June 2, 2024

The four noble truths we know are about the issue of suffering and stress. The question often arises, where is the place for pleasure among those truths? Well, it’s in the fourth truth, under Right Concentration. The pleasure that comes from being focused steadily on any of the four frames of reference, the four establishments of mindfulness—the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, or mental qualities in and of themselves. When the mind can settle down there, in a state of unification and steadiness, there comes a sense of pleasure, a sense of ease. That kind of pleasure is useful on the path. The pleasure that comes from sight, sound, smell, taste, and tactile sensations is on the other side of the path. That’s over in cause of suffering and suffering itself. So you’ve got to shift your frame of reference as to where you’re going to look for happiness. As in that sutta we discussed this morning about the quail and the hawk, the quail had wandered off from its ancestral territory, and the hawk swooped down and got it. It was in the wrong place. So the quail laments, “Oh, if only I’d stayed in my territory, you’d be no match for me, you hawk.” And so the hawk, looking at this little pipsqueak quail, decided to test him. So he lets him go. He says, “Go there, but even there you won’t escape me.” So the quail goes into a field where there are clumps of earth and stones all dug up by the plow. And then he stands on top of it. He stands on top of what is either a clump of earth or a stone and says to the hawk, “Come and get me. Come and get me.” So the hawk folds its wings, swoops down, and at the very last minute, the quail sneaks behind the stone. The hawk crashes into the stone and dies. As the Buddha said, when you’re with the four frames of reference, you’re in your safe territory. Mara can’t get you. If you’re out wandering, in other places, in sights and smells, taste, tactile sensations, you’re easy prey. Easy prey for what? Well, for your own defilements. Greed, anger, and delusion can sneak up on you at any time, take over the mind. And you’re totally consumed because you’re totally into those pleasures. It’s when you’re able to maintain a good solid foundation, being really established in the body just in and of itself. Sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations come and go. Some of them are nice and some of them are not. But you’re in a position where you can step back a bit and look at them for what they actually are. You’re not quite so involved. If you haven’t totally cut through your defilements, you’re in a much safer place because you can watch the pleasures of these things as it comes and as it goes. You can begin to see there’s no real substance there. But at the same time, you’re not lacking for a sense of ease. This is important, that you have a good solid state of concentration where you can get your sense of pleasure. This is called a pleasure on the level of form. You’re inhabiting your body. You’re inhabiting your hands. You’re inhabiting your feet, all the rest of the body. And there comes a sense of ease that goes along with that. If you don’t have this sense of pleasure, you’re going to try to sneak little bites out of the sounds and sights and smells and tastes and tactile sensations, and your quest for pleasure goes underground. Then you’re really in bad shape because you can’t see it. So it’s good to be open and above board about the fact that you really do want a sense of ease. You need a sense of ease if you’re going to look at these things objectively. So this is why we develop right concentration based on any one of these four foundations. So we do our best to develop this place as our safe haven. It’s going to require work, but it’s good work. Sometimes there’s going to be a sense of frustration. You want the mind to settle down, and it hasn’t settled down yet. Sometimes you hear the attitude that, “Well, it’s hard for the mind to have a goal that it hasn’t attained, so let’s just erase all desire for goals.” That doesn’t help at all. It just leaves you adrift where you were before. One of the discourses is that there are two ways of approaching or responding to a sense of dis-ease or a sense of dissatisfaction with the situation around you. One is to try to find satisfaction in the pleasures of the senses, and the other is to focus on the fact that the real source of dissatisfaction is not that I’m not getting the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations and relationships and honor or whatever we want out of the world. That’s not the problem. The problem is that I’ve got a goal inside. I want to be able to find peace of mind, and I’m not there yet. The Buddha said that the grief of not having attained your goal is much better than the joy that comes from tasting those sensual pleasures. After all, the sensual pleasures you get are going to turn into sensual pain at some point, and they leave you without anything at all. John Swann often used to ask this question. Those sensual pleasures you had just last week, the ones you had yesterday, where are they now? They’re gone. And when they go, either they don’t leave a trace, or sometimes, if you’ve had to do unskillful things in order to gain those pleasures, you’ve got the memory of the unskillful things. The pleasure itself is gone. So it’s better to have a sense of dissatisfaction over the fact that you’ve got a goal. Rather than trying to go running around for the satisfaction that comes from these pleasures. Then you can look at what’s lacking. Why can’t the mind settle down? For the mind to settle down, you’ve got to give it something that it likes. It can be the breath or, as the Buddha says, any inspiring theme. If you have a particular problem in mind that seems to be gnawing away at your mind, you can look at the meditation that’s designed to counteract that problem and look for the antidote. If you’re