

Pain & the Middle Way

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The Buddha once said that the reason we go for sensual pleasure is because we don't see any other alternative to pain. And when he said that, he was giving the basic insight that led to his discovery of the path. He realized that there was another alternative to pain. There's the pleasure of form: the pleasure of the mind in concentration, focused on the breath with a sense of ease, well-being, and refreshment that spreads throughout the whole body. That's the other alternative to pain. And it's a good alternative for several reasons. One is that it keeps us from simply being bounced back and forth between our pleasures and pains. And two, it gives us a good place to stand so that we can understand pleasure and pain: the power they have over the mind.

When the Buddha said that his path was a middle way, it wasn't between pleasure and pain. It was between being devoted to self-affliction and being devoted to sensual pleasures. The middle way is not simply a halfway point between the two of those. In other words, you don't devote yourself to finding middling pleasures and middling pains. You devote yourself to something else entirely. You devote yourself to what he calls the heightened mind: the mind in concentration. From that perspective, you can start understanding what's going on as the mind gets involved in pleasure, in sensual pleasure, and as it gets involved in pain.

It's not impossible for the mind to be concentrated even though there's pain in the body. This is something that a lot of us misunderstand. The texts do describe pleasure saturating the whole body when you're in the first jhana. But if there's a pain that you can't work out with the breath, you can simply learn how to work around it. In other words, focus not on the pain, but first on the breath energy in the body and seeing what you can do to make that energy pleasant. There arises a sense of pleasure in form, i.e., your sense of the body as you inhabit it from within. Then see how much space in the body that's not occupied by the pain you can fill with that sense of well-being. Then think of the good breath energy that you're working with penetrating through the pain.

Ajaan Lee makes this point. He says if the breath stops at the pain, that just builds up a wall, which gives even more reality to the pain, makes it even more firmly entrenched. But if you can breathe through it—thinking of the breath energy going right through the pain, permeating the pain and coming out the other side—at the very least it relieves a lot of the tension around the pain.

Sometimes it can actually make the pain go away. Or sometimes you'll find that as you work with the breath energy in one part of the body, a pain in another part of the body disappears. I myself found, when I was first meditating, that pains in the knees or in the hips often came from the fact that the breath energy wasn't flowing well in the back of the neck or the top of the back. Once the energy down the spine was flowing well, it began to flow down through the hips and through the legs. A lot of the pains that came from poor circulation of the breath, poor circulation of the blood, or simply a pinching of the nerves, would go away.

But it's not our purpose here to make the pain go away. Remember, as the Buddha said, it's to understand pain, and particularly the pain in the mind. This is why, when you've worked with the breath and have gotten a sense of concentration, that's not enough. It plays a huge role in getting past the pain. As the Buddha said, without the pleasure of concentration, there's no way that discernment would be able to do away with your attachment to pain, because as long as you don't have this alternative pleasure, then no matter how much you understand the drawbacks of sensual pleasure, you're going to keep going for sensual pleasure. As you go for sensual pleasure, you find yourself stuck with pain as well, because the two go together. As the sensual pleasure changes, there's going to be pain. So back out of that and actually pull back into the pleasure of *jhāna*. Then, from there, you start examining: What is this power of the pain over the mind? And you realize it's the combined power of the pleasure and the perceptions that go around it.

Because when there's pain in the body, it's not simply just the feeling there in the body. Red alerts are being lit up in your brain. Your mind gets worried about the pain. "Is this a sign that I'm going to lose my legs? Is this a sign that I'm going to be paralyzed?" All sorts of stories, or just simply the fact that you're going to have to sit here for a whole hour with this pain. "What if this pain just grows and grows and grows with the hour?" Your mind can come up with lots of stories around it. These are all based on your perceptions: the images that the mind uses to communicate with itself.

So once you've allowed the mind to step out of the back and forth between sensual pleasure and pain by getting into this sense of well-being or the pleasure of form, the pleasure of the concentration, then you're in a better position to be curious about, "Well, what is it about sensual pleasure and what is it about pain that pulls the mind in?" Being able to be curious about these things is a major step. You're not caught in running back and forth, and being hit back and forth by the pain and the pleasure, thinking about nothing but how much you want the pain to end, or how much you want to run away from the pain. Now, though, you've

got a place, a safe place, to watch it. And then you can begin watching out of curiosity. The simple fact that you're moving toward the pain, to investigate it, means that the pain is not hitting you. You're now a moving target. If you just sit there, receiving the pain, it's very easy for it to hit you.

