Mixed Bag, A

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Birth in the human realm is a pretty mixed bag. There are lots of pleasures. There are lots of pains. Lots of desirable things. Lots of undesirable things. They say, though, it’s the best realm for gaining awakening, the realms where there’s nothing but pain. People are just too overcome with the pain to be able to practice. In the realms where there’s nothing but pleasure, people get carried away by the pleasure, get complacent, get heedless. It’s this mixture of pleasure and pain that alerts us to the problem. If we had nothing but pleasure, everything would seem smooth and easy, and there would be no idea that there was any need to get out. It’s the contrast that reminds us that there’s work to be done. We’ve had a taste of pleasure. So when pain comes along, we realize what we’re missing. There must be something better than this. The Buddha says, however, that even the pleasures we have in this world are not the ultimate pleasures, at least not the sensual pleasures or the pleasures from getting the mind to be still. There’s something even better than that. Even though we may not have experienced what he’s talking about, it makes sense. Even the nicest pleasures in the human realm, in terms of sensual pleasures, the pleasures of what they call form or formless realms that we can get into in the concentration, they’re not permanent. They don’t last. They turn into other things. If you try sticking with them as best you can, you’ll find that there comes a point where you can’t stick with them any longer. The mind hunkers for something more. So how are we going to get to that something more? We make use of what we’ve got right here. We’ve got the body with its mixture of pleasures and pains. We’ve got the mind with its mixture of skillful and unskillful qualities. Again, it’s a pretty mixed bag. But we look into this bag and see what it’s of use. When the Buddha talks about contemplation of the body, everybody knows that Theravada has a pretty negative take on the body, but that’s not the total truth. It often emphasizes the good things that can come out of the body. You can focus on the breath and develop a sense of rapture. It means, of course, that your focus has to be selective. If there’s pain in the body, you’ve got to learn how to focus around the pain, just like that old book of instructions on how to draw. You may have seen it called “Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain.” It tells you when you draw, don’t draw eyes or noses. Try to draw the spaces between the eyes, the spaces between the nose and the eyes and the nose and the mouth. Because you don’t have preconceived notions about what those spaces should look like, you end up drawing a lot better. It’s the same with the body. There may be pains in the body, but you find there are lots of spaces around the pains, places that you tend not to focus on because the tendency of the mind normally is to run straight to the pain. Learn not to run straight to the pain. Learn to look at the areas around it. The sense of ease may not be a great sense of ease, but at least there’s some ease comparatively. Focus on that instead. Then, as you focus on that, you become sensitive to other areas of ease in the body. You see there are these little islands of ease here and there in the body. You can connect them. You can build bridges between them so they all hook up. If you allow them simply to be there as you breathe in, to be there as you breathe out, don’t squeeze them as you breathe in, don’t squeeze them as you breathe out, they develop a sense of fullness. As that sense of fullness matures, you find it gets more and more prominent. The body feels more and more light. That’s definitely one of the advantages of having a body to meditate on. It can be used that way. Again, you have to learn how to use it selectively. You take this mixed bag that you’ve got and you dump it out and you look at what you’ve got that’s of use. After all, you can’t use nirvana to attain nirvana. You’ve got to use the body and mind you’ve got right here. So you’re selective in what you focus on. You’re selective in what you develop. First, you use the body to gain a sense of well-being right here. Then you can turn around and look at your attachments to the body. In other words, the attachment that goes beyond simply using it as a tool for the practice and into clinging, craving, possessiveness, lust. That’s when you take the more negative side of the body, like the chant we have on 32 parts of the body. Just go through those parts. Gain a sense of where they are in the different parts of the body. Visualize them. Realize, okay, you’ve got a liver just like the liver in that book on anatomy over there. You’ve got excrement in your intestines. You’ve got all kinds of disgusting stuff in here. And it’s not that you’re more disgusting than anybody else. We’re all equal in this sense, everybody in this room. As the Buddha said, whoever would think of exalting the themselves or disparaging others on the basis of this body, what is that, if not blindness? Whether you’re dealing with lust or possessiveness or pride or whatever, you’ve got to focus on what you’ve actually got right here. It’s not that the Buddha is bad-mouthing the body or slandering it. It’s just the plain, basic truth that when you’re holding on to the body, this is the kind of stuff you’re holding on to. Now, again, he asks you to do this when you’re in a state of concentration, or just coming out of a state of concentration, so that you have some other place to hold on to. You go back into that state of rapture if you need it, and you begin to compare your attachment to the rapture versus your attachment to the body. Which is more desirable? Which is a more satisfying pleasure, a more satisfying attachment? And the rapture wins out. But because of your old habits of holding on to the body, it may not win out for long. So you have to