Gratification

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Psychologists make a distinction between two kinds of happiness, pleasure and gratification. Pleasure is simply enjoying pleasant sensations, pleasant emotions, contentment, thrill, ecstasy. It’s a more passive kind of thing, just trying to consume whatever comes by. That’s basically taking pleasure in things. Whereas gratification requires a more active role. It comes from developing a skill, developing your strengths to the point where you can get so involved in an activity that you get completely absorbed and completely immersed. That, they say, is a higher form of happiness than simple pleasure. Of course, from the Buddhist point of view, both types of activities involve a kind of activity, or just that, activities. You enjoy the pleasure. There’s an element of fabrication, even in the present moment, when you try to enjoy a nice sound or a nice sight. The mind embraces a lot around the sound and sight in order to enjoy it, because those things are pretty fleeting. And the mind has a tendency to advertise the sound and the sight to it, that this is something really special, something you really ought to pay attention to. And then they try to draw out the pleasure as much as they can. So that’s a type of skill in and of itself, but it doesn’t go very far. In other words, totally for the present moment. Whereas the second sort of skill, we’re actually investing in trying to develop strengths that will be useful in the future. That’s a lot more useful, a lot more helpful. But it has a carryover, not just the craving to get a particular pleasure again, but you’ve got a strength, you’ve got an ability that you can fall back on again the next time you need it. The question that psychologists don’t ask is, “Which are the skills that are most important to develop?” Because as far as they’re concerned, anything where you get a sense of immersion, or what they call flow, is perfectly fine. You get it from riding with a motorcycle gang or dancing or singing or shooting a rifle. Wherever you get your kicks, that’s perfectly fine from their point of view. It doesn’t really look into the issue of what strengths does everybody need in order to face what’s sure to happen in life. Aging, illness, and death are sure to happen. Separation is sure to happen. What skills do you need so you don’t suffer from these things? What you can do about them. But the Buddha’s great discovery was that even though they happen, you don’t have to suffer. That’s what the Four Noble Truths are all about. The suffering that really gets to the mind is the suffering that comes from craving. Not from the arising and passing away of things, but from the craving that we have. So try to take these things that arise and pass away and turn them into a foundation for happiness. We do this out of ignorance, so we need skills that can get rid of ignorance, get rid of craving. That’s why we’re meditating. This is why this is such an important skill. It should be a basic skill for everybody. In the course of our lives, we all have different kinds of problems. If you’re good at sports, you have sports problems. If you’re involved in work as a lawyer, you have lawyer’s problems. If you’re in a relationship, you have relationship problems. And those specific problems require specific skills. But the universal problems are aging, illness, separation, and death. Those are problems we all face, and those are all skills that we need to develop. The ones that will give us the strength we need to deal with those. In normal, everyday society, say, when you go to school, after you get basic lessons in reading, writing, arithmetic, they start to channel you. Wherever your aptitude seems to be, they’ll channel you in those directions. So we get used to developing our skills in areas where we have the aptitude. What we’re missing is skills in how to learn to get good at things where we don’t have the aptitude, because it’s not always the case that mindfulness comes in easily, alertness comes easily, concentration, discernment. These things are many times very hard, and yet they’re all skills we need to develop. So that second set of skills is learning how to develop skills in areas where it’s hard. That means you have to learn how to talk to yourself in the right way. One, to remind yourself of how important this skill is, so you feel more encouraged to spend time, devote time, to invest time in mastering these skills. So this is why the Buddha has you contemplate things like the fellowship of the body, or contemplate death. Realize that these things are inevitable. The body’s going to start falling apart. It’s going to start getting sick. It’s going to start getting weak and old, if you live that long. At any rate, it’s sure to die. And if your happiness depends on things that die, what are you going to do then? And death can come at any time. So you don’t want to waste your life dithering around with other things and then suddenly have, say, three weeks when the doctor says, “Whoa, whoops, three weeks left. We all know it’s going to happen someday, so it’s good to get prepared now.” These