

— THE DISCIPLINE OF PLEASURE —



*The  
Discipline of  
Pleasure*

JAMES BAMPFIELD

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To my son, Sidney, prince of pleasure

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## *Introduction*



I HAVE HAD TWO TYPES OF SCHOOLING IN MY LIFE: WHAT I call an old schooling and a new schooling. My old schooling was traditional, English-style boarding school: typical upper-middle class, nudged and thumped through the ranks of private school and privilege. I was a good fit in the sense that I was competent in class and on the sports field. Privilege does not always pamper, however, and it was a rough ride. Some of it I loved, some of it continued to give me nightmares into my later years, as fear was the dominant motivator at such a school.

What did I learn?

I learnt that duty comes first, that doing the right thing comes first.

I learnt to win. I acquired a steely resolve, which did its best to keep in check a lurking, tenacious undertow of emotion and insecurity that rarely left me.

Pleasure was driven underground, into illicit escapades and rendezvous. Study was a means to an end and enjoyment came from doing well, not from learning itself. There were occasional Dead Poet Society-type teachers who would inject a dose of colour and joy into the classroom, but the general ethos was one of grinding out results... which I duly did.

It is remarkable how little memory I have of being told to *enjoy* a game while playing sport. I was representing the school and the

maxim we heard *ad nauseam* was: do your best and fight to the end! Perseverance was the most praised quality.

Looking back, it is easy to despise and mock this kind of schooling, but that is not how I feel. Although some of it was tragic and some of it comical, there was a basic orientation towards what I now call *soul pleasure*. I feel sad, however, because this basic orientation was poorly articulated and even more poorly applied. No one learnt how to be happy.

At the core of the British psyche is an aridity, an essential lack of juice – of joy! – which has plagued me all my life. *Love* is the chief ingredient of pleasure and love is the one thing we never learnt, neither giving nor receiving. That is why the greatest British ‘achievement’, the Empire, is its most flawed. Head and gut, but no heart... and everyone has suffered the consequences.

I too have a good head on my shoulders and a drive from my belly, which have brought me much, but my heart needs both constant reassurance and provocation to unlock its capacity for feeling and joy.

My second schooling came in the form of spirituality.

From the age of 16, I plunged headlong into a world of gurus, therapy and spiritual practice that was in great contrast (and occasional similarity) to boarding school life. It was common for me to move from the gowns of Trinity College to the meditation robes of Satsang, from the cries of the football pitch to the cries of the primal therapy room.

The new schooling was also a tough ride. Young and brittle, I was easily bruised by the rigour of therapeutic ‘encounter’ and numbed to the knees by the discipline of meditation. That said, I was also introduced to the wonders of the world of spirit and a whole new dimension of life opened up to me in all its splendour.

I wouldn't give up those roller-coaster years for anything; traveling from country to country, community to community, teacher to teacher, teaching to teaching. I was on the road to enlightenment and nothing could stand in my way. Except myself.

I slowly got more and more in my own way. Thank God.

There came a point when I realized, almost as an afterthought, that I wasn't happy. At that moment, my quest for truth lost its lustre.

I always felt – still do – that some ultimate state of contentment is possible, that the veil of separation could disappear once and for all, revealing a glorious unity. I wasn't experiencing this in any continuous way though and I was suffering.

'Truth' is a masculine kind of goal and in a strange way retains echoes of my British upbringing. I was tired of the sweat and effort. I was tired of the tension of the trail and the constant pushing of boundaries. I didn't want to 'boldly go' any more.

I longed for a softer, more pleasure-oriented approach to life. I needed to come home. To myself.

And I don't mean to some higher self, some universal self. Just to James. The path of learning and development needed to be anchored more in my actual inner state, more in my body, more in my own wisdom.

I had been told during all those years that happiness is not the goal of the true spiritual seeker. Most Eastern religions suggest that any form of duality – such as pleasure and pain – is beside the point. I decided, however, that the pursuit of truth (in any form) was an incomplete truth at best, especially if that truth had been decreed outside myself. It was time to kill the Buddha and reclaim my own sense of knowing.

Neither of my schools taught me how to enjoy life. Implicitly or explicitly, both schools were suspicious of pleasure.

I have no doubt that my spiritual education has contributed enormously to my wellbeing, and indeed this book, but there remains a hole, which I am here trying to fill.

