

Abusing Pleasure & Pain

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Meditation is largely training in how to handle pleasure and pain. We need this training because we tend to abuse these things. When pain comes along we try to push it away. When pleasure comes we like to wallow in it. And pushing away and wallowing are not really all that productive of any genuine happiness, any genuine wellbeing. When you push the pain away, you don't get to know it. You don't get to understand it. As a result, you never really get away from it. No matter how hard you push, it keeps coming back, coming back. It's like having a delinquent child. You don't like him in the house and so you push him out of the house. And of course that brings on more trouble to you, because of what your child has done when he's out of the house.

Our abuse of pleasure is a different kind of problem. We want to have it all the time and yet we don't look after it. We just wallow in it and then it turns into something else. Ajaan Suwat had an image for this. He said, it's like being a water buffalo. Water buffaloes like to drink nice clean water. But when they get a nice puddle of clean water, what do they do? They lie in it. They piss in it. They wallow around in it and get it all muddy. As a result, they don't have the clean, clear water they wanted. In other words, the pleasure we gain when we meditate can be used for developing an even higher pleasure, a genuine nourishment for the mind to keep us going, to keep our meditation work well nourished. Yet as soon as we gain a little bit of pleasure, we don't want to use it as a basis for any kind of work. We just want to wallow in it. The mind begins to drift away and then we've destroyed our meditation because we've abused the pleasure.

So it's important that you understand the proper way to approach both pleasure and pain in the meditation. That way you can get genuine benefits from them because they are both noble truths. When pain arises, think of it: "This is the first noble truth." When the pleasure arises from being settled in the breath, that's part of the fourth noble truth: right concentration, a factor of the path. But we don't use it as a path. We just lie in it. And you know what happens when you lie down in paths. If it's a forest path, you're bound to get run over by an elephant or whatever large animal uses the path. If it's a paved road, you get run over by trucks and cars.

The path is to be followed, to be developed. That's what you do with this kind of pleasure: You learn how to develop it. As for the pain, you learn to comprehend it. That means in the beginning—say, as a pain arises in the knee or in your back—you've got to strengthen the mind, give it a sense of ease and wellbeing, so that it doesn't feel threatened by the pain. This is where the pleasure from the meditation can show one of its uses. You try to develop a sense of ease with the breath. Once you've got that sense of ease going, you don't wallow in it. As the Buddha says, once there's a sense of pleasure and rapture coming from getting the mind secluded from its unskillful thinking, you allow that sense of pleasure and rapture to permeate the entire body, to suffuse the entire body. Now that requires a little work, and a fair amount of alertness. How

do you allow that pleasure to spread without squeezing it out of existence? You have to learn how to develop just the right touch.

This is one way of discovering whether your meditation is too clamped down. If you clamp down on the object of the meditation, it's not going to produce the sense of ease you want. Or if you try to force the ease through the body, it's just going to destroy the ease and make things worse. So how do you allow it to spread? Just pose that question in the mind and see what answers you can come up with. And you want it to fill the whole body. As the Buddha said, it's like having a pile of flour—or, in his image, a pile of bath powder. In those days, you'd take bath powder and knead water into it to make a lump like dough that you would then rub over your body. To mix the water with the bath powder, you had to knead the water through the powder in such a way that every part of the ball of bath powder was saturated with water, but it didn't drip.

So how do you saturate the whole body with pleasure? That requires a lot of alertness, alert to the whole body. This is why the Buddha says, in the beginning of his breath meditation instruction, that you watch when the breath is long and when it's short. Then you try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, so that when the pleasure arises, you can allow it to spread through the whole body. If there's any sense of blockage, you try to knead the pleasure through that blockage. This is very different from wallowing in the pleasure. When you wallow in the pleasure, as they say in Thai, you close your ears and close your eyes and just dive right in. You're not taking care of the pleasure. You're not doing any work at all. And because you're not doing any work, the effort that was required to keep that pleasure going disappears. In the meantime you've probably lost focus and drifted into a delusive state.

