Afraid of Pleasure

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You probably know the story of the Buddhist quest for awakening. As a young prince, he had all the pleasures you could imagine. Yet when he reflected on it, he realized that the pleasures he had would not survive aging, illness, and death. And that realization began to eat away at him. He developed a sense of what’s called sanghuega, a very strong sense of meaninglessness of life as it’s ordinarily lived, and a sense of urgency, the need to find a way out. And all of those things come together, and all of a sudden those pleasures seemed like a trap. And so he left home, first went to study with some of the teachers of those days, who taught a path to what they said was true happiness. He wasn’t satisfied with that, so he went off on his own and started practicing austerities, engaging in spiritual and extreme self-torment, trying to stop his breath, going on an absolute minimum of food, one handful of beans a week. And he discovered that that extreme didn’t work either. That wasn’t the way out. And the story goes that he began to reflect on his childhood. There was a time when he was a young boy. His father was out plowing. In the original version of the story, it just says that his father was plowing. Later on, the idea of the Buddhist father plowing disturbed people, so they said it was a royal plowing ceremony. But at any rate, he was sitting under a tree and came to a sense of great contentment. His mind entered the first jhana. Which means mental absorption. And there was a very steady state of well-being, rapture, refreshment, simply focused on his breath. And so he reflected on that. He said, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure? Is there anything blameworthy about it?” And the more he reflected on it, he realized there was nothing to be afraid of there. So he decided to see if that was going to be the way to awakening. And that was when he got on the right path. It’s interesting, when he later formulated the Eightfold Noble Path, he started with the right view and ended up with right concentration, which was the four stages of jhana. But in the story, he reflected first on the seven stages of jhana and decided to make that the path. And there are other places in the Canon where they talk about the path as being essentially right concentration with seven ancillary or helpful factors, which are the seven other factors. So it’s the right concentration that’s important. It starts out with direct thought and evaluation. As the Buddha said, after you’ve put aside your obsession with sensual pleasures and other unskillful mental qualities, you focus on one object, direct your thoughts to the object, and then you evaluate the object. And those two processes are what give rise to a sense of ease and rapture, pleasure and rapture. For instance, you’re focusing on your breath. That’s the direct thought. You keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. Then you evaluate it. This is where the real work of the meditation comes in. How does evaluation lead to pleasure? How does it lead to a sense of refreshment? Well, you evaluate the breath in a way that the breath begins to feel pleasant, begins to feel refreshing. This is where thinking plays an important role in the practice. You think about the breath and then you look at it. Ask yourself, “Is this really as good as it can get? Is this really comfortable? Do I like being with this kind of breathing?” And if the answer is no, you think, “Well, let’s change.” And so there’s a little dialogue there in the mind. “How about this? How about that?” And then you try different kinds of breathing until you find one that works. One that feels good. Then you stay with that until it doesn’t feel good anymore. Then you allow it to change. So in the very beginning stages of the meditation, there has to be thought. There has to be evaluation. Because that sense of ease, that sense of pleasure, is very important. Without it, the meditation gets dry. No matter how strong your willpower to stay in the present moment is, it’s an uphill battle if there’s no immediate payoff. So this is what you’re trying to provide for the mind, a sense of refreshment that comes simply from sitting here breathing. In the beginning, it may not be especially intense, but give it time. Whatever sense of ease, refreshment, and satisfaction comes from breathing in a particular way. You might just think, “Every little cell in the body has the right to order what kind of breath it wants and see how the body’s going to breathe in response to that.” Because all too often we occupy the body with other thoughts. You may have noticed that at the end of the day of a lot of thinking and mental activity, the body feels tired, too. That’s because when you think, there are going to be patterns of tension going through the body, and your thought worlds take over. So whatever breathing needs the body may have, those get shoved off to the side. At the end of a day of work like that, the body feels exhausted. I remember reading a Chinese medical treatise one time that said that mental work is three times as taxing on the body as physical work. A lot of that is because the breath energy in the body gets stopped up. It gets bottled up here, blocked there. So