

The Pain Box

By Bill Ramsey

So the main idea behind the pain box is to provide a spatial/geometric representation of some very basic facts of life that we probably all appreciate at some level, but have a hard time fully embracing. It is easy to grasp because of its starkness and because of the way it cuts to the essence of what is involved in most forms of self-improvement without the usual bullshit people often try to sell us. There is a complementary “pleasure box” that goes along with it, which is also explained below.

The key concept of the pain box can best be described as *pain reallocation* (with a similar concept of *pleasure reallocation* in the case of the pleasure box). Here is the basic geometric imagery: Imagine a rectangular box, with a divider in the middle. The box is filled with most of the pain and suffering in your life, and the divider separates the two very different kinds of pain and suffering we experience.

On the left side is all of the pain associated with sacrifice and hard work – the exertion, tiredness and soreness we experience from a tough work-out, the mental fatigue we feel from studying hard and concentrating, the monotony of practicing something over and over, the hunger we feel from dieting, and so on. It is all the unpleasantness associated with those things we know we should be doing but often don't -- because of that unpleasantness.

On the right side of the box, on the other hand, is a very different sort of pain. Here is all the pain associated with, well, sucking. It is all the frustration associated with failure, the disappointment that comes from not achieving our goals, the discontentment that comes with not feeling good about ourselves, our bodies. It is all the regret that comes from not living up to our own expectations. Thus, the box neatly divides the overall quantity of these two very different kinds of pain in our lives. For practical reasons, we should assume that this overall quantity is fixed – that we cannot in any way change the outer parameters of the box. However, the important thing about the box is that the divider in the middle is mobile. (See diagram below)

Now for most of us, a basic fact of life is that we would like a lot less of the latter sort of pain in our lives – the pain on the right side associated with failing. And when we look at the geometry of the box we see that this is indeed possible. It is possible because the pain on the right side of the box is of a finite quantity that can be reduced. Because we cannot reduce the outer parameters of the box, the only way this quantity can be reduced is if the divider is moved to the right. However – and this is the key point – when we move the divider to the right to reduce the amount of “failure” pain in our lives, this necessarily involves an increase the amount of “hard work” pain in our lives.

In other words, if we want to decrease the quantity of frustration and failure that we experience by not achieving our goals, we can do so only by trading out that type of pain for the other sort of pain – the sort of pain that comes from hard work and sacrifice. This is what I meant by “pain reallocation”.

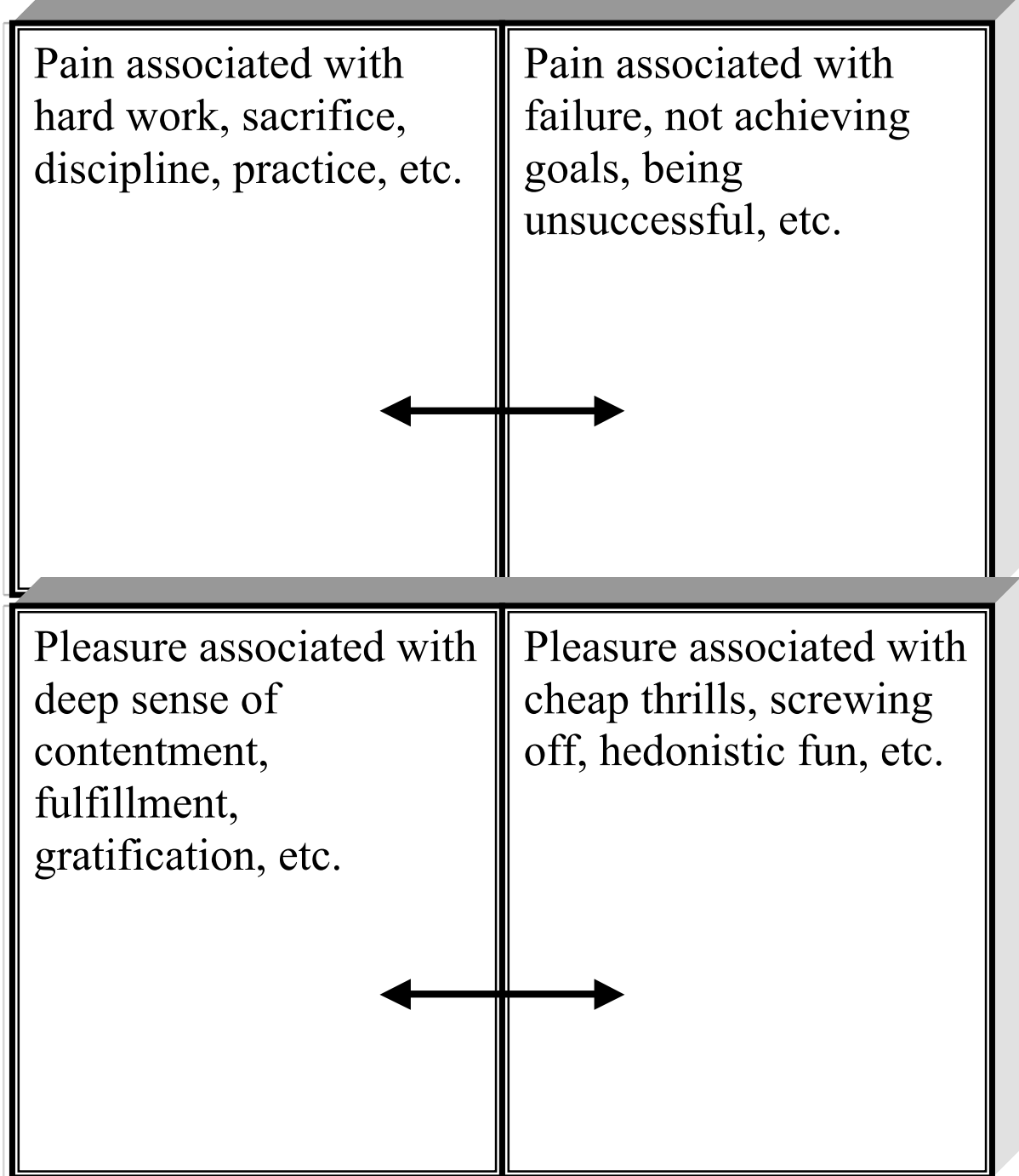
One way to think about this is along the lines of a sort of “conservation of energy” principle. The quantity of pain in our lives cannot be reduced, so we should accept it. But the pain can be converted. It can be converted from failure/frustration pain to hard-work pain, which results in an increase in the amount of the sacrifice/hard-work sort of pain and a decrease in the failure/frustration sort.