So you need to establish a very large frame of reference, the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. This is where you become more sensitive to the breath energies in the body: the flow of energy down the back, or sometimes up the back; down the legs, or sometimes up the legs. These things really vary from person to person. You find that conceiving of the breath energy in different ways helps to modulate the breathing so that it feels good: just right for what you need right now. When it feels good in one spot, you think of it spreading out in whichever way is the most comfortable to fill the whole body, so that you're surrounded with breath energy—behind you, in front of you, above you, below you. The whole body is saturated with a sense of ease and wellbeing, with the fullness of rapture.

Now you want to do this early on in the meditation period, because allowing the breath energy to flow in this way helps to eliminate a lot of the potentials for pain in the body: the pain that comes from focusing down too hard, from sitting in an unbalanced posture, or from closing off certain energies in the body to focus more strongly on the spot you want to highlight. You can avoid those problems by thinking "whole body" all from the very beginning, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. That in and of itself can help prevent a lot of pains.

When I was first meditating at Wat Asokaram, we'd have hour-and-a-half sittings. I'd usually find that after the first half an hour or so, there'd be pains in my leg. But then I realized that up to that point I hadn't been doing much work in spreading the breath, spreading the pleasure from the breathing. So as a way of

heading those pains off beforehand, the first thing I'd do right from the very beginning of the session would be to think of the whole body, of the breath flowing through the whole body. That helped to eliminate a lot of the pains.

So while you're sitting here, don't think of how long you're going to be sitting here. Think of the work you've got to do right now. When there's a sense of ease in the breathing—and the breathing does become a lot easier when you're thinking of the whole body, because you've begun to get sensitive to areas where you've tensed up to breathe in or to push the breath out—you can allow the various parts of the body to relax.

Then you do your best to maintain that sense of full-body awareness and relaxation. It does have a tendency to shrink, so you have to fight that. Think, "whole body," all the way with the in-breath, "whole body" all the way with the out.

That's the work you do in the pleasure. When the pleasure arises, you have something to do with it. This also helps when the breath gets more and more refined. It will come to a point where it's going to stop—not because you've forced it to stop, but simply because all the breath energies in the body are so full and so well connected that they nourish one another. You're thinking less, so less oxygen is being turned into carbon dioxide in your body. At the same time, the carbon dioxide going out the pores is enough to keep the blood in balance, so the brain's instinctive reading of the level of carbon dioxide in the blood allows the breath to grow more and more still. When it's still, you're really going to need this full-body awareness not to lose track of things.

That's how you make proper use of the pleasure. Whatever sense of ease comes from the breath, you allow it to suffuse the body. Again, you don't force it. Just think of everything opening up to allow the pleasure to flow in. This puts you in a really good position if any pains come up, because the duty with regard to pain is not to push it away, not to make it go away. The duty with regard to pain, remember, is to comprehend it. And the first thing you've got to realize is that whenever there's any pain or stress, there are two kinds. There's the simple pain and stress that comes from the three characteristics. In other words, anything that's fabricated like the body or the mind—any of the *khandhas* or aggregates—is going to involve some stress simply by virtue of the fact that it's fabricated. That's part of the natural order of things.

But there's also a deeper stress, a deeper pain that comes from craving. That's stress and pain in the four noble truths. And that's not necessary. In Ajaan Lee's phrase, the pains in the body are natural pains. The pains caused by craving are unnatural. We create them—and yet we don't have to. That's what you need to learn how to see. Why do you create these kinds of pains? Because you like to feed on your pleasures. But when you're feeding on your pleasures, you're going to run into pains as well. And because you're in feeding mode, you start feeding on the pain, too, and that's unpleasant. So you want to watch: Why is the mind feeding on these things? You want to develop a sense of what the Buddha calls *nibbida*, which can be translated as disenchantment, but also as disgust or distaste for these things. In other words, you want to stop feeding, to lose your appetite for feeding. That's different from pushing them away. When you push them away, you don't really understand the difference between the natural pain in the body and the unnecessary suffering or stress in the mind. You want to keep on

feeding, but you've got something bad in your mouth so you indiscriminately try to spit it right out. And often you can't, for it's a big glob stuck in your throat.

