

Talk for urban retreat on worldly winds of pain and pleasure

Buddha makes it clear that pain and pleasure are not in themselves the problem for us to deal with in life; it's how we **respond** to pain and pleasure that distinguishes the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person and the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones.

The Sutta describing the worldly winds states that those with an un-liberated mind and heart welcome pleasure and rebel against pain and are consumed by these experiences. States how **craving** the pleasant – longing for it to last – and **pushing away** the unpleasant – trying to escape it – is the cause of endless cycling round the wheel of reactivity. This is because we don't see into the impermanent and changing nature of our experience. This leads to us being joined with suffering and stress.

Here is how it works: we have a body with senses. These senses come into contact with the world and this gives rise to vedana, the initial arising of an impression of something being pleasant, unpleasant or too dull to notice. Before we know it, when we are not aware, we automatically react – piling the tight fist of clinging onto the pleasant – crushing the experience in the desire to hang onto it and make it last; and pushed away the unpleasant with aversion and resistance. Like a billiard ball bouncing through the day. This is a restless and unsatisfactory way to live. Strung out between the two poles of “I like this”, “I don't like that”. Trapped cycling around wheel of reactivity.

What are we to do? How are we to acknowledge painful things that arise without automatically pushing it away; and enjoy pleasant things without automatically reacting with clinging, and move up the spiral of growth?

Vajragupta suggests in his book that the dharma door of **mindfulness** is the key and I agree with that. And I'd like to also suggest that mindfulness has to include a warm, caring quality for it to be true mindfulness – when you are really present in an integrated and whole way to life, aren't you not also loving? And when you are fully loving, aren't you also present and aware? Worth thinking about this.

Analyo in his book on the Satipatthana Sutta, one of the key texts on mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition, describes an aspect of mindfulness as being the **middle way between suppressing our experience on the one hand and over-identifying with it on the other**. I find this v helpful. Brilliant and concise. Mindfulness is the key quality that enables us to be open to experience but without being consumed by it.

In working practically with our experience I suggest we first of all look at how to work with the worldly wind of pain and then move onto looking at how to work with the worldly wind of pleasure. A lot of our behaviour is driven by trying to avoid the unpleasant – be it physical, emotional, mental or the more existential experience such as inner emptiness. It is so instinctive to recoil from pain and seek escape through distraction, compulsive pleasure seeking and so on that this seems an important place to start.

In the Sallatha Sutta – Sutta of the dart or arrow - the Buddha says initial experience of pain is like being pierced by an arrow – say painful sensations in the body; and before we know it we have resisted and resented this pain and added more layers of mental, emotional pain and physical pain. Now we have many pains instead of just the one pain. It is like being pierced by many more arrows! Mental second arrows are thoughts like “Oh no, I can’t bear it”. “why me?” “It’s not fair”. Emotional second arrows are things like anxiety, anger, fear and depression. Physical second arrows are secondary tension and strain. The Sutta says how by harbouring aversion in these ways an underlying tendency of resistance and resentment comes to obsess the mind. And so we dig ourselves into a deeper and deeper pit of suppression and blocking; or overwhelm; or compulsive distraction and so on.

Practice is to investigate our actual moment-by-moment experience and distinguish between the **first arrow** – primary pain or suffering; and the **second arrows** – secondary suffering. By shining light of mindfulness and kindness onto experience can learn to **accept** the primary pain as it arises and passes away moment by moment – let it be like the wind; and **reduce or even overcome** the layers of secondary pain or suffering. We can allow them to gradually dissolve away as you learn new positive habits of living. Then you only have basic pain to live with, just one arrow, which is often not nearly as bad as you fear.

How to do this in practice?

Firstly, bring mindfulness to your general experience. Probably you’ll find some degree of craving for the pleasant to last; and aversion, resistance to the painful. This is just the way we are built. It is automatic to dislike pain and hang onto pleasure when we are not yet fully aware. But, as shine awareness onto experience in this basic way, we’re already creating a little space as we’ve stepped back from blindly reacting.

Then, on the basis of this basic awareness, perhaps surprisingly, the practice is to turn towards the unpleasant by scanning your experience for any quality of resistance. You won’t get far in your practice if you don’t first address resistance. This is a mistake many of us make. Our spiritual practice in itself starts off on an escapist footing – layering longing and craving for a different experience on top of our resistance. This is a recipe for unhappiness and a dry, frustrated tense life!

So drop your awareness into your body, your present moment embodied experience and see where there is a felt sense of contraction, of resistance either gross or subtle. It may be predominantly physical such as in the case of physical pain, or it may be an echo in the body of a mental or emotional pain. See if you can soften towards that resistance with a quality of kindness and tenderness. I imagine I am ‘leaning into it’ with my awareness – a little like leaning against a bale of hay. It appears solid but as you lean it yields and softens a little. We can use the breath to help this quality of softening as when we are resistant we usually hold the breath to some degree – so when soften into the breath, we naturally soften resistance a little.