no wonder you feel tired at the end of the day. But here, when you’re meditating, you say, “Okay, no other priorities.” The priority is going to be to allow the body to breathe in whatever way it wants. Every part of the breath, every part of the body, can have a share in the breathing. So, who wants what kind of breathing? You can go around and ask different parts of the body. Of course, they’re not going to answer in words, but just open up that possibility. How about this little spot of tension here? What would feel good for that spot of tension as you breathed in? How long does the breath feel good there? Explore it. Stay with that sense of ease for a while, and then you can move on. Check out the rest of the body. Sort of cleaning up work in the body. Working through the patterns of tension until things are as good as you can make them. They may not be 100% good, but they’re good enough. Then you might want to go through the body and check some more. As your sensitivity heightens, you begin to detect patterns of tension you didn’t see before. Well, work through those. Feel the body feels pretty good. Then choose whatever spot in the body is your favorite spot to stay, and then settle down there. Then you can think of your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. Let all the breath sensations connect. Then just maintain that state. It’s going to be an active balance. Little thoughts flitting here, running around there, but you don’t have to chase them down. You don’t have to deal with them at all. You may find yourself clamping down too much on the body or having too light a touch. You learn that simply from experience, from your direct thought and evaluation. It’s important that you make this your priority while you’re sitting here. You don’t have anything else you have to think about right now. Whatever other agendas the mind may have, you have to learn how to say, “No.” Because sometimes it’ll say, “Hey, look, there’s this huge empty space here all this time. Nothing else is going on. Let’s think about this.” And you find yourself in another world. We’ve got a little bit of time. Learn how to just drop those worlds, no matter how intriguing they may be, how attractive they may be. One way of dropping them is to figure out where is the tension right now that goes along with this little thought world. Once you spot it, which part of the body it is, just breathe through that part of the body and the thought world will go away. Get back to allowing the body to breathe uninjured. This kind of indulgence here is a very important part of the practice. The Buddha is saying that. He says, “Work on this.” When he told the monks to go out and meditate, he said, “Go do jhana.” There will come a time when you have to overcome your attachment to this. But first, develop an attachment here. Otherwise, what happens to your attachments? They go back to their old ways. Other things are easier. If you tend to be good at thinking through things, the mind will want to go back to its attachments, to its thoughts. Or it’ll think up other duties for itself. “I’ve got to look at this. I’ve got to look at that.” Even here at the monastery, there’s a lot of looking after the physical planet that has to go on. It’s very easy for the mind to get tied up in that. If you don’t give the mind something really good to hold on to, then the mind, in the present moment, is going to go back to its old ways. So it’s important that you develop this sense of attachment here, this sense of really liking to be here, breathing, learning to enjoy it, learning to be a connoisseur of your breath, because that helps shift the center of your gravity into the present moment. Only when it’s really thoroughly shifted here, when it’s solid here, that’s when you can really start seeing things in the present moment as they’re actually happening. Remember that little question and answer that the Buddha asked himself. He said, “Why am I afraid of this happiness?” Is there anything blameworthy? There’s nothing blameworthy. Is there anything wrong with being here? No, there’s nothing wrong with being here. This is the path to awakening. So try to develop your sensitivity here. For the most part, we’ve learned to desensitize ourselves to the breath energy in the body so we can get on with our thinking and other activities. But now it’s time to re-sensitize ourselves here. Because if you’re going to see stress and its cause, this is where you’re going to have to see them. And if you want to be sensitive to very subtle levels of stress, you have to be able to give rise to good, strong feelings of well-being. After all, it’s there in the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. Training yourself to breathe in and out with a sense of ease and pleasure. Training yourself to breathe in and out with a sense of rapture. Training yourself to gladden the mind when it needs gladdening, steady it when it needs steadying, and releasing it from whatever concerns are weighing it down. And the ability to let go of your worries. Develop a sense of pleasure here, to appreciate that sense of pleasure here, and to learn how to tap into it whenever you need it. Those are important skills in the meditation. They form the heart of the path.

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