As you focus on understanding the pain, you can ask, "What is the perception here?" And you can test your perceptions by asking yourself some strange questions: Is the pain the same thing as the body? Suppose you've got a pain in the knee. Is it the same thing as the knee? And part of your mind will say, "Well no, of course not." But another part of your mind says, "Yes." So you have to argue with that other part. Take it on. And the reason you haven't taken it on before is because the question was so strange. The whole idea was so strange, even though it has power over the mind.

A lot of the ideas we have about pain are things we picked up when we weren't thinking straight: when we were little kids, often before we had language. That was when we first encountered pain. And a lot of our subconscious feelings about pain come from that time. So you have to investigate them in this way, by asking strange questions. Or other questions not necessarily so strange, but simply the question, "Where is the sharpest point in the pain right now?" Try to follow it. You begin to realize it moves around quite a lot.

So why do you have this idea that there was this one pain that was frozen in your leg, or in your knee, or whatever? Where does that perception come from? Learn how to question that perception. And by prying the perceptions away from the pain for a bit, you begin to see that the pain and the perceptions really are two separate things, and that the perceptions are what's causing the problem. The perceptions come and they go. And you'll find that even though the pain may be steadily there in your leg, or relatively steady, the actual amount by which your mind is bothered by the pain goes up and down as the perceptions come and go. That insight right there helps to loosen up a lot of the hold the pain has on the mind.

Of course, you have to come up with your own strange questions because you have your own strange ideas of relating to pain or understanding pain. This is where the ingenuity factor in discernment comes in: learning how to ask new questions about the pain. Coming at it from another angle, you might ask yourself, "Where are you in the body in relationship to the pain?" Say the pain is in your knee. You're up here in your head. But if you put yourself in your foot—the sense of where you are being located in your foot or your calf, below the pain—what would that do to your perception of it? If you perceive the pain as solid, think of it being just composed of... it's not even atoms, because it's not even in

the body. So how is it going to be a solid? Ask these questions from the point of view of the relative ease of your concentration. Having the concentration here is important.

Being committed or being devoted to the heightened mind is a really important part of the practice. We don't just sit here saying, "Well, I'm just going to be equanimous about everything that comes up and patient with everything that comes up." That can last for the amount of time your determination is strong. But the mind gets hungry. Without some sense of well-being that it can go for blatantly, it's going to go secretly, when you're not looking, trying to feed off this, feed off that. And that just opens up more avenues for pain to come into the mind, because now the mind is being dishonest with itself. So feed the mind well by being devoted to the heightened mind so that you don't have to be devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasure or the running away from pain.

And take advantage of the fact that you do have this alternative to running between pain and sensual pleasure. Learn how to use it, because it is the middle way. And it's the way, as the Buddha said, that leads to what's noble. If you find yourself disturbed by pain, don't go for what the Buddha calls household pleasure. You have to go for renunciate pain—in other words, the pain of the fact that "There's work to be done and I've got to do it." The fact that you're still worked up about the pain means there's work to be done. Okay, do the work. Don't try to soothe yourself by saying, "Well, just learn how to be equanimous about all this or non-reactive to all this." That's just a momentary salve.

The Buddha actually encourages you to go for what he calls renunciate pain, which is the realization, "There's work to be done. I've got to do it." But it's good work. And it's work that's done from this sense of well-being, the pleasure of form, that comes from working with the breath. That's what really heightens the mind. It's from the perspective of the heightened mind that you can get beyond these things, to renunciate pleasure: the pleasure of having abandoned your defilements, of having transcended them.

The Buddha's image of discernment is of a person standing in a tower looking down on the people below. In this case, the people below are all the thoughts in the mind that are rushing around: worried about pain; worried about pleasure. Up here you can look at them. You don't have to identify with them. Ajaan Lee's comment is interesting. Learn to get to the position where you can see the words "pleasure" and "pain" as things that people say in jest, he says. They're not big issues for the mind. If you can heighten your mind to that point, then you're safe wherever you go.