And, of course, going the other way, we can readily see by looking at the box that if we reduce the amount of hard work and sacrifice we engage in, then we can expect an increase in the sort of discontentment associated with failing. Basic geometry is basic geometry – you can’t cheat. If we want to push that divider to the right, then geometry will only allow this by increasing the quantity of what’s on the left side of the divider.

One nice thing about the box, besides the clarity of the imagery, is the way it quantifies something that is often nebulous, and this can be a great motivator. So, for example, when I’m nearing the end of a hard workout and want to quit, I often call up the imagery of the box and ask myself if I don’t want to push that bar just a little more to the right. Yes, I want less failure in my life, which means I need to engage in a little more pain reallocation, which means I need to train another half hour (despite bleeding fingertips, sore muscles, etc.). This is what

sometimes often keeps me going when everyone else is quitting. I suspect that if you interviewed many accomplished athletes or successful individuals, you would find that somewhere in their psyche is fairly robust understanding of the basic facts illustrated in the pain box.

Pain and Pleasure Boxes



As I said, there is also a corresponding pleasure box. Imagine a similar box but this time it is filled with much of the pleasure in your life. On the right side of this divider is the pleasure associated with cheap thrills, screwing around – things we often call “guilty pleasures”. It is the sort of superficial pleasure associated with things like playing video games, getting high or drunk, eating junky food, watching reality television, and so on.

On the left side of the box is the deeper sort of pleasure associated with gratification and fulfillment that might come from a job well done, a meaningful relationship, or contentment about one’s situation or status in life. It is the sort of happiness Aristotle referred to as “Eudaimonistic” – a kind of living well and flourishing. Once again, these different types of pleasure are divided in a way that allows for reallocation – the more we have of the one sort, the less we have of the other sort. And since most of us want more of the latter sort of pleasure in our lives, this is possible only by having less of the former sort. If we want to increase the happiness in our life associated with a deeper sense of contentment and fulfillment, then that means we need to experience fewer guilty pleasures. In the pain box, the goal is to decrease the quantity of something; namely, the pain associated with failure.

Now, in the pleasure box, the goal is to increase something – this time, the sort of pleasure associated with contentment and gratification. But in both cases, quantities can only be changed by a trade-off. In the pain box, we want to push the bar to the right to decrease pain of failure, which demands an increase in the pain of hard work.

In the pleasure box, we want to push the bar to the right to increase the pleasure associated with gratification and fulfillment, which demands a *decrease* in the hedonistic pleasures we experience. The two boxes are connected because the quantities of pain and pleasure are connected.

The more I screw off and have fun, the less hard work I do and hence the more I suck and the less contentment I experience. The fewer guilty pleasures I engage in, the harder I work and sacrifice, and hence the less I suck and more I achieve a deeper sense of gratification.