

Pleasant Practice, Painful Practice

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The breath is the basis of our practice partly because it's our anchor in the present moment, partly because it's the means by which we shape our experience of the body. If we do it in ignorance, it's going to cause suffering. So we bring the other factors that shape our experience—our ways of directing our thoughts to a topic and evaluating it—and we apply them to the breath in a way that also gives rise to the way we shape the mind through feelings and perceptions. In other words, we have labels we place on the breath, and we have perceptions that tell us *this* is a breath sensation or *that* may not be a breath sensation. We work with those in a way that can bring the mind to an alert state of calm.

How can you work it so that everything in the body is related to the breath in your perceptions? How can you breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of pleasure and ease: a sense for rapture when you need extra energy, a sense of equanimity when you want the energy level to calm down? You bring all these things together with the breath because these are the different ways we shape our experience. If we do *any* of them in ignorance, there's going to be suffering. So we try to do this with knowledge and awareness—*clear* awareness.

Now, the clarity of our awareness and our skill in shaping these things is something that will have to develop over time. It's through observing these processes that we gain discernment. I was reading a while back an interview in which a teacher was talking with a student. The student said that she had been meditating on her breath and found there was a fair amount of pain in her body. So she adjusted the level of her breath, adjusted the way she breathed, and it alleviated a lot of the pain. It made it easier for her to sit long periods of time. The teacher said, "Well, that's all well and good, but you lost an opportunity to gain insight." That's a real misunderstanding right there, because how are you going to gain discernment unless you look into this process of what the Buddha calls fabrication and master it?

How we fabricate our sense of who we are and where we are, what the body's like: You have to learn to play with these things if you're going to gain any discernment at all to understand what fabrication is and what influence the principle of cause and effect has. When you manipulate certain causes, what are the effects that come about? To what extent can you create a reliable sense of ease and well-being with the breath? To what extent do you run into barriers—such as

the limits of what a fabricated happiness can be? The only way you're going to learn these things is through playing with them.

It's like getting a new toy or a new stereo system. You play with the dials; you play with the different settings, and you learn how far you can go with that particular toy or that particular stereo. It's the same with the breath and the way you relate to the body. This is what the Buddha calls pleasant practice—getting the mind to settle down with a sense of ease, creating sensations, creating feelings in the body through the breath that draw you into the breath, that make you like staying here.

This is one way that we practice, but it's not the only way. If it were the only way, we'd be really limited. All our defilements would be able to hide in whatever blind spots we might still have.

This is why the Buddha also recommended painful practice. And it's interesting. When he talks about painful practice, he's not referring to physical pain, although learning how to sit with pain is an important lesson in patience. In fact, it's one of the very beginning lessons in meditation. You sit in the meditation posture for long enough, and it's going to give rise to pain. Your ability to deal with pain comes under the qualities of patience and equanimity, which the Buddha takes as a preliminary for all types of meditation.

But on top of that, he says there's another kind of painful practice, and that's contemplating the unattractiveness of the body. This is really important because we're all attached to the body in one way or another, and that attachment becomes a big weight on the mind. The extent to which we don't see it as a problem: That in itself is a problem.

This is what the Buddha said: If you have a lot of passion, a lot of aversion, a lot of delusion, you really do have to look into this issue of how you're attached to the body. One way of counteracting the attachment is to start thinking about all the unattractive and undesirable things that there are in your body. This is not to make you hate the body. It's not meant to induce the desire to die or anything like that. It's just medicine for the fact that we're strongly attached to the body, and that attachment is a big weight on the mind.

There's an interesting story in the Canon of a nun who's going out in the forest, and she meets up with a guy who propositions her. Now, he's not crude in his approach. There's a version of the story that I was reading a while back—you know, these renderings they do, when they don't really translate straight—in which he comes off as a real oaf. And of course, she's going to say no. But in the original version, he's very articulate. He spins all kinds of word nets to try to trap

her in one way or another: all the pleasures he's going to provide for her, all the wealth he's going to be able to give her if she'll go off with him.

