

Withstanding Pleasure & Pain

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There's a traditional way of talking about the stages of concentration in three levels. It doesn't come in the Canon, but it's very pervasive. And you hear lots of different ways of explaining it. The three levels are momentary concentration, access or neighborhood concentration, and then fixed penetration.

The way of explaining them that's made the most sense to me is that momentary concentration is your day-to-day concentration—the concentration that allows you to read and listen to someone, make sense of what's going on. But it doesn't withstand pain. And the pain doesn't have to be a very strong pain. Sometimes it can be just a little thing, like boredom, disinterest, something you don't like. You're focused on something, and it turns into something you don't like, and you lose your focus, you go someplace else. Or you get bored and you go someplace else.

The thing is, we have to work with this kind of concentration to get past the pain if we're going to get it deeper. This is why we use directed thought and evaluation with the breath. Watch your breath for a while and notice where it's comfortable, where it's not comfortable. At what point does the breath get too long? Or how does it feel when the breath is too short? You explore these things. You think about them, you ask questions, and you evaluate. When you do, you find that you can take the sensation of the breathing, which can be pretty ordinary, and make it more and more pleasurable. In other words, you turn the pain into pleasure. You work with the pain. You're not afraid of it. You stay focused on dealing with it. That's how the mind can get to a deeper level of concentration, into access or neighborhood concentration. In other words, it's almost there but not quite.

Now, this level of concentration can deal with pain, but it tends to lose itself in pleasure. This happens all too often. As the breath gets comfortable, you drop the breath and you go for the comfort, and your concentration tends to lose focus at that point. This is how you get into delusion concentration, where things are very pleasant and very still, but you don't really know where you are. You come out and you're not really sure whether you were awake or asleep. And because this concentration tends to lose focus with pleasure, it's very similar to falling asleep. Dreams come up, visions come up very easily in this level of concentration. But that's not what we're here for. We're here to get deeper. So you have to learn how

to resist the pleasure. In other words, you're here creating the pleasure, but you have to learn how not to fall for it. You give the mind work to do in the pleasure.

You can keep your focus by reminding yourself that the pleasure is here to use and not to wallow in. You allow the pleasure to spread throughout the body. Give yourself a good, all-around sense of well-being throughout the body, and try to expand your awareness so that it fills the body, all at the same time. As you're working at keeping your awareness full-body, full-body, the breath can start settling down, get more and more subtle, and you don't lose your focus.

One of the problems with this comfortable breath is that, as it gets very subtle, if you're only in one spot, you've lost your focus. Sometimes you have the feeling of falling into an air pocket. You're still, and something jerks inside. You find yourself back, like you've woken up a little bit. To prevent that, you've got to develop full-body awareness and then maintain it. As you get all the breath channels in the body connected, the need for in-and-out breathing gets more and more attenuated, more and more still, more and more gentle.

It can often happen that, without your thinking about it, the breath stops. At first, when you've realized that it's stopped, it can scare you. But you have to realize that it's stopping not because you've suppressed it. It's stopping because there's no need for it. The breath energy in the body is full. The breath channels are all connected so that if there's a lack of breath energy in one part of the body, another part of the body will send its energy there. The brain is using less oxygen. The carbon dioxide levels in your blood stay low so you don't feel the need to breathe. Apparently, there's some oxygen exchange going on at the pores. That's enough to keep you going.

If you can stay there, that's fixed penetration. You've gotten past pain, you've gotten past pleasure, and the mind gets more and more into the state of equanimity. Now, it's a nice state; it's an enjoyable state of equanimity, but it's much more subtle than the pleasure you've gotten past.

This is how you get the mind deeper into concentration. You've got to learn how to deal with pain and deal with pleasure. It's in a state like this that the Buddha says you're developed in body and developed in mind. Now, "developed in body" doesn't mean that you've done a lot of physical exercise. It means, instead, that you're resistant to pleasure. "Developed in mind" means that you're resistant to pain. The pleasure and pain don't overwhelm the mind. They're there, but you learn how to live with them and not get knocked off course by them.

This is a very essential skill for living in the world in a way that's good for you, and good for the world. We see injustice all around us, but we have to realize that the sources of injustice lie inside. There are basically four. There's desire, aversion,

delusion, and fear. And a lot of our desire, aversion, delusion, and fear are around issues of pleasure and pain. As long as your mind can get easily pushed around by pleasure and pain, it's very easy for these four qualities to take over. So first you deal with the sources inside by learning how to be with pleasure and be with pain, and yet not get overwhelmed by them.

For one thing, this is useful in dealing with your own karma from the past. As the Buddha says, if you're developed in body, developed in mind, developed in virtue and discernment, and you make your mind unlimited—in other words, with the brahmavihāras—the results of past karma can come, but they don't have to have an impact on the mind. In fact, in some cases, you scarcely feel them at all. In other cases, where the past karma is really strong, it's going to come willy-nilly, but you don't have to suffer from it because you've developed these skills.

So, again, you're putting yourself in a position where there's a lot less danger, a lot less need to feel threatened by anything.

At the same time, you're less likely to harm others, and you have more energy to help them. One of the hard things about training the mind is that you try to develop an attitude of unlimited goodwill, wishing all beings to be happy, so that you don't act on any unskillful intentions. But you look around and you see that not all beings are happy. There's a lot of injustice going on around us. So part of wishing for all beings to be happy is not only, "May you be happy now," but, "May you act on the causes of true happiness, and may you avoid harming other people." You wish that for everybody, but you still see people harming other people, and there's a limitation on how much you can do, there are the limits of your own strength. This is why, when you develop unlimited goodwill, you also have to learn how to develop unlimited equanimity.

But you don't just leave things like that and say, "Well, that's the way things are." You realize that there are times when you have extra energy, and you want to help. That's your generosity. But you have to figure out how much energy you have, and how much you can increase the level of your energy. This is where concentration practice is very useful. If you're less likely to be weighed down by pain and distracted by pleasure, the mind has more strength. It's able to do more things than it could have otherwise.

This is why the practice of concentration is not just a selfish chilling out. You're learning how to deal more efficiently and effectively with issues of pleasure and pain inside, so they don't absorb all of your energies and all of your concerns. And they're not likely to lead you to, as the Buddha says, take a wrong course, i.e., to be biased by desire, aversion, delusion, or fear. You've got more to offer, more energy you can devote to others. But even then, you realize that there are

limitations. You've only got so much. And, as the Buddha said, you're dealing with generosity—and, in this case, you're being generous with your time—so you want to give your time where you think it's going to be of most help, to give the best results. You give where you feel inspired, where you feel it will lead to good effect.

At the same time, in doing so, you learn how not to harm yourself and how not to harm others. In other words, you don't get engaged in breaking any of the precepts, and you don't get other people to break the precepts, either. Those are the limitations within which we're working. But instead of seeing them as limitations, see them as opportunities to do real good, genuine good, in the world. There is a lot of people out there with a lot of good intentions, but they end up causing a lot of harm by the way they try to help.

So you want your mind to be clear, able to deal with pain, able to deal with pleasure, and solid in that way, able to work more efficiently with its own inner issues so that the help it gives goes deeper, actually does more good, because it's coming from a better place: the place you're developing as you learn how to bring the mind into concentration in a way that's solid and alert, and doesn't get pushed around by pleasure and pain as it has been in the past.

This way, your mind becomes something you can trust. And it's only when you can trust yourself that other people can trust you.