are precisely the skills you’re going to need, the mindfulness not to go running off after the daydreams of the mind. Because if those daydreams come in as you’re dying, you just might follow them. Who knows where they’re going to go? They talk about something called samsara. Don’t think of samsara as a place. It’s a process. When the mind is constant, it means wandering on, and the mind is constantly wandering on. You see this. A little thought comes into the mind, you follow it off, and then that begins to run out and you catch the next train, and then the next train, and the next train. Who knows where it’s going to go? You want to get skilled at bringing the mind back. As soon as you realize that you’ve hopped a train, well, hop off. Come back to the breath. Because that skill is going to serve you in really good stead when things get difficult. The mind starts complaining and it starts creating all sorts of scenarios that are really not good for it, and you want to be able to pull out as quickly as possible. So this practice of staying with one object, the breath, and as soon as you catch the mind wandering off, bring it right back. This is an important skill. Then the mind will create all sorts of tricks to make it difficult from time to time. Just take that as par for the course. You get quicker and quicker at sensing when you’ve slipped off, or sensing even before you’ve slipped off. The mind is going to give its warning signals that it’s getting ready to go. It knows some place to go. Catch it in the waving before it actually lands. It’s like an inchworm at the edge of a leaf. It waves around looking for the next leaf. As soon as another leaf comes floating past there, it’s gone on to the next leaf. Try to catch it before that leaf comes. Bring it back here. Try to get more and more sensitive to the breath so you can really get absorbed. When you get absorbed in the breath, then there can be a sense of ease, that you’ve got a place to settle down, and the breath itself becomes more and more pleasant. This gives you strength. It helps to lubricate the practice. That’s the next step, is how to get yourself through those dry periods. If you can access a sense of ease any place in the body, focus on it. If you’re having trouble, learn how to give yourself pep talks. Don’t be the sort of person who’s constantly negative about what you’re doing. “See, you can’t do that. See, you can’t do this.” What kind of advice is that? It’s not helpful at all. You’ve got to learn how to encourage yourself. Each time you catch yourself wandering off, that’s a good sign. You’ve caught yourself. Come right back. Learn to be encouraging. That’s one of the most important aspects of developing a skill. Because what is it to develop a skill? Well, you make a mistake. And how you respond to those mistakes makes all the difference between whether you’ll become skillful or not. If you get discouraged, if you give up, that’s it. If you say, “Let’s come back and try it again, let’s come back and try it again,” you’ve got to have confidence both in the path and in yourself. It’s an important psychological skill. It’s just this, learning how to be encouraging. It’s good to have a sense of humor about the whole thing, so you don’t let the downs get you down. So this is a basic set of skills that everybody needs to know. Learning how to learn. Learning how to master a skill, whether you’re good at it or not. If you master only the ones that you’re good at, you leave huge areas of your life undeveloped. And if so happens that virtue, concentration, and discernment are not your forte, then you’re really stuck, because these are the skills that everybody needs. So be the sort of person that takes pleasure in learning, takes pleasure in meeting a challenge. Conquer the challenge right away. Just keep trying different angles, different ways. Find some enjoyment in that, learning to become ingenious in tackling the problem from different angles. That way, the meditation eventually does become gratifying, as you learn different ways of keeping the mind centered in different situations—easy situations, hard situations. How to deal with setbacks, because they’re going to come. It’s inevitable. What makes or breaks a meditator is how you deal with it. Don’t take the setbacks as a sign that you’re a failure. Just take them as a sign that life has its ups and downs. The mind is a complex, chaotic system. If you were to chart the progress of even the great meditators, it’s not a nice straight line up and onward. It goes up and down. It’s important how you treat the downs. That’s what makes all the difference. Remember that these are the important skills in life. The other things that you master are secondary. The skills you learn in a job, the skills you learn in a relationship, your hobbies, whatever. Those will serve you for a time. But then there comes a time when they can’t help you. And that’s when you’ll be glad that you have these skills under your belt. Mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. Because these are the skills that will see you through.

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