Next, on the basis of having allowed in the unpleasant and become more sensitive – less blocked and resistant – we can intentionally seek out any

pleasant aspects to the moment. There's always something pleasant once we become more sensitive, aware and open. When we resist pain, we become a bit numb, we block out a whole band of awareness – we might not feel pain so much, but when you see something beautiful you don't feel much emotion – you feel a bit dull and shut down. You don't have much access to emotions like love and tenderness and joy either. So, now we have softened resistance, softened the heart a little we can in turn appreciate and pay attention to the pleasant, enjoyable side of life and feel something. It doesn't need to be grand or big – small sensations or experiences are also valuable to notice and enjoy – noticing the sun on your skin, the bird song outside, soft face, relief around the heart now that you are being more real and less blocked and hard. Let these feelings arise and pass away moment by moment.

Now, on the basis of having opened to pain and pleasure, we broaden awareness – like pulling back with wide angle lens of awareness. Allow the pleasant to rise and fall without being consumed by clinging - seeing into its nature as change; and the unpleasant to rise and fall without being consumed by resistance - seeing into its nature as change. Rest back in broad, embodied present moment awareness as everything comes into being and passes away. We can cultivate an equanimous and heart-felt connection with all of experience. See how all experience is inconstant and subject to change as the Buddha counsels.

But don't end here. How are we to use this new approach to pain and pleasure to move up the spiral and gain liberation and freedom? One of the key things the Buddha taught can be summed up as: "*what we dwell on we become*". Life unfolds in dependence on a coming together of many conditions – one of which is the habitual inclinations of the mind/heart. If we dwell on the skilful then this will become a habit - we will quite naturally cultivate a mind that is perfumed by the skilful. If we cultivate habits of contraction, aversion and craving – then these will become the dominant tendencies of the mind and heart. It really matters what we do with our awareness and what we choose to dwell upon!

What I do is, very gently, to seek out where there is a quality of openness and release in my experience, as opposed to contraction. This seems to work well – we all know what contraction and resistance feels like and we also know what openness and a more fluid experience feels like - we'll all have the seeds of release somewhere in our experience right now - seeds of experience that has the taste of freedom without being stained by craving and aversion. If we rest upon these seeds of release it is a little like blowing on the embers of a fire – very gradually the fire begins to grow until it blazes up and gives off warmth and light. If you blow too hard the fire goes out, and if you don't blow at all the fire goes out. So it is learning how to rest awareness in a quite light and delicate way upon seeds of openness and release that will take you up the spiral path.

Bhante talks about the importance of developing appreciation of *kalyana* – by dwelling on the aesthetic, beautiful and skilful this will be one way to blow on the embers of faith and growth so we become more saturated in these qualities. Maybe it will be in communication with a friend – you know that quality of openness and presence that comes with good communication? It is enjoyable but, at its best, without being stained by craving. Or maybe you feel this in nature

– pleasure with a quality of release not craving. Or maybe listening to music. Its important to value these things as a way of dwelling in pleasurable states without slipping into craving and grasping. And, of course, it will only be effective if you are also open to any pain that comes into awareness as it arises and passes away – meeting it with tenderness and receptivity as you see into its nature, whilst dwelling in the foreground of awareness upon the *kalyana*.

Gradually you'll become like the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones: able to meet pain when it arrives at your door with an open heart without resistance and aversion, letting it arise and pass away moment by moment; and able to meet pleasure when it arrives at your door without craving and clinging, letting it arise and pass away moment by moment. Gradually choosing to dwell upon, and enjoy, that in your experience that has the felt quality of release and openness as opposed to contraction and tightness. You can learn a new default setting, a new habit of valuing that which has the taste of freedom – dwelling there – letting it build and grow. Gradually you can live with a much stronger and deeper sense of flow. More aligned with the skilful. More fearless and strong. Resting **in** life rather than fighting it. Having the confidence to meet whatever arises in the wisdom of being more in harmony with the natural way of things.

To conclude with some images: when we're ignorant, it's like being in a city surrounded by sky scrapers. The blue sky way is above and we can barely see it. We go along, head down, with a narrow perspective and winds gusting and funnelling around the buildings. These winds can knock you over.! They're very distorted by the solid buildings of your fixed views and habits that are very unyielding and rigid.

When we're wise it's like being out in wide open space with the vast blue sky of the mind all around and above. You're like bamboo that yields to the wind but never snaps. It doesn't provide resistance so the winds blow freely, undisturbed. The wind is much less distorted and destructive as it's blowing in wide open space. Can you have a mind and heart like this yielding, flexible, pliable bamboo?

Remember: everyone experiences pain and pleasure – whether you are enlightened or not. The difference between the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person and the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones is in how you **respond** to pain and pleasure. By following the path of mindfulness and kindness you can become completely free, happy and strong in the midst of this ordinary human life.