

# The Uses of Pleasure & Pain

*August, 2001 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

Allow your awareness to settle in on the breath and get aligned with the body. It takes a little experimenting to find exactly what amount of pressure is needed, what amount of force is needed to stay with the breath and the body in a way that's just right. If the pressure is too light, the mind goes drifting off. If it's too heavy, the body starts feeling constricted, the mind starts feeling constricted, and it's going to look for a way to get out.

So try to see precisely what amount of mindfulness and alertness is needed just to keep the body and mind together right at the breath. The breath will be a good barometer to let you know when the pressure is too much, when it's too little — but you've got to know how to read the barometer.

This is why we practice meditation day after day after day, to get more familiar with our barometer. To begin with, you can focus your awareness at any one spot in the body where the sensation of breathing is very clear. It might be the tip of the nose, the throat, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, any spot where you know clearly: "Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out." There's a sense of rightness about the spot; it's an easy spot to maintain your focus.

This may seem strange, this emphasis on ease and comfort in the meditation after everything we've heard about the Buddha's teachings on pain, stress, and suffering. But you have to look carefully at what he says about pain, stress, and suffering and also what he has to say about pleasure. Look at the four noble truths. Truth number one, of course, is stress and suffering. But buried down in number four, the path, you find the most important factor of the path, right concentration, which involves getting the mind focused on the breath with a sense of ease and rapture. This rapture comes from seclusion: seclusion here meaning that you're not thinking about past, not thinking about the future, you're right here with the present moment. Things are settling in, and there's a snugness to how things feel. It feels good, it feels secure, being right here.

Look at what the Buddha has to say about the tasks with regard to each of the noble truths. The task with regard to stress and suffering is to comprehend it. The task with regard to the path is to develop it, which means you want to

develop that sense of ease, the sense of rapture that comes as the mind begins to settle down in concentration. What you're doing is taking one of the aggregates — the aggregate of feeling — and instead of latching onto it or pushing it away, you learn how to use it as a tool.

When pain and stress and suffering come, you want to comprehend them. Comprehending pain and stress teaches you a lot about the mind. The Buddha never said that life is suffering. He just said there's suffering *in* life, which is a very different teaching. As long as there's going to be pain, as long as there's going to be suffering, get the most use out of them. You find as you focus on pain — as you get to know it, get to comprehend it — that you learn all kinds of things about how the mind is working. In particular, you learn to see what it's doing to take a physical pain and turn it into mental pain — or, if you're starting with mental pain, to make it worse.

But to watch that feeling of pain long enough and consistently enough so that you can comprehend it, the mind needs strength, it needs nourishment. Otherwise it gets drained. That's where the pleasure in the path comes in. That's your nourishment. Try to create a sense of wellbeing in the mind as it's focused in the present moment so that it doesn't feel threatened by the pain, doesn't feel drained by the pain, so that you always have a place to go when you need that strength.

What we're doing is taking one of the aggregates that we usually cling to... Clinging here doesn't mean just holding on. It also means trying to push away, and pushing away is like pushing away a glob of tar. The more you push it away, the more you get stuck. So instead of clinging or pushing away, we try to learn how to use these aggregates as tools, in the same way you'd use tar to make asphalt for paving a road.

This is a common theme running throughout the Buddha's teachings: Before you can let go of anything, you have to learn how to master it. Otherwise, you're just holding on, pushing away, holding on, pushing away. And nothing comes from that except more stress, more suffering, more pain. This harms not only you but also the people around you. If you're constantly feeling worn down by the pains and the inconveniences of life, you'll find it hard to be kind to other people. In fact, most of the evil things people do in their lives come from their sense of being totally overwhelmed, feeling weak and trapped and then lashing out.

But if you give the mind the sense of strength and security that comes with knowing it has a center it can return to and gain nourishment from, it's a gift

not only to yourself but also to the people around you. It's not a selfish practice.

Learn how not to hold onto feelings, grabbing hold of the pleasant ones, pushing the painful ones away. Instead, learn how to use them as tools. When they're used as tools, they open things up in the mind. You understand where the mind is unskillful in how it manages its thinking, and you realize that you don't have to be unskillful. There are better ways to think, better ways to manage the thought processes in the mind.

And a funny thing happens. As you master these processes, they bring you to a point where everything reaches equilibrium. That's where you can really let go. You can even let go of your tools at that point because they've taken you where you want to go. From that point on, everything opens up to the Deathless.

But you can't get there by pushing and pulling your way around. If the Deathless were something you could force your way into, everybody would have gone to nibbana a long time ago. It requires a lot of finesse, a lot of skill in how you deal with the mind, learning to recognize the time for analyzing issues of stress and suffering, and the time for letting the mind rest so that it can gain strength and then go back to work.

The ultimate skill is learning how to put those two things together. In other words, you develop states of concentration to give the mind a really solid center, and from that center you can begin to let go of things that are obviously unskillful, things you obviously don't want to hang on to. Then when you've let go of everything else, you turn on that pleasant center you've been developing and take it apart. But all too often we've read the books that tell us what comes next in the practice and we want to get on to insight as fast as possible. In doing so, we tend to destroy the very quality that's going to help us: this ability to get the mind aligned with the body in a way that feels just right and then to use the strength, use the nourishment that comes from that, the stillness and ease, the steadiness that comes from that. Only then can you really gain insight.

In other words, you just can't jump over concentration or go rushing through the various levels. It's something you want to settle down into, so that you can stay still, calm, for long periods of time. And when you can stay that way during your formal sitting, you take it out and try to maintain that same calm center no matter where you go, no matter what happens. That's when you really gain interesting insights into the mind, seeing how it goes flowing out after things, rushing to grab hold of this, rushing to push that away.

The Buddha talks about effluents in the mind, things flowing out of the mind, and when you can maintain your center you actually get a physical sense of the energy flowing out as the mind loses its alignment with the body and goes out after its objects. The trick is learning how to maintain that still, steady observer so that you can see the movement and realize you don't have to go along with it. The movement is something separate. The knower is something separate. And the movement dies away.

When you have that separation clearly delineated, you can see even more clearly which of the mind's actions are skillful and which are not. You begin to see cause and effect in a way that really opens things up in the mind.

So we carry these five khandhas, these aggregates, around with us, and the wisdom of the Buddha is in taking these aggregates that tend to weigh us down, like big lumps of metal in a suitcase, and opening up the suitcase to look inside. That's when you begin to see that they're not just lumps of metal. They're tools, tools that you can apply to dismantling your attachments so you don't have to lug things around any more. Use them to cut away your obvious attachments and then finally, when everything else is taken care of, you can let go of your attachments to the tools themselves. But until that point, you want to take good care of them — not to the point of worshipping them, but careful enough that they stay in good shape so you can actually use them.

This is why the Buddha didn't teach self-torment, but he didn't teach self-indulgence, either. The middle path between the two is not half indulgence and half torment. It's learning how to regard these aggregates as tools. You've got aggregates of form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. Learn how to treat them as tools, showing them the proper care and attention that tools need, but also realizing that they're not the be-all and end-all of life. They're processes, not things. They've got their uses, but they're not ends in and of themselves.

Once you've got that point clear, the path opens up.