I continue to draw inspiration from truth-oriented practices, but the edges have been softened and I no longer see truth as an end-goal. What use is truth if it doesn't improve the *felt* quality of life?

When I look around me, I see people crying out for liberation and joy, not truth. I see a world that has for too long prized truth ahead of pleasure – and even pain ahead of pleasure. Pain is still revered and the crosses we choose to bear are given great respect. People go on hunger strikes, not binge strikes. Our myths tend to glorify hardship as heroism above all else.

I am, like many others, so very tired of what I call the 'truth wars': endless cycles of violence, sometimes on a huge scale, perpetrated mostly by men who wish to impose their version of truth on others. I also know that placing a rigid moral straightjacket on the perpetrators simply perpetuates the truth war. I long for a society that gives more attention to simple and spiritual pleasures than to the ego pleasures of power, domination and revenge. I long to ask those in power what *really* makes them happy, what *really* gives them pleasure...

I have been living in Belgium for the past 12 years and I experience here a more subtle kind of oppression... people trying so hard to do the right thing: be a good worker, be a good father, be a good wife. Such a keen sense of duty and responsibility elevates the Belgians above a certain self-indulgence that I have experienced in other cultures, but also weighs them down with a dense energy of resignation. Life is rarely celebrated other than in specifically designated contexts. People are taught to build and sweat, but not to fly and delight.

So perhaps it is not surprising that my paean to pleasure was born in Belgium, though it feels like my whole life experience is poured into this book.

In my job as consultant and facilitator, I have worked with thousands of people and seen a more or less universal longing for a greater quality of life and deeper fulfilment. Unfortunately, you either have people who feel ashamed or guilty about focusing on their own pleasure, deeming it selfish or immoral, or you have those who focus on pleasure in a superficial way and have no awareness or discipline to help them find the deeper pleasures in life.

Clearly I am not the only one moving away from a truth and duty-oriented life. Happiness is in fashion these days and fast becoming an important measuring stick, individually and even politically. I welcome this movement.

I also distance myself slightly from the happiness movement though, and purposely choose the word *pleasure* because it is a more fundamental part of our make-up (children are not concerned with happiness) and because the pleasure mechanics are less prone to self-delusion and outside influence. We can kid ourselves that we are happy, but it is harder to kid ourselves that we are experiencing pleasure.

As I will explain, happiness is just a sophisticated form of pleasure that includes a sense of duration.

The way I write is the way I have lived: eclectic, impressionistic and without much sense of order. I quote philosophers and spiritual pundits in a fairly reckless manner that will offend some and attract others. I have philosophical leanings but am not a philosopher. I have spiritual leanings but am neither disciple nor guru. Just a fellow traveller who might have visited more or different countries than you.

I have taken great pains and re-writes to find the right balance between head and heart though it could well be that the final integration of the two awaits a further breakthrough in my personal evolution. The first draft of the book clearly suffered from delusions of intellectual grandeur and I received signals from pilot readers that their pleasure levels were strikingly low. I must say that on various occasions while reading the (many) philosophical treatises on pleasure, I have also at times felt like I was losing the will to live... One general principle I have deduced so far that guides existing philosophical, sociological and scientific writers on pleasure is: give the reader as little pleasure as possible.

My hope is to inspire and light a flame of pleasure in your heart. There are no tools, no workbooks, just a bunch of reflections, musings and insights. You, and only you, can do the rest...



*What is Pleasure?*



*Pleasure is the gentle spray of sunrays on my wintery skin, slowly seeping down into stiff bones. Pleasure is the rustle of autumn leaves between my feet. Pleasure is my first kiss, birds singing in my wild heart. Pleasure is the feel of my child's head nestled between shoulder and chest as I carry him to bed in a bubble of love and trust. Pleasure is stroking my dog, pleasure is hearing my wife laugh unashamedly, pleasure is feeling the champagne bubbles explode gently on my tongue.*

*Pleasure is fixing a broken tap, pleasure is solving a crossword puzzle, pleasure is winning a Nintendo game (apparently). Pleasure is skiing recklessly down the mountainside at full speed, relishing the bite of wind and risk on my cheeks. Pleasure is lunging to hit a perfect tennis volley. Pleasure is looking at my shiny car after I have scrubbed away. Pleasure is teaching my son how to read a clock, pleasure is serving my family as best I can. Pleasure is helping an elderly person with her bags. Pleasure is creating a work of art. Pleasure is getting results, doing a good job. Pleasure is fulfilling my mission, enacting my values, helping to make a better world.*

