot of the bad habits you developed way back when. As you learn how to approach both pleasure and pain in more skillful ways – as tools on the path, rather than ends in themselves – you find that your new understanding has an impact on the entirety of your life, because so much of your life is driven by pleasure and pain. When you can see them both more clearly – and your reactions to them more clearly – you're not driven. You have a wider range of choice. More freedom. And it all starts right here, at the basic building blocks.

The physical world may be made out of atoms, but the world of your experience is made out of little things like this – pleasures and pains. So use the techniques of the meditation to become more skillful in how you deal with the basic building blocks. Once the basic building blocks are well in hand, then the whole rest of your life gets rebuilt.