The Pursuit of Pleasure

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The pursuit of happiness is a principle that we’re pretty much in agreement on. It’s enshrined in the founding documents of our nation. The pursuit of pleasure is more problematic. We’ve all known instances of pleasures that have carried a high price. There are times when we even become afraid of them. There’s the story of the Buddha going through those six years of austerity, doing everything he could not to let his mind get overcome by pain or overcome by pleasure, submitting himself to an awful lot of pain and denying himself any pleasure at all. Finally, he realized that that was a dead end. That’s when he remembered the state of mind he was able to attain when he was young, meditating under a tree, gaining the pleasure in rapture, the first jhana. He asked himself, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure?” He asked himself, “Is it blameworthy or blameless?” It’s blameless. It doesn’t hurt anyone. It doesn’t have the usual drawbacks of a lot of pleasures, where the mind gets complacent or intoxicated, heedless, and ends up doing and saying and thinking very unfortunate things. But he realized that this pleasure was something different. The mind was fully mindful, fully alert, fully aware, and yet there was pleasure. It’s when he decided that he was not afraid of this pleasure that he was able to start pursuing the path that actually led to the end of suffering. This is an important story, because a lot of us have indulged in pleasures that have been really harmful, and we get burned. So we learn not to trust pleasure, to be afraid of it, thinking somehow that by depriving ourselves of pleasure it’s going to be a good thing. On top of that, there’s the natural tendency of the mind. It’s almost as if we have these little scouts and sentinels in all the nerve ends, quick to sense whenever there’s pain, and they send the warnings. So we tend to be more familiar with the parts of the body that are in pain than the ones that are in pleasure. You combine these and you get all kinds of attitudes, the idea that it’s because of pain that we become strong. And there is a strength that comes from dealing with pain. But if you don’t have a basis of pleasure from which to come, the pain overwhelms you. If you had nothing but pain, you would die. So we need a certain amount of pleasure for the mind to be strong, to deal with the issues that come up in life. But it has to be a pleasure that’s not complacent, that’s not intoxicated. It’s a pleasure where the mind is sharp. That’s the kind of pleasure that actually forms the path to the end of suffering. This is what we’re working on. As we meditate, it’s a pursuit of pleasure. It’s instructive to note that in Pali they don’t have different words for pleasure, happiness, bliss, ease, well-being. These are all one word, sukha. They do distinguish different types of sukha. There’s limited and there’s abundant. Abundant being the sukha that’s large and long-lasting. And the beginning of wisdom is when you realize that it’s worthwhile to be able to forsake limited happiness, limited pleasure, limited sukha, for the sake of the abundant. There’s also amisa sukha and niramisa sukha. Amisa sukha, the word amisa literally means meat or flesh or bait. These are the kinds of pleasures that are a bait for the mind. They get you stuck on the hook of greed, anger, and delusion. Obviously, you don’t want to fall for those. But there is a niramisa sukha, a form of pleasure that’s not a bait at all. It doesn’t depend on the flesh at all. It starts with the right concentration and goes on up and encompasses nirvana. That’s the kind of happiness we try to use as our path. Because this happiness is not intoxicated. The mind is not dulled. It’s the happiness that comes from a sharp mind, learning how to use your powers of observation to sharpen the mind at the same time that you’re getting a sense of ease in the body. It’s something to be developed. It’s part of the path. So don’t be afraid of it. At the same time, learn how to recognize where it is. The body has a potential for happiness. There’s one passage where the Buddha talks about the potentials for serenity, the potentials for rapture. They’re there in the mind and the body. The parts of the body are still and relaxed. There’s the potential there for happiness. There’s the potential for ease, pleasure, even the fullness of bhitti, or rapture and refreshment. So you learn how to recognize them. There’s a principle in one of the Buddha’s teachings that there is no sukha, there is no pleasure, no happiness, no bliss, no well-being, no ease, apart from peace. So it’s the peaceful parts of the body that you want to learn to focus on. These are precisely the ones that we tend to ignore. It seems to be hard-wired to look for the places that are problematic, where there’s pain. We’re awfully good at stitching the different pains in different parts of our body together into one big mass of pain, and that just weighs us down even more. So try to take the opposite approach. Find the areas of the body that are at peace. They feel refreshed and relaxed. Refreshed is too strong a word in the beginning. They feel relaxed. They’re okay as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Learn to focus on them in a way that allows them to maintain that same sense of open relaxation and thinking of them opening up to one another. So instead of stitching together patterns of tension in the body, begin to allow patterns of ease to radiate out and blend with one another. This gives you strength. This is the kind of pleasure you can really use. It has a real minimum of dangers. Sometimes you hear about the horrors of getting attached to concentration, or being attached to jhana. There’s no passage in the Canon at all where the Buddha talks about that. That jhana is something to be afraid of. It’s something to be developed. It’s something to be indulged in. You settle in, and he actually says, you indulge in the sense of well-being, so as to strengthen it. So it becomes really solid, something you can learn to depend on, tap into whenever you need it, because it is the strength of the path. The similes the Buddha uses for the different qualities of mind that you need to bring to the path. Jhana is food, good food at that. It’s a sense of ease and well-being that gives you the strength to do some of the difficult work that the path involves. It’s a strength. It’s a pleasure you really can use because it is conjoined with a sense of clarity in the mind, full mindfulness, alertness. When the mind is at ease and it’s fully alert, then you begin to see where the subtle areas where you cause yourself unnecessary stress are. What can you do to stop doing that? What can you do to stop identifying with your unskillful habits? We really do hold onto these pretty strongly. It takes a lot of determination, a lot of repeated observation, in order to see where these habits are unskillful and how you have alternatives so you don’t have to keep following the same old unskillful ways you’ve related to the body, you’ve related to the mind. That requires strength. And the pleasure jhana, the pleasure of right concentration, provides that strength. So it’s not a pleasure to be afraid of. It’s a pleasure to search out for, look for, develop, cultivate. Once you find it, learn how to maximize it. This is why you have to find it. And John Lee recommends learning how to experiment with the breath, learning how to conceive the breath energy in the body on different levels—the in-and-out breath, the sense of energy that’s flowing in the nerves, in the blood vessels, and the still breath that underlies them all. As for the breath energy flowing in different parts of the body, there’s upflowing energy going from the soles of your feet up, the legs up, to your backbone. There’s the energy that goes down. You have to learn how to balance these two. If there’s too much upflowing energy, it can cause headaches and a sense of dullness around your brain. If there’s too much downflowing energy, it’s hard to sit up straight. So take the time to explore. Get a sense of where the different pleasure centers of the body are. They’re not going to be very precisely located. One of the qualities of pleasure is that its boundaries tend to be kind of vague. But that’s okay. Think of all these vague but present feelings of well-being, ease in different parts of the body. Think of them spreading out. Merging with one another. They begin to dissolve away the old patterns of tension that you’ve been holding onto. In and of themselves, they’re a pleasant abiding. At the same time, they put the mind in a position where it can see things clearly. When the Buddha talks about indulging in right concentration, that’s one stage. The next stage is to learn how to maintain that same sense of pleasure and analyze it at the same time. See where it’s coming from, what the mind is doing to maintain it. Because it’s learning to see the actions of the mind, where real insight comes. See what your intentions are, how you’re shaping your present experience. It’s in that kind of understanding that liberating insight comes. And you can see it clearly only when the mind is at peace. The mind can be at peace only when there’s a sense of well-being. So try to cultivate the kind of well-being that really does enable you to see clearly. It’s the pursuit of this pleasure, the pursuit of this bliss, that leads to happiness. And it’s really genuine, solid, lasting.

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