discouraged about yourself, think about all those monks and nuns who were even worse off than you were in their practice, and yet they were able to turn themselves around and find awakening. If you find yourself getting lazy and complacent, you can think about death. It could happen at any time. Are you ready to go? If not, what work needs to be done? Well, work on the mind. Think about that for a while, and it gives you the energy you need to get back to work. But of all the methods that he taught, the Buddha emphasized the breath the most. One, because the breath is right there all the time. It’s right next to your mind. It’s very intimately related to your mind. So it’s a good place to take your stance in order to read the mind. It’s a very versatile topic. You can just sit and watch it, or you can play with it. Find a sense of ease and pleasure. This is how you get the mind back into the body, through this breath element. Notice where you tend to tense up the body as you breathe in, where you’re holding onto tension when you breathe out. You can breathe through those patterns of tension. You can relax them. When they get relaxed, it’s a lot easier to settle down. So you take the breath as your starting point, as the place where you take a stance when you want to read the mind. That puts you in your safe territory. The better you get to know the breath, the more a sense of fullness can arise, a sense of refreshment. Then you’re established in your safe territory, with a sense of well-being. When you’re there, then you can decide what needs to be done with the mind now. Sometimes it’s simply a matter of staying there. It’s a good practice to be able to keep the mind in that spot as long as possible. All too often, people get impatient. “Okay, once the mind is settled down, what next? What do I do next? Where am I going to go next?” Well, you don’t go anywhere. You stay right here for a while. Because an important skill in the meditation is to be able to maintain this. The foundation as long as possible. So you’re familiar with it, you know it, and nothing can knock you out. When impatience comes up, learn how to just watch the impatience. Don’t get blown away with it. Because when you get blown away by impatience, all of a sudden you find yourself blown away by just about anything at all that comes along. It’s from here that you’re going to take your stance so you can watch things, not only in terms of the pleasures of the senses, but also what’s going on in the mind. As I said, the breath is very intimately related to the mind. Fear comes up. You’re going to feel it in the way you breathe. Anger comes up. You’re going to feel it right here. So you’re in a good spot to read the mind. All four of the foundations of mindfulness, or the frames of reference, all come together right here at the breath. When you’re with the breath, you’re with the body. There are the feelings that arise based on the breath, the state of mind that’s related to the breath, and the different mental qualities either the hindrances that are getting in the way or the factors for awakening that are helping you while you’re here. These are all right next to the breath, so you’re in a great position to watch things. From this position, you can decide what needs to be done. Once you’re really firmly established here, if you decide that something needs to be analyzed, you’re in a good place to analyze it. Different pains come up. Different uncomfortable mental states come up. You can watch them from here. See how they come. See how they go. See what comes along with them. That’s the important part of the meditation, seeing how things come together and go together. The Buddha wasn’t teaching only about impermanence or inconstancy. He was also teaching about cause and effect, because that’s where the real insight gets useful, when you see these connections. So stake this out as your safe territory. Learn how to stay here as consistently as possible, because on the one hand, it’s safe, and because on the other hand, it’s a great place to set up your experiments—experiments with the body or experiments with the mind—the ones that will allow you to see how cause and effect are related, what causes need to be cut, what causes need to be nurtured. You’re going to get the most out of the meditation. It’s like putting yourself where the Buddha was on the night of his awakening. He had mastered the four jhanas, and from that perspective, he was able to understand the truths about suffering and the end of suffering. So he wouldn’t understand what he was seeing and what he wasn’t seeing. He wouldn’t understand why he used the terminology he used. It’s good to put yourself in the same spot where he was. It’s like hearing about what Zion Canyon looks like from Angel’s Landing. When they describe this, that, and the other point, you’re at the bottom of the canyon. You can only imagine what they’re talking about. When you get up on Angel’s Landing, you see, “Oh, that’s what they were mentioning. That’s what they were referring to.” It all comes together. These are some of the advantages of developing a good, strong state of concentration based on these establishings of mindfulness, these four frames of reference. It’s something you really want to work at. Even though there may be times of frustration when it’s not working, it’s a healthy kind of frustration. It’s a useful frustration, because it spurs you on to get the mind in a state where it really is safe. The Buddha didn’t want to leave you where you were. He said, “There’s a better place to be.” It’s right here. You’re just simply here in a different way. You’re occupying the part of the present moment that really is your safe territory. Whatever effort is involved in trying to get into this territory and stay here, it’s all effort that’s well spent, because the rewards are more than many.

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