But she's not the least bit interested. She's a non-returner. He goes on and on and on about how pleasant it would be in the forest if they went together and how beautiful she is. Now, for anyone who worries about how beautiful his or her body is, that's a real trap right there because you're constantly concerned: "Does this person think I'm beautiful? Am I still attractive?" Fortunately, she didn't have any interest in that. As she told him, "There's nothing in this body that's attractive. It's all ready to die. Take the contents out and you wouldn't want to look at them at all. Why are you interested in this body?"

He says, "It's because of your eyes." He goes on and on how beautiful her eyes are, like the eyes of a doe. She says, "What is an eye? It's just a little bubble filled with tears and secretions. But if you like mine, here: Have it!" And she plucks an eye out and hands it to him. Of course, that puts an end to his attempts at seduction. He apologizes profusely, and she goes safely along her way.

Now, notice that she goes safely on her way as a result of this: It was through her sense of the body's unattractiveness that he *saved* herself from the nets and traps that he was laying with his words. When you think about it, she had quite a sense of humor. "You like my eye? Okay, have it!" That's a mind with a lot of freedom.

The story ends with her going to see the Buddha, and just looking at the Buddha, she gets her eye back. There's some question as to whether the story actually happened, but it tells you an important lesson: that when you're not attached to the body, the mind is free. You're not trapped in the kinds of traps that everybody lays out for people who are attached to their bodies and are concerned about: "Does my body look beautiful to other people? Do I look strong? How do other people think about my body?" That's a huge trap. If you've swallowed the lines of society that you should be attached to your body and be concerned about that kind of thing, then you're *really* trapped.

So learn to see this practice of contemplating the unattractiveness of the body as a means for freedom. It makes the mind light, able to do a lot of things it wouldn't be able to do if it was worried about the body all the time. One of the reasons why people don't want to put in extra hours of practice is that they're afraid that it'll hurt their health, or it'd be bad for this or bad for that, in terms of the body. So think in other terms—"Wait a minute! The body's going to die anyhow. Let me get the best use out of it while I've got it"—rather than spending your time shoring up this sand castle that's just washing away in the waves. You look after the body and take care of it as you *need* to in order to practice, but don't

let your attachment to the body get in the way of the practice. And the extent to which you make excuses for yourself not to contemplate the body in this way — “This type of meditation is not the one that I need!” — you have to look into that objection, because there’s a lot of attachment in there.

So when the time is appropriate, you look at the body the way they eat mangos in the Philippines. They slice the mango and turn it inside out. Think of it. If you took the mouth and just pulled everything inside the body out the mouth, and had the sac exposed from the other side, you couldn’t look at it at all. Yet it’s the stuff we’re walking around with all the time. How can we be concerned about whether it’s good-looking or not, or whether it’s attractive or not?

That’s the whole purpose of this contemplation: to get to the point where the mind is neither taken with attractiveness or unattractiveness, to realize these are perceptions you apply that are not all that useful. When you can get past them, the mind is freed from a lot of worries and a lot of concerns.

This is a method of practice that’s really important. Now, it’s not pleasant. As the Buddha said, it’s a painful practice because it goes against the grain. But there are times when giving the mind what it wants in terms of pleasant sensations from the breath can’t get it to settle down. And yet, when you chastise it with this contemplation of the body, it behaves itself. Ajaan Maha Boowa has the image that sometimes the practice is like a stick. Some of the Buddha’s teachings are like the stick you use to make sure a monkey doesn’t grab this or grab that. As soon as it tries to grab something, you hit its hand with the stick, and the monkey will withdraw its hand and sit very still. Or you can compare meditation to the carrot and the stick. There are some times when the donkey needs the carrot in order to go, and other times you need to give it a taste of the stick.

This is one of the skills you’ve got to learn when you look after your own practice. Look to see: When are the times when the mind needs something pleasant, something soothing, something reassuring in order to settle down? And when do you have to get strict with it, point out its shortcomings, point out its failings, point out its foolish attachments?

Realize that the mind is going to need both types of treatment, and that a lot of the skill in meditation lies in learning how to figure out which treatment you need right now.