A Pleasure Not to Be Feared

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Once your body is in position, sitting up straight, facing forward, your eyes closed, your hands in your lap, right hand on top of the left, next step is to get the mind in position. Think thoughts of goodwill, a wish for happiness, true happiness—your own true happiness and the true happiness of all other beings. That’s the good thing about true happiness. Your true happiness doesn’t have to take anything away from anyone else’s true happiness. It doesn’t have to conflict with it, because it comes from within. That’s why we’re meditating, to find happiness, to find well-being. The word in Pali is the same. Sukha means happiness, pleasure, well-being, ease. We often hear that the Buddha’s teachings are about suffering, like in the chant just before, about suffering and its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. The focus seems to be on suffering, but notice it’s not just sticking with suffering. It’s also finding an end to it. And the end of suffering is true happiness. And those four noble truths are not all about suffering. It’s the path to the end of suffering. You find right concentration, and the factors of right concentration include a sense of sukha, which can be happiness, pleasure, ease, well-being, and pitti, which is rapture, refreshment. Those are the qualities we try to develop in our meditation as part of the path. So focus on your breath as your object of concentration. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to see how the breathing feels and where you feel it most prominently in the body. Because the breath is an all-body, full-body process. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the flow of energy as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Because it’s the flow of energy in the body that actually brings the air into the lungs and allows it out. So you can feel the breathing process anywhere in the body—in the chest, in the abdomen, in your shoulders, in your neck, in your head. As you get more and more sensitive to it, you realize you can feel it anywhere in the nervous system, all the way out to every pore. But in the beginning, focus on whichever spot is easiest to notice the breath, and allow the breath to breathe in a way that lets that spot feel comfortable. So it feels full and at ease. You don’t have to strain. In fact, if you strain, then you create tension in different parts of the body. So you can just pose the question in the mind, “What kind of breathing would feel really good right here, right now?” And see how the body responds. Learn how to read the spot in the body that you’re focused on. So you can tell when you’re breathing too far out or too far in. There’ll be a sense of strain as it gets too full or too empty. So allow the breathing to stay right in the range of what’s comfortable. And see how long you can keep it there. If your mind wanders off, come back and ask yourself, “Where were you?” Pick it up from where you left it off. And pose that question in the mind again, “What kind of breathing would feel really good?” If you want, you can experiment with different types of breathing. Longer or shorter, heavier or lighter, deeper or more shallow, faster or slower. Just to remind yourself of all the different options you have here. Sometimes it stirs up a memory in the body itself of what kind of breathing feels really good, what kind of breathing is possible. An important part of the meditation is learning how to read the needs of the body and allowing the breath to meet those needs to whatever extent it can. Because you need a sense of ease and well-being on the path in order to stay with it. As I said, if there’s not that sense of fullness and refreshment, the path begins to seize up like an engine that hasn’t been lubricated. As the oil wears away, finally the engine seizes up and just can’t go anywhere. The practice stops going anywhere. Because there’s no sense of refreshment that comes with it, it becomes very dry. So the pleasure that comes from staying with the breath, allowing the mind to settle down with the breath, is something you really want to pursue. Think about the Buddha. As a prince, he was indulging every desire, every wish for pleasure. And it so often happens when someone who’s been indulging in that way, when he decided to take the way to true happiness, he went to the other extreme, denied himself any happiness, any pleasure at all. He was afraid of pleasure. Those similes occurred to his mind. For the mind to gain awakening, it has to be like wood that’s totally devoid of sap and is kept away from water, no moisture at all. In other words, not indulging in pleasure and not thinking about pleasure. So he forced himself to go without food. He forced himself to stop breathing. He kept up this practice for many years. There was nothing left but skin and bones, fainting every time he went to the bathroom. And you know, it keeps someone going, like that sense of pride. He wasn’t taking pride in sensual pleasure. Excuse me, he wasn’t indulging in sensual pleasure, but he was indulging in his sense of pride, that he was better than the people who were indulging in pleasure. But ultimately, he realized that that wasn’t the way either. Everything was just suppressed, but there was no real understanding. So he remembered a time when he was young, sitting under a tree and meditating. Not even intentionally meditating, just sitting under the tree very quietly, and his mind settled down into a state of ease, rapture, singleness of preoccupation. He was focused, probably, on his