Don’t Be Afraid of Pleasure

January 2, 2011

Before the Buddha found the true path to awakening, he subjected himself to a lot of torture, a lot of pain. He was afraid of attachment, afraid of being intoxicated by pleasure. And so he did everything he could to avoid every kind of pleasure. And after six years, he found that he really hadn’t gotten anywhere. He had trained his mind to be very resilient and very tough, but hadn’t given rise to any insight. So he asked himself, “Is there some other way?” He was sitting quietly under a tree while his father was working out in the fields. His mind entered the first jhana, the sense of pleasure, rapture, that was totally divorced from unskillful mental qualities, totally divorced from sensual desires. And so he asked himself, “Could that be the way to awakening?” And an awareness came to him. Yes, it could. So he asked himself then, “Well, why am I afraid of that pleasure and rapture? After all, it has nothing to do with anything unskillful in the mind, and it has no intoxicating effects. At least, it’s not as intoxicating as sensual pleasure, sensual desires.” So he told himself, “I’m not afraid of that.” But he needed to strengthen his body in order to attain that pleasure, attain that rapture. So that’s when he started eating normal meals again. And the monks who’d been looking after him got disgusted. “Ah, he’s turned back to luxurious ways. He’s turned back to self-indulgence. There’s no way he’s going to find awakening,” they thought. And so they left him. But it was not long after that that he did attain awakening. Then when he formulated the path, he put right concentration there as an essential element of the path. It was actually the first part of the path that he realized. And as he said, this was the central factor. The others were aids and assistance. There’s a state of mind that finds pleasure and rapture when it’s secluded from sensuality. Sometimes that formula is translated as being secluded from sensual pleasures, but that’s not what it means. Sensuality means your resolve for sensual pleasures, i.e., the states of mind that are fascinated and keep feeding over and over and over again, and how much you’d like these nice sounds, nice smells, tastes, tactile sensations. So it’s an important element of the path, the ability to give rise to that pleasure, to give rise to that rapture. And we shouldn’t be afraid of it. There was a book recently that came out on the topic of right concentration. And after explaining right concentration on the first page, on the second page they warned about the dangers of concentration, which is a strange attitude. You don’t hear warnings about right view or right resolve or right action or right speech. But you hear people saying, “Well, watch out for the pleasure and rapture of concentration. They get addictive.” But the damage they do is so much less than our attachment to sensuality. Nobody kills, steals, has illicit sex because of their rapture and pleasure of right concentration. So we have to realize that this is an essential element of the path, and it’s not to be feared. Because the mind needs a sense of well-being if it’s going to stay on the path and motivate itself to stick with the path for its own sake and also for the sake of others. The Buddha never drew a sharp line between the things you do on the path for yourself and the things you do for other people. When you develop goodwill for others, it’s good for you. When you develop compassion for others, it’s good for you. When you work on mindfulness, it’s good for other people as well as for you. In other words, these practices we do are not clearly marked off in terms of their benefits. The benefits seep through the lines we may draw between ourselves and others. And the same goes for this pleasure for right concentration. Some people are afraid of it because they’re afraid that it’ll sully the equanimity of their minds, or the clarity of their minds. But you have to remember, the mind ordinarily is not just a receptive screen. It’s actively engaging in the world, feeding off the world, feeding off ideas, feeding off intentions, feeding off sensory plasmas. And if you don’t give it better things to feed, it’s going to sneak off and feed when you’re not looking. There’s a story they tell of a candidate in England, Anagarika, who had been very strict with himself. He was also very strict with other people. If he saw the slightest thing that seemed to be an offense or something against the rules, he would immediately be on top of other people. And one day, one of the Ajahns happened to go into the storeroom, and there was this Anagarika stuffing himself with chocolate. He had a big mouthful of chocolate, and he looked in his eye and said, “You’re not supposed to see this,” as he looked at the Ajahn. You can take that as a symbol for the mind when it’s been very strict with itself. After a while, it breaks down and it goes off, feeding in very unskillful ways. Either on pride or on sensual pleasures, depending on its particular taste for unskillful food. And so we need the pleasure that comes from concentration, we need the rapture that comes from concentration, in order to give the mind something better to feed on so it’s not starved. Then when it’s well-fed, it can look at its sensual attachments, look at its pride, look at its other unskillful qualities that have been its food for so long, and really see that there’s nothing worth eating there. So this process of giving pleasure to the body, gladdening the mind, is an essential element of the path. It can’t be overlooked. It can’t be avoided. It’s like looking after your car. You can’t forget to put the lubricant in. It runs out of oil, the whole thing’s going to seize up. Or like growing plants. If you don’t feed them, they’re going to just dry out and die. So look at the pleasure, look at the rapture as a form of food for the mind. As the Buddha said, if you don’t give the mind better places to feed, it’s going to keep going back to feed on its old unskillful things, whatever little scraps it can find. In John Lee’s images of a person who’s so thin and gaunt, he doesn’t just stuff anything into his mouth. He just has something in his stomach. You see that sometimes with the coyotes here, during the seasons when there’s no fruit on the trees. You see the coyote scat and sometimes you see plastic rope, all kinds of weird things in the scat. So when they were just so hungry, they would just put anything in their mouth. Of course, when that’s the attitude, it’s very easy to put poison and other things that are really harmful into your mouth. It’s the same with meditation. You’ve got to feed yourself well. Allow yourself the pleasure, allow yourself the rapture, the refreshment that can come when you focus on the breath. The breath feels good coming in, feels good going out. You let go of all your preconceived notions of what you’re supposed to be here doing, and just allow yourself to be here with the breath. Allow that to nourish the body and nourish the mind. Because this doesn’t rank as indulgence. It’s actually part of the path, something the Buddha said should be developed, should be cultivated. For as long as the mind needs to feed, you want to make sure it’s feeding well, feeding in a way that gives it strength. That’s where the mind differs from the body. The body gets to a point where you don’t have to feed it anymore, when it’s so strong in conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. It’s found a happiness that doesn’t require conditions, doesn’t require food of any kind at all. But until it gets there, make sure you’re feeding it right. Otherwise, it will slip off in the middle of the night and go off by itself. It’ll go off who knows where, to get the food that you’ve been denying it. So don’t be afraid of the pleasure. It’s your friend.

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