A Pleasure Not to Be Feared

July 21, 2008

Focus on the breath. Focus on the sensation of breathing wherever it seems most prominent in the body. It might be at the nose, but it might be at the chest, or the abdomen, or the shoulders. It can be anywhere at all in the body. Or there are sensations that tell you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” Find a spot that seems congenial and allow your focus to stay there. And allow the breath to be comfortable. The element of right concentration is a sense of ease, of well-being. The word sukha can mean anything from happiness, to bliss, to ease, to pleasure, to well-being. It covers that whole range, and it’s definitely part of the path. We know the story of the Buddha when he first went out into the forest. He started to study with two of the famous teachers in that day. He wasn’t satisfied with their teaching, and as is so often the case with someone who had spent a life of very intense physical pleasures, he decided he was going to try the practice of denying himself any kind of pleasure. He did that for six years, and he realized it didn’t get anywhere. Those are two of the most amazing incidents in his life story. One is that he was willing to give up all of his wealth and pleasure to find the Deathless. And then, secondly, after six years of tormenting himself, he had the honesty to admit that it wasn’t working. You can imagine what was keeping him going all those six years was a strong sense of pride. He was able to get beyond the pride to realize that if this was not working, there had to be another way. He remembered a time when he was sitting under a tree as a child, and his mind had entered a state of intense absorption called jhana, a sense of ease and rapture. He asked himself, “Might this be the way?” And the answer came up, “Yes.” Then he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of that sense of ease and pleasure?” Because it’s not blameworthy, it doesn’t harm anyone, and it’s not the kind of pleasure that comes with intoxication. It’s a pleasure that allows you to see clearly. So he decided he wasn’t afraid of it, and he was willing to practice it. Then he realized, of course, that after having starved himself for six years, he was not physically in shape to do the meditation. So he began to eat again, just enough to keep the body strong and able to do the meditation. So the ease of concentration is something you don’t have to be afraid of. It’s not like a lot of the pleasures that we search for in daily life. The pleasures that we search for in daily life involve harm of some kind, either for ourselves or for other people, and tend to cloud the mind. The fact that they cause harm is one of the things that tends to cloud the mind. If we find our happiness someplace and it’s causing harm to other people, we tend to hide that from ourselves. But the pleasure that comes from concentration is an honest pleasure. Sometimes you hear warnings that say, “Don’t get involved in concentration practice because the pleasure is very addictive. It’s dangerous.” But you can’t find the Buddha ever saying anything like that. He’s always encouraging people to practice jhana. Every time he told people to go meditating, he said, “Go practice jhana.” He didn’t say, “Go do insight,” or whatever. He just said, “Go practice jhana.” So get the mind absorbed. Develop the sense of ease. And as you nourish the mind and nourish the body with a sense of ease and fullness, it gets willing to settle down. And then when it’s had enough, it’ll let go on its own, because you work through the ease and the rapture, finally to a state of clear equanimity and pure mindfulness. That’s when mindfulness gets pure. It gets nourished. And it’s a better mood to look at things for what they are. So breathe in whatever way feels gratifying, whatever feels pleasurable, feels good for the body, good for the mind. Allow yourself to experiment to see what really feels good right now. The one danger you run into is that when things get pleasant, you tend to drift off. The danger, of course, is that as you work, work, work, work, work at the meditation, you don’t seem to get any sense of ease or pleasure at all. That’s when you have to step back a little bit and ask yourself, “Well, how about just staying with this one breath?” Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good just right now? What would the body like for this one breath?” Take it one breath at a time. Then the next breath, and then the next. Listen to what the body seems to want in terms of breath energy, because it’s the breath that keeps the body going. The breath here means not only the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the whole energy movement of the body that brings the breath in and allows the breath to go out. So when you bring it in, don’t try to force things to move. When you let the breath go out, don’t try to squeeze it out. Allow it to come in and out whatever way feels best. When a sense of comfort does arise, that’s when you have to be careful not to drift off. So think of the sense of ease of the breathing flowing through different parts of the body. Down the back, out the legs. Down the shoulders, out the arms. All throughout the torso, in the head, anywhere in the body where it would feel good to have breath energy flow. Allow yourself to think that the breath energy can go anywhere there’s a nerve, anywhere there’s a blood vessel in the body, and see where it goes once you allow it. Notice what rhythms of breathing feel best in the different parts of the body, until it feels like the whole body is connected. When you breathe in, the energy flows everywhere. Then try to maintain that sense of full body awareness, still but enlarged. If you find it distracting or hard to maintain, we’ll go back to your one spot. Try to protect it. The word for jhana has a verb, jayati, which is a homonym with another word for jayati, which means to burn. But it’s a special kind of burning. It’s burning with a steady flame, not the burning of the fire sermon that we chanted just now. That’s a different verb, a different kind of burning, the burning of greed, anger, and delusion that flickers and flames up. It’s like reading a book next to a flaming wood fire. It’s hard to read a book because of the flickering. But if you have a steady candle flame or the steady flame of an oil lamp, which is what I just mentioned, you can read clearly. It’s the same with this quality of mind. Try to keep a steady flame going. In the beginning, it may seem like there’s a lot of wind blowing your flame, so cup your hands around it and just keep that small, steady flame as still and as constant as possible. Once you feel that the flame is taken, then you can think of spreading it around. This is an important element in what we call the Middle Path. We often tend to think of the Middle Path as halfway measures, sort of halfway between pleasure and pain, halfway between effort and no effort. But the Buddha didn’t call it the Halfway Path. He called it the Middle Path. It avoids extremes. Here, instead of pursuing pleasure or pursuing pain, the Buddha teaches you how to use pleasure, how to use pain. Use the pleasure in the sense of giving the mind a good, solid place to stay. You develop a different kind of pleasure from the sensual pleasure that lies at one extreme. The pleasure of a still mind helps you in the sense that it helps the mind to settle down and be still to begin with. Secondly, it nourishes the mind and nourishes your meditation so that you’re not afraid of pain. This is when you can bring in issues of pain and stress. If there happens to be a pain in a certain part of the body, once the mind is still and feels nourished, then you can look at the pain. Again, you’re using the pain. It’s not going after the pain for its own sake. You’re going to use the pain to understand the mind. When you’re coming from a position of pleasure and well-being, you’re much less likely to want to snuff out the pain or run away from it, and you’re more able, honestly, to want to understand the pain. What is this sensation of pain? You start taking it apart. There are the physical sensations of body. There’s the solidity, the energy, the warmth, the liquidity. These are all body sensations. And then the pain is something separate. We very rarely see it as something separate. It’s all one big mass. Once the mind is still enough, it can sort out these different kinds of sensations. So you have the sensation of the physicality of the body, and then there’s the feeling tone of something that doesn’t feel quite right. But if you can separate the feeling tone from the sensations of the body, you begin to see that it flickers around. It’s another kind of flame, another kind of burning. It’s not just nearly as steady or as solid as you originally thought. And you begin to see that a lot of its movements correspond to movements in the mind, exactly what changed in the mind that made, say, the pain flare up at a particular point. In what ways did the mind move that made the pain die down? These are things you can watch. When the mind is still and it’s been nourished. So explore the breath. Get to know the breath. In the course of getting to know the breath, you learn how to get to know the mind as well. Getting a state of good, solid concentration requires some insight, at the very least an insight into what feels good right now. What the body would seem to like in terms of the breath, what the mind would like in terms of the breath. In other words, you’ve got to figure out the mind in order to get it to settle down. Once it’s settled down, then it’s ready to gain deeper insights. There’s a passage in the Dhammapada, “There’s no jhana without insight, and there’s no insight without jhana.” The two things have to go together. So try to develop that still, steady flame. Whether it’s small or large is not the issue. Just try to keep it still, steady. Because only when it’s steady can you learn to read the body and mind.

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