breath. And the question occurred to him, “Could this be the way to awakening?” And the answer appeared to him, “Yes, it could.” “But why am I afraid of this happiness? Why am I afraid of the pleasure that comes along with that concentration?” he asked himself. “Is there anything blameworthy about it?” “No. It doesn’t oppress anybody. It doesn’t involve intoxication with sensual pleasures.” “So why am I afraid of it?” he said. And the more he contemplated, the more he realized there was nothing to fear. But then he realized that when he was so emaciated, it was hard for him to get the mind to settle down into that state. So he returned to eating food again. And that was how he found the middle way. And so now it’s up to us to find the middle way, too. Most of us tend to indulge either in pleasure or pleasure. But we’re afraid of the pleasure that comes from a concentrated mind, that comes from allowing the breath to be comfortable and to develop that state where the Buddha says, “Once there is that sense of ease and well-being, you allow it to spread throughout the body.” Think of yourself kneading that pleasure through the body as you would knead moisture through a ball of dough. So it’s not just this one spot where you focus that feels good, but you allow that feeling of ease and pleasure to spread around to the different parts of the body—out your fingers, out your toes, through your head, all over the body. Because, as the Buddha said, there’s no way you’re going to really overcome your attachment to sensual pleasures, your desires for material objects, unless you can find a higher sense of well-being and ease that comes from a concentrated mind, or the higher levels of well-being and ease that come from states of awakening. Because the mind wants pleasure, it wants ease, it wants well-being. And if you try to stamp out that desire, it will go underground where you can’t see it. There’s no way insight’s going to arise if you keep putting things underground, denying what’s going on. So you bring that desire out to the open, and you learn how to satisfy that desire in a skillful way. This is an important part of the process. Once the mind is nourished in this way, then when you do start letting go of other desires, other attachments, you’re doing it from a sense of well-being. It’s not neurotic, it’s not done with hate or aversion. It’s simply dispassion. You’ve found something better, something more solid, something more reliable, something less blameworthy. A pleasure that allows the mind to be clear rather than clouded. And so you look at all the other pleasures you’ve been pursuing through your life, and you begin to realize they don’t nearly match this. And so you let them go. Not because somebody told you to let them go, but simply because you realize you’ve got something better. And as you develop this sense of inner well-being even further, you become more and more sensitive, and you finally realize that this, too, has its drawbacks. It’s not totally constant. It’s not totally without stress. It’s not totally under your control. It’s fabricated. It’s willed. And as you begin to see the slight variations and the slight fluctuations in this sense of ease and well-being, you look for something deeper, more solid. That’s how right concentration becomes a step to greater insight. You become more and more aware. You become a connoisseur of pleasure. Your sensitivity for what’s stressful and what’s inconstant gets more and more refined. Because without this refinement, your understanding of what the Buddha taught about things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self is very crude. The practice of concentration helps to develop your sensitivity for what true well-being really is. And how refined it can get. That’s what sharpens your insight. So the pleasure of concentration is nothing to be feared. You actively pursue it. You openly pursue it. The Buddha says, when the mind finds an object that’s comfortable, easeful, you allow it to settle in, you indulge in that sense of well-being. You allow yourself to fully enjoy it. You let it spread throughout the body, so your whole nervous system is illumined by that sense of ease and well-being, refreshed by that sense of ease and well-being. So the insights that come to you don’t come with a neurotic fear of anything. It’s simply a realization that this is much better than the kinds of pleasures you’ve been pursuing before. And it piques your curiosity. Is there something better than this? Sometimes you hear about the danger of being attached to the pleasures of deep concentration. But if you compare those to the dangers of being attached to sensuality, they’re very minor. When you’re attached to sensuality, it’s because of attachment to sensuality that people kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, take intoxicants, harm one another, harm themselves. That’s the real danger. So you want to learn to find a better pleasure for the mind, a deeper pleasure for the mind, so that you’re less likely to engage in that kind of behavior. The only drawback for deep concentration is if you get satisfied with it and say, “This is good enough for me. I don’t want to go any further.” But that kind of attachment is relatively easy to overcome. So this is a pleasure that’s not to be feared. As the Buddha said, it’s totally blameless. So give it your full attention. Try to master the skills that can bring on this pleasure, so that you can bring the path to fruition and see the even greater happiness, the even greater well-being that lies at its end.

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