

Satipaṭṭhāna (35) Wise about Pleasure and Pain

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There is an amazing quote from the Buddha. After spending time doing ascetic practices, he went back to meditating in a way that he knew from earlier in his life, when he had experienced meditative joy. He said to himself, “There is no reason to be afraid of this kind of joy and pleasure.”

There are joys and pleasures we can experience that we do not need to be afraid of or be hesitant to feel. They are an important part of the practice. The Buddha went on to say that what he was discovering about the pleasure and joy of meditation was “This is the way to awakening – the way to freedom.”

So there is a path that opens up with pleasure, delight, and joy in practice. To find that and use it wisely is one of our tasks in meditation. Meditation is not supposed to be an endless series of grim pains. I have known people who have sat with a lot of physical pain in meditation, as I have, and benefitted from doing so.

I have also known people who have sat with a lot of pain and discomfort in meditation and have not benefitted from it. Or they benefitted for a while, but eventually, it became grueling – it went on and on. Some people will sit with unnecessary pain because they think they are supposed to sit in a cross-legged meditation posture. After they move to a chair, they immediately feel so much better. Now, they can give themselves over to the present moment rather than struggling with the pain of practice.

But we do not want to only avoid pain and discomfort, and only pursue pleasure and delight in the pleasant, because chances are we will stay close to our attachments. Rather, the idea is to become free of them – to engage in the world of pleasure and pain in a way that is freeing for us.

This requires some wisdom. How do I find my freedom? One of my favorite quotes is, “If you are only free when things are pleasant or comfortable, you are not really free.” You need to become free when things are

uncomfortable and when there is pain. This does not mean we are supposed to be stoic. We are not meant to just put up with pain, pain, pain. It is not supposed to be all difficult.

There is an art to opening up to pleasure. Part of that art is to understand our relationship to pleasure and pain. Without using a spotlight or magnifying glass to study our reactivity, beliefs, and attitudes towards pleasure and pain, we probably will not find a wise way of being with pleasure and pain. Rather, we will be driven by our lack of wisdom – our attachments or unhealthy beliefs that weigh us down.

Spend some time looking at and seeing what you believe. Some people believe that life is only successful if there is pleasure. As soon as there is pain, or emotional or mental discomfort, it is a sign that somehow they have failed. They are not living up to the standard of a successful human being – wealthy, filled with joy and pleasure, and able to navigate life perfectly, like drifting on a cloud. And if they cannot do that, something must be deeply wrong with who they are.

A belief like that is a delusion. Every human life will have its share of pains and pleasures. Both come with being human. Rather than believing things have to be one way, in the Dharma we believe in practicing with whatever comes our way. We find a wise way through it

rather than trying to avoid it or hold ourselves to some high standard of perfection.

Sometimes people who feel discomfort or pain will be angry at it – hostile towards the pain or themselves. Some people get restless. Some people get bored very quickly. Some people have a lot of ideas about who they are. They are trying to live up to their ideas or to avoid them. They can get triggered by the experiences of pleasure and pain. They may feel: “I am the victim. All this discomfort is happening to me.” It is me, me, me. I am the one. It is all about me.

There is a way in which all the discomfort of life can get drawn into our identity – our idea of who we are and our history. It is not necessarily wrong to admit there are a lot of challenges in life. But all the difficult things can become a magnet for the concept of me as the victim – as the person experiencing it, the experiencer. This makes things so much more difficult.

One of the exercises we do around pain is to feel it. You might try this right now. Close your eyes, and look around in your body for a place where there is some discomfort. Within reason, the more uncomfortable it is, the better for this exercise. Then in your mind, tell yourself: “This is *my* pain. My pain is this way. My pain is in my knee. My pain is in my ankle. My pain.” Just add the word “my.” Or, “*I* am having pain.”

Take a deep breath and let it go. Then, be aware of the pain or discomfort and just call it “pain” or “discomfort” – without the “me” or the “I.” Perhaps you will notice a difference between these two ways. It is not uncommon for people to start realizing that if they let discomfort be just discomfort without the pronouns – without I, me, or mine as part of it – then some micro-muscles around the pain do not contract. Some of the micro-emotions do not contract and get tight. The “me, myself, and mine” brings a lot of extra baggage. So, keep it simple: just pain, just pleasure.

When pain does arise, there can be attitudes of being for or against it. There are intentions, agendas, and strategies we may have. One of them is to get rid of the pain. If there is pleasure, some people do not feel safe. There are reasons why some people feel distrustful of pleasure: “It is going to go away. I have been burned before.” Or, “I will get attached if there is too much pleasure.”

What intention do you have? What is your attitude or reaction to pleasure and pain? One of the remarkable things one can learn is that it is possible to have equanimity towards pleasure and pain.

One can turn towards it with mindfulness and look upon it just as you would look upon a bird flying high up in the

sky. It has a certain grace. When you look up and see that bird in the sky, you do not take it as *my* bird. You do not think: “That bird is not flapping its wings quite right. It should probably soar differently. Someone needs to give it flying instructions. I will explain what it needs to do.” We do not get involved in trying to fix the bird. We do not associate it with ourselves. It is just a bird flying in the sky. There is a lot of equanimity in just letting it be.

In the same way that you would watch a bird flying in the sky – without appropriating it or needing to do anything about it – it is possible to have that kind of equanimity towards pleasure and pain. Learning that kind of equanimity is one of the very important parts of training in vipassana. It is not training to be stoic with all pain and uninterested in all pleasure. We can have an appropriate interest in both pleasure and pain. We learn from some pains. We learn how to take better care of ourselves by paying attention to pain and adjusting things.

But the pleasures of relaxation, of just being, and the pleasures arising from meditation itself – these are like someone saying: “Hey, come here. Come closer. This is the way. Follow me.” There is a way in which meditative joy and pleasure support our practice. They support opening up, letting go, and relaxing more fully. Rather than holding on to pleasure, the idea is to open to it and

feel it more fully so that the mind can settle and open into the present moment – deepening our connection so that the mind gets quieter and stiller.

Becoming wise about pleasure and pain helps us. Wisdom about both is helpful for meditation. Sooner or later, you will sit with pain in meditation. Sooner or later, you will sit with pleasure. For most of us, it is sooner rather than later.

This is part of the field of the Four Foundations for Awareness – to use the pleasure and pain of our experience as a support and a foundation for learning to be aware. Pleasure and pain are not to be turned away from or grabbed on to. Rather, we develop a heightened awareness of pleasure and pain, which are part of all experiences.

As we do this, we will start making a remarkable transition from the worldly dimension of pleasure and pain to the spiritual dimension of it. Tomorrow, we will talk about what that means and how it works. Part of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is to make this distinction and to be able to appreciate the difference between the two forms of pleasure and pain – the worldly and the spiritual.

Today, I hope you will try to discover more equanimity and spaciousness with pleasure and pain. You might try

freeing yourself from appropriating pleasures and pains as part of me, myself, and mine: just pleasure, just pain. You are allowed to experience both and be at ease with both.

So, thank you very much. It is a pleasure to be with you in this way.