*Pleasure is meeting you for real. Pleasure is intimacy – sharing, exposing, disclosing. Heaven is other people. Pleasure is meeting you, the other. Seeing and being seen. Pleasure is comradeship and trust. Pleasure*

*is being part of a band of brothers and sisters, the team, the gang. Pleasure is feeling you beside me, my wife and partner, as we face the world together.*

*Pleasure is passion, pleasure is penetration, pleasure is caressing, pleasure is making love. Pleasure is love.*

*Pleasure is seeing the Taj Mahal and rubbing my eyes in disbelief at such grace. Pleasure is hearing that one melody that pierces my defences and confronts me with a beauty so fierce as to leave my tiny whining self in pieces. Pleasure is being confounded and transported by a painting, which plunges me into new waters.*

*Pleasure is when I finally sink out of my thinking mind into a sweet presence of being that knows and needs no desire or goal. Pleasure is when all becomes transparent, no veil, no separation: pleasure is when I am gone. The movie of my life goes on but something extraordinary has happened to the part of me watching it... what was an I is now vast, empty and tainted with bliss.*

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Life offers an endless array of joys and pleasures, some readily available, some elusive, some buried, some yet to be discovered. The word 'abundance' doesn't do justice to the diverse and sumptuous catalogue of pleasure dangled before us in this slice of life we are given.

But before we celebrate too wildly, here is another take on pleasure:

*Pleasure is revenge. Pleasure is humiliating my wife when she has humiliated me. Pleasure is cutting someone down with the sword of my tongue. Pleasure is turning the whip on myself when I am already*

*desperate. Pleasure is injecting myself with heroin. Pleasure is lashing out at others when my own pain is too much to bear.*

Atrocities can even bear the stamp of pleasure for some.

If such diverse recipes of experience all contain the ingredient of pleasure, how is pleasure best understood? Foucault says nobody knows what pleasure really is. Freud says pleasure and displeasure are “the darkest and most impenetrable area of the psyche”.

Yet every child, every adult, can directly report on any given experience in terms of pleasure and displeasure. Even when the two are entwined, they can both be named, distinguished, with confidence. Pleasure is a fundamental element of our internal world – immediately recognizable. We are continuously registering and responding to pleasure (and its opposites).

How can something so simple, so basic, be so mysterious? We can talk of neurotransmitters or the release of dopamine in the bloodstream but these are just the physical, biological correlates of the experience – such facts don’t help us understand and interpret the *felt texture* of the experience.

In his book *Happiness*, the Dalai Lama – as many others have before him – makes a distinction between pleasure and happiness. I see no fundamental difference; we are still talking about *what feels good*. Happiness is just a sophisticated form of pleasure that includes the concept of duration: a subtle form of pleasure drawn out over time. Our first experience as children is of pleasure, not happiness, as we have little concept of time. Pleasure is the basic experience and drive out of which adult forms such as happiness and contentment can grow.

If the line we draw to distinguish between pleasure and happiness is too thick, we run the risk of dishonoring the roots of happiness and forgetting that the quest for pleasure and happiness stem

from the same impulse. People would like to think, for example, that the desire for chocolate and the quest for moral or spiritual contentment are different. The pleasure impulse fuels both equally. All we ever want is what feels good.

So let us return to the simple definition and leave the rest in mystery: pleasure is that which pleases us. This book is more about our puzzling *relationship* to pleasure than the puzzle of pleasure itself.

I am advocating in the course of this book a new kind of hedonism. Through my *typology of pleasure*, I will lay out what I believe to be a new map of pleasure and explain the discipline and personal developmental process needed to apply this map. I believe my brand of neo-hedonism can help make the world a happier place for all.

In the course of this pleasure treatise I wish to dispel certain misconceptions about pleasure. When I first started announcing to friends and colleagues the theme of my book, there was much suspicion about the word pleasure and encouragement to change it. That very suspicion is one of the reasons why I think the book needs to be written.

I like the word pleasure because its sensual flavour brings us back down to the earth of our bodies. Pleasure takes us out of pretense; it releases us from the pinching grip of our lofty notions as to what *should* be good for us and others. Pleasure brings a lush humility.