keep reminding yourself, reminding yourself, going over this meditation again and again. This way you find that even the negative side of the body has its uses for developing dispassion. Disenchantment, dispassion, and from dispassion comes release. So the various things you have here in this mixed bag, they have their uses, if you learn to use them properly. Then you look at the ways of the world around you. There’s gain and loss. Status, loss of status. Criticism and praise. Pleasure and pain. All the things that come with living with other people in this world. And again, it’s a mixed bag. You try to find the uses of all these things. Praise has its uses, as does criticism. You hear criticism of yourself, and you realize that you don’t want to get too stuck on other people’s words. So that when they praise you, you remind yourself, “Don’t get stuck on other people’s words. What are they praising you for? What do they want to get out of you? What damage can come from that praise?” You might get carried away. They say you’re good, and you get carried away with the idea you’re good. When you learn to peel yourself away from their praise, then it’s easier to peel yourself away from their criticism. And then you can look at it to see how it’s useful. If the criticism is accurate, well-founded, okay, you’ve got a lesson. As the Buddha once said, “Regard those who point out your faults as someone who’s pointing out treasure, pointing out areas where you have work to do.” So if you’re not caught up in whether you like or dislike the things in this mixed bag of the human life, you find that all the various things that come your way have their uses. It’s simply a question of learning to use which tool for which job. And when you live in this way, then you realize you can use whatever comes your way as an important lesson. And if things get too heavy and you’re not ready for that lesson yet, well, you can go back into your concentration and wait till the time when you’re ready. Have a sense of what you’re capable of. I think I’ve told this story before about the martial arts class in China. They were going to have a demonstration in a pavilion out in the forest. And the road to the pavilion had a donkey on the side of the road, which was well-known in those parts for being an obstreperous, nasty donkey. Anyone who walked past on the road would get a good kick. And so as the students were heading out to the pavilion and ahead of the teacher, they decided to take this as an opportunity to show off their skills. The first student goes up and says, “Okay, I’m going to take care of this donkey.” He goes up, and the donkey kicks him across the road. The second one comes up and says, “That’s not how you do it. You do it this way.” But then he gets kicked across the road as well. And so on down. All the students got kicked across the road, no matter what stance they took the donkey. Finally, they decided to wait and see what the teacher would do. So they hid on the side of the road to watch his approach to the donkey. And when the teacher came along, he saw the donkey, and he walked way around. The lesson, of course, is to know your own strength. Know what you’re capable of. Some situations, there’s too much for you to take, and so you avoid them. You step back for the time being. And you don’t regard it as disgraceful or as a weakness. You just regard it as being realistic. After all, good soldiers, someone knows which battles are worth fighting and which ones are not worth fighting, which ones have the prospect of victory and which ones don’t. And so you approach these lessons accordingly. Sometimes the mixed bag is a little bit too heavy to take right now, so you back off for a while and do what you can to gather your strength. But ultimately, as you practice, you find more and more uses for these various tools that you’ve got in your bag. And don’t think that when awakening comes and nothing bad is ever going to come your way again. It’s simply that you have all the tools you need to handle everything that comes your way. There’s a reference in the biography of Ajahn Mun, where before he attained Arunachala, sometimes you could be heard to say that he didn’t have the energy to take on a particular task. Sometimes he would leave his students so he could go off and meditate more, because he just didn’t have the strength needed to keep on teaching day after day after day all those people. But after he became an arahant, he never said that again. He always had the strength, he always had the ability to teach. That was because he had mastered all the tools he needed. Because this didn’t mean that difficulty in teaching for adult students didn’t come along. He had to deal with all the, what they say in the Thai, the issues of the pig shit is getting moldy, the dog shit is getting dry. In other words, all the diddly shit affairs that are involved in living with human beings. He still had to deal with those all the way to the end. But he had all the tools, all the skills he needed to handle these issues. So he didn’t leave an imprint on the mind, so he had no effect on the mind. So human life is always going to be a mixed bag, just having this body as a mixed bag right here. But the difference between an awakened person and one who’s not is that the awakened person knows how to handle everything in the bag. We’re on the path. We’re learning those skills. That means we have to be up for whatever lesson is coming our way. If we find it’s too much, we withdraw for a while. But never in total defeat. Just wait until we’ve got the right time. Wait until our powers of mindfulness and concentration and discernment are ready. Then we come back again. That’s one thing that we’re told never to give up, is that determination that we’re going to see it all the way through to the end, no matter how difficult it gets. We may have to pace ourselves, but that determination stays solid.

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