

Cut Through the Narratives

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When the Canon describes how you remember your past lives through the powers of concentration, it's all pretty basic. This was your name, this was your appearance, this was the kind of food you ate, this was your experience of pleasure and pain, and this was how you died. That's it. Then you do it again, and then again. It seems awfully bare-bones, and you realize that each individual life has a lot more in terms of the narratives you could spin around it. But one of the purposes of the practice is to get down to the bare bones. Pleasure and pain are things that we experience very privately, but we want to make them public. We talk about them a lot; we spin a lot of narratives around them.

You may know the story of Ishi, the last wild Indian in California. He ended up working in an anthropological museum in Berkeley, and the people there kept saying, "Take us back to your old stamping grounds." At first he didn't want to go but finally they won out, and he got back to where he'd been with his family. Of course, it brought back a lot of painful memories. His family was no longer there, but there were some pleasant memories as well—in particular, a big bear hunt where they had successfully gotten a bear and had really feasted. He had a lot of stories to tell about the feast.

Recently we had a lot of people coming from Thailand, students of Ajaan Fuang, people with whom I had helped build a chedi, build a Buddha image, build an ordination hall. A lot of our conversation was reliving the pleasures of those projects, even though it was a difficult time. There was a lot of heavy work, but still it was something we really enjoyed and we bonded around that.

We like to tell stories about our pleasures, our mutual pleasures, to give the illusion that we experienced these things in common. We tell stories about our pains. Recently I was reading an account of a woman who had helped counsel people after the tsunami in Thailand, and she commented how everybody had a story to tell and wanted to tell it to connect their private pains to somebody else. That's how our pleasures and pains take on meaning.

One of the purposes of meditation is to start taking that tendency apart. Because we keep on looking for more and more pleasures to spin out over which we could bond with other people, that's what keeps us coming back again and again and again to pleasures, but then again to a lot of pains as well. Once you focus on pleasure and pain as the big issues in your life, you're going to keep pursuing the pleasures, trying to run away from the pains, and then talking them over, creating lots of narratives about both the pleasures and the pains to try to make some sense out of all this.

But the Buddha has you try to make sense in a different way. This is what the practice of mindfulness is all about. As he says, there are feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, feelings of neither pleasures nor pain. Some of them are what he calls pleasures of the flesh, *amisa-sukha*; others are pleasures not of the flesh, *niramisa-sukha*. There are also pains of the flesh, pains not of the flesh, feelings of equanimity of the flesh, not of the flesh. Instead of focusing on what they mean to you, he says to focus on what they *do* to you.

Certain pleasures, when you pursue them, just don't happen. Some do. The pleasure comes and you pursue it. Sometimes pains come and you pursue them. But what happens to the mind when you focus on these things, when you hang around with them, identify yourself around them? What's the result? What kind of skillful or unskillful qualities develop? Do you look at that? For the most, part we don't. We're interested in something else, which would be called wrong mindfulness. We're remembering the wrong things, the wrong details around these feelings. The Buddha wants you to focus on what you can do with these things so that you can develop skillful qualities of mind and abandon unskillful ones.

Some pleasures, he said, are actually good for you; other pleasures are not. You want to notice that when you focus on this issue. As when your meditation is going well: You can focus on the fact that it's going well and develop skillful qualities of mind or you could develop unskillful ones. The unskillful ones include getting complacent. There could be a sense of pride that goes around this, especially in places where people start comparing their *jhānas*. When the meditation is not going well, you can either use that as a skillful or unskillful source for states of mind. One of the reason why we try to have a sense of seclusion

around here is so that we can see that clearly. Even though there are lots of people here right now, we want each person to have his or her own space to look at these things directly.

As the Buddha says, when there's a pleasure that accords with the Dharma you don't reject it. We're not here trying to burn off past karma by inflicting ourselves with pain. It's simply that there are times when you focus on pleasure or you pursue pleasures or pleasant meditation, and you find that you're getting more complacent or you're getting lazy, or unskillful qualities are developing one way or another. That's when you have to practice with pain, which can mean either sitting longer periods of time and enduring more physical pain, or taking up a painful meditation object, like contemplation of the body, that list of the 32 parts of the body that we chant. The Buddha calls that a painful practice and he says you take it on when you realize you need that kind of practice to counteract unskillful tendencies in the mind.

So we need a sense of seclusion here, a sense of being by ourselves, because when there's a lot of interaction, there are a lot of narratives. And the narratives blind you to what are these pleasures doing to you, what are these pains doing to you? Even the simple matter of putting up with unpleasant words: As Ven. Sariputta said, you have to focus on the fact that you've got an ear that's made out of physical elements and sounds will hit the ear. Some sounds will be pleasant and some will be unpleasant. When someone's yelling at you or being really nasty in their words, remind yourself: "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." And leave it at that.

It sounds almost comical, because we don't usually stop with that thought. It continues: "Why is that person saying that? Why do they have no respect for me? Why do they look down on me?"—or whatever the reaction is. Then we go spinning out another narrative. So even something simple like that—"an unpleasant sound is making contact at the ear": That will happen even in a community where people are trying to be quiet. Fortunately, we don't have that many long, drawn-out narratives here, so we have time to notice, "Okay, an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear. What do I do with that?"

When there's a pain in the body as you sit and meditate, what can you do with

that? The Buddha doesn't tell you to just sit there and accept it. You ask yourself what's causing it. How are you going to find out what's causing it? You try to change things. Change your breath, and if the pain goes away, you've realized something important: that simply the way you breathe, what the Buddha calls a bodily fabrication, can have an impact on feelings of pleasure or pain. The way you perceive a feeling of pleasure or a feeling of pain can also have an impact on how you experience it. In other words, the label you apply to it can either inflame the pain or it can reduce it.

So you're looking at these things from the point of view of right mindfulness, remembering that this is what you want to look out for: What is this doing to the mind? Is it leading to skillful qualities or unskillful qualities? The fewer narratives are swirling around, then the easier it is to see these things in these terms.

So try to give the mind some space so that it can look at these things simply as processes without all the narrative elaboration, and you'll find that the mind can rise to a higher level where, instead of concerning yourself totally with the pursuit of pleasure and trying to run away from pain, you can see that pain has its uses, pleasure has its uses, some pains, some pleasures. And when you can sort that issue out, you've accomplished a great deal.