Circumspect About Pleasure

February 5, 2013

In the Buddha’s first sermon, which we chanted just now, he talks of his path as a middle way that avoids two extremes, the extreme of self-affliction and the extreme of devotion to sensual pleasure. There’s another sutta where he talks about devotion to pleasure, but it’s a different issue entirely. Notice it’s not just sensual pleasure and pleasure in general. There are two kinds. There’s a good devotion to pleasure, and there’s a bad devotion to pleasure. The bad devotion to pleasure has to do not only with just getting all tied up in the pleasures of sight, sound, smell, taste, and tactile sensations, but also cases where you’re engaged in breaking the precepts and you’re pleased. You kill something, an animal or a human being, and you’re pleased. You steal something, and you’re pleased. You tell a lie, and you’re pleased by that. Being devoted to that kind of pleasure, the Buddha said, is also very unskillful. But there’s a good kind of devotion to pleasure, and that’s devotion to the pleasure and good, strong concentration, the four jhanas. That’s one of the reasons why we work with the breath, because the breath energy is one of the ways of giving rise to a sense of pleasure in the body. But even here you have to be careful. You have to be very circumspect. There are lots of ways that pleasure and pain get related in the practice of concentration. And it’s in sorting these things out that you really gain discernment. There are states of concentration where you can have a sense of pleasure and spread it around. But it’s like the icing on a cake. It disguises something. And there are times when there’s a really intense pleasure in one part of the body, and the more you focus on it, the more you’re actually creating pain in another part of the body. That’s what we’re talking about today. So you have to look all around when you find a sense of pleasure. Then we’re beginning to spread it around. Notice what effect it’s having on the body. One of the reasons we’ve paid attention to the posture when we meditate is that if you can keep sensitive to your posture, you can minimize a lot of the pain that can be caused by concentration. You sit for a while and you begin to notice your legs are going asleep. Why is that? It may be because you’re not sitting straight enough. How do you sit straight without getting a lot of tension? Well, you learn how to straighten yourself up and then see which muscles in the body are pulling you out of a good straight posture. Try to relax those, particularly the muscles around your spine. Notice which ones are really tight if you’re trying to stay erect. Can you loosen those up and still maintain a straight posture? Because as the blood vessels go down the spine and through the hips, they’re going to have a huge impact on whether or not your legs fall asleep while you’re meditating. Start with the back of the neck and go down. When you breathe in, are you putting pressure on any of the nerves in the back of the neck? Trace things down throughout the spine section. What areas down in your hips are tight? Allow things to adjust, and then when you find a good posture, relax into it. Which means just what I said just now. Notice which muscles are pulling you out of that posture and try to relax them so you can maintain it with a minimum of tension. Then, notice how the breath flows in the body when you’ve arranged it this way. It’s then that you choose the spot where you want to focus your attention and allow the breath, the rhythm of the breath, the width of the breath, the depth of the breath, to adjust so that spot feels relaxed. Then when you spread it out, don’t push it out. Just think that you’re allowing it to go. It’ll seep out in different ways that you might not expect. In this way the sense of pleasure will flow in and around other areas of the body which may not seem so pleasant. But that’s okay for the time being, just as long as you’re not making them uncomfortable. If you’re making them more tense, you’re okay. After all, you can’t expect that every time you meditate everything in the body is going to go well. We’re dealing with something that’s inconstant, complex. But it’s learning to deal with pleasure without pushing and pulling it around. That’s a huge part of the skill of getting the mind to settle down, giving it a place where it feels good to settle down. So even in the midst of pain you will have a sense of pleasure, because that’s going to be a very important skill to develop. When you get sick, when you’re dying, parts of the body just will not go the way you want them to. After all, that’s what death ultimately is. The whole body just says, “No, that’s it.” In the meantime, it will put up its arguments and put up its objections to what you want it to do. So the skill is learning how to stay with a sense of pleasure in a way that doesn’t aggravate the pain. In some cases you can work through the pain and the pain just gradually dissolves away. That’s fine. Other times it will stay there, but you’re fine, because you’re focusing on other areas of energy in the body that flow around and feel fine. You’re not making the pain the object of your focus. It’s not your preoccupation at that point. And always bear in mind that pleasure and pain have to go together. Pleasure is comfortable in staying the same, and it’s painful in changing, unless it changes for a better pleasure. Pain is uncomfortable in staying the same, but pleasant in changing. So one is always the shadow of the other. And the skill here is learning how to focus on the pleasure and make the most of it, without also making more of pain. This requires that you be circumspect. You look at things all around. People have studied with the jhanman. He always commented on how he seemed to see a side of things that they never noticed. They’re focused on getting one thing right, and he pointed out that they were missing a lot of other things all around them. There’s that quality that allowed him to be in the forest and not get carried away with any insights or any events that happened in his meditation. Then he wanted to develop this quality in his students as well. Because even though you’re not alone in the forest still, when you’re sitting and meditating, you’re the one in charge of your mind. You’re the one in charge of what you’re doing here. You’re your own inner teacher. Part of your inner teacher will accept what I’m saying or what other teachers say, and part of it will not. Put up a resistance. So you’ve got to make sure that the inner teacher is well-trained, knows its limitations. That places a lot of responsibility on you. But it’s in learning how to accept that responsibility and to handle it well. That’s how your meditation progresses.

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