Psychologist Carol Gilligan expresses a similar notion in her wonderful book, *The Birth of Pleasure*:

“The English word pleasure is a sensual word, the z of the ‘s’ and the sound of the ‘u’ coming from deep within our bodies, tapping the wellsprings of desire and curiosity, a knowing that resides within ourselves.”

Pleasure is that which pleases. Happiness, joy, satisfaction, contentment, bliss, cheerfulness, rapture, ecstasy, fulfilment, merriment, delight, gladness, glee, gratification, relish, delectation... these are all different colours of the pleasure spectrum. These emotions and states may differ in degree and duration, but they all bear the unmistakable stamp of pleasure: they please us.

In order to bring credibility and dignity to the word and pursuit of pleasure, I will try to relieve pleasure of various associated misconceptions that have gathered over the years:

1 A life devoted to pleasure means *dissipation* and *excess*. The reason pleasure is so often associated with excess is because it is on the one hand judged, minimalized and repressed, and on the other hand secretly glorified, longed for and worshipped. The *discipline* of pleasure does not lead to an excess of anything. A hedonism infused with *learning* does not lead to decadence.

2 Pleasure is synonymous with *fun*. During the Haiti earthquake disaster in 2010, there was a heart-rending radio interview with a foreign doctor who had flown out to help and had been working 24/7 to treat a horrific array of injuries. At one point he was asked how it felt to be doing what he was doing. There was a silence and eventually he answered in a voice cracked with emotion: "It is as awful as you would imagine... and there is nowhere else in the world I want to be." I realized in that moment how much *pleasure* this man was deriving from playing his part in the crisis. It would be inaccurate (and inappropriate) to imagine he was having *fun* in that context, but the fact that it *pleased* and *satisfied* him to be there cannot be denied. Furthermore, on hearing his words I was deeply touched and felt the pleasure of being touched.

3 Pleasure refers only to *nice* experiences. Too often, pleasure has sweet, superficial associations. I once had a painful swollen toe, which only seemed to get worse. I couldn't work out what the problem was, so I eventually consulted a doctor friend, who proceeded to draw out a huge, bloody splinter, which had been submerged in my toe for several months. The experience was deeply satisfying if painful. Could this be described as a *nice* experience?

Similarly, can an emotional meltdown – tears of pain and relief – be described as a *nice* experience? Perhaps this is why Freud tended to define pleasure as a release of tension – and therefore orgasm as the greatest pleasure. I don't think pleasure can be restricted to the release of tension, but I do think that covers a large domain of pleasure.

4 Pleasure presupposes *immorality*. This is the most common challenge to pleasure, as I shall explore in chapter 3. How can pleasure be 'good' if revenge and spite (and much worse) can bring pleasure? This is why Plato calls pleasure the "bait of evil", as do many other sages in as many words. Pleasure is often pitted against virtue and moral goodness. One of the aims of this book is to place morality *within* the pleasure spectrum, not in opposition to it.

5 The pursuit of pleasure or hedonism is inherently *unspiritual*. In the philosophical world, hedonists have tended to be atheist. In common usage, a weekend devoted to pleasure is not readily associated with church or a meditation retreat. *Spirit pleasure*, however, provides a whole category in my pleasure typology. I will show that not only does the transpersonal domain offer some of the most profound pleasures, but also that the discipline of pleasure eventually *leads* us to spirituality.

The reason I take pleasure so seriously is because it is an *end in itself*. An end state, an end value. Try playing this game and see if you can get further than pleasure (or a definition of pleasure) as your motivation:

Why do you play sport?

Because I like moving my body.

Why do you like moving your body?

Because it feels good.

Why do you like something that feels good?

Um... strange question!

Or:

Why do you like playing sport?

Because I like competing.

Why do you like competing?

To prove something.

Why do you like proving something?

Because then I feel powerful.

Why do you like feeling powerful?

Because it feels good.

Why do you like something that feels good?

Um...

My definition of pleasure is broad and includes everything that feels good. I wish to strip the word of certain assumptions and restore some of its innocence, while honouring its status as the only true end goal. Broad as the ocean, pleasure also has the variations of both depth and menace, from sparkling shallows to deep blue chasms, from silky calm to vicious currents.