You have to learn how to watch these things to make the necessary distinctions. This is why that sense of ease and wellbeing from the concentration is an important tool, an important helpmate in the path, because it allows you not to feel threatened by the pain. The pain may be there, but you've got something else you can focus on. And one of the things you can do, once you've got this full-body awareness going together with a sense of the breath energy flowing throughout the whole body, is to allow the breath to spread through the pain, so the pain isn't a wall, say, in your leg, or in your back or in your hip. It's porous. And the breath comes first, so the pain can't stop it.

There's often a subconscious reaction that perceives the pain as a wall that can block the breath. When there's a pain, you tend to close off that part of the body when you breathe. And because it's squeezed off, it doesn't participate in the breath. Of course that makes things worse. You allow the pain to restrict your breath energy. So you want to reconceive the breath energy as permeating that part of the body *prior* to the pain. It's there first, so the pain can't block it. Hold that possibility in mind. Keep that foremost so that you're not just reacting to the pain, but are actually more proactive in helping to direct the breath energy through the area occupied by the pain.

This can help loosen up the pain and allow you to feel less threatened by it. Sometimes the pain will actually go away. If it doesn't go away, you can still watch: What does the pain do as you breathe through it? How does it move? How does it change? What are the momentary pain sensations? Are they all pain sensations? Or were you labeling them "pain" in ignorance? What happens when you label them simply as "sensations"? Where is the worst spot of the pain? How bad is it? Is it so bad you can't stand it?

Usually when you get interested and more proactive with the pain like this, instead of simply being on the receiving end, you find that the pain is a lot more tolerable. That's because you're not just sitting there drinking in the pain or eating up the pain. You've gone from feeding mode to investigating mode. You're probing, chasing the pain down from a position of strength based on the breath. You can start seeing distinctions. What's the difference between the physical pain and the mental pain? What's the distinction between the physical pain and the body? What's the distinction between the mental pain and your awareness of the mental pain?

We tend to glom these things together, but that's because we don't understand them. We've been pushing them away, so we push them into one big glob. But as you allow them to open up, you begin to see that these things are different. The sensations of the body are earth, wind, water, and fire. Pain is something other than those four things. So when pain seems to have taken over your knee, try to ferret out which are the pain sensations and which are the knee sensations. Focus on distinguishing among the earth sensations, the fire sensations, water sensations, and the breath sensations in the knee. When you can sort them out, you see exactly what's left to be the actual pain. You see that these are all different things. They don't have to be glommed together.

This is where thinking of the breath as primary—as prior to the pain rather than something that can be squeezed out by the pain—is very helpful. Earth, water, wind, and fire were there first. The pain came later. Keep that in mind. It

helps you separate the pain out from the leg. As you're engaging in this analysis, you're feeling less and less on the receiving end, or on the eating end, and more in a position of simply probing to understand.

Then you apply the same principle to the mind and the mental pain. There's the awareness and there's the awareness of the pain. Then there's the pain itself. Try to sort these things out. Again, which came first? The awareness was first. The pain is visiting. Don't let the pain take priority. Keep your awareness, your perception of your awareness, in a position of priority.

When you do this, you're learning how to use both pleasure and pain in the right way. You're not abusing the pleasure. You're not abusing the pain. You're gaining experience in developing the duties of the four noble truths. You're developing the path, and you're comprehending the pain to the point where you develop dispassion for it. It may seem strange to say that we're ordinarily passionate for our pains, but we do allow the mind to get colored by them, as pain in the body becomes anguish in the mind. If something has the mind upset, causing it anguish, that's a kind of passion, a kind of coloring of the mind. And it's not necessary.

So we've got to learn new habits in the way we approach pleasure and pain, so that the pleasure isn't simply an end in and of itself, and the pain isn't pushed away as an enemy. You put the pleasure to use so that you can comprehend the pain. Only when you actively try to comprehend the pain can you go beyond it. Only when you put the pleasure to use can you go beyond it. As Ajaan Lee said, that becomes the point where you stop bothering them, because you've got something better than conditioned pleasures, something better than pain. And that's when everyone has their freedom. The pain has its freedom. The pleasure has its freedom. And you have *your* freedom.

So try to keep these points in mind.