Good & Bad Pleasure

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The Mali Canon contains what appears to be some of the oldest wilderness poetry in the world. There are some verses by Mahalakassapa which talk about how he’s refreshed by the mountains and streams and the forests, the flocks of birds, even the ladybugs. And so it’s not the case that the Buddha and his disciples were down on pleasure or down on beauty. They recognized that the beauties of nature, especially wild nature, were really conducive to helping the mind to settle down. They became refreshment in the practice. That you don’t reject pleasures that are in accordance with the Dhamma as you practice. Because the element of pleasures that don’t have a bad effect on the mind don’t have a bad effect on other people. That can be part of your nourishment on the path, especially as you’re having trouble getting the mind to settle down, when the practice starts getting dry. But the Buddha does recognize that not all pleasures are good. It’s the same with pain. It’s the same with feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. In some cases where pain has a good effect on the mind, in some cases where it has a bad effect. In some cases where equanimity has a good effect on the mind, in other times where it has a bad effect. So you have to look at these things from all around. When you’re looking, when you’re listening, what’s doing the looking, what’s doing the listening? Is it your greed, aversion, and delusion? If so, you’ve got a problem. Or when you look and listen, whatever, just the simple fact of looking at certain things, does that increase your greed, aversion, and delusion? Okay, that’s something you should avoid. And you have to look at the impact of your ways of finding pleasure. Not only on yourself, but also on other people. Remember those instructions that the Buddha gave to Mahapajapati. If something leads to entanglement, if something leads to being burdensome, then it’s not in accordance with the Dhamma. So when you’re looking for pleasure in life, of course, we do focus on the pleasures of the world. But there are the pleasures of the world around you. And you want to learn how to relate to those in a way that’s not going to get in the way of your concentration, and also in a way that’s going to give rise to right concentration. There’s a passage where, after the Buddha passed away, a Brahmin is talking to Ananda and saying, “Oh yes, I used to listen to the Buddha teach. He praised all kinds of concentration. Every kind of concentration he said was good.” And Ananda said, “No. They’re actually forms of concentration that are based on greed, based on aversion, based on delusion.” As many people have commented throughout the centuries, you can get really concentrated when you’re angry, really concentrated when your lust is aroused. And somehow they think they’ve discovered a concentration the Buddha hadn’t appreciated or hadn’t known about. Well, he knew about it, but he didn’t also realize that this kind of concentration has a really bad effect on the mind. It’s not in accordance with the Dhamma. So as you relate to the pleasures around you, you make your choices. Always be careful to look at these three things. One, what’s doing the looking. Two, what impact does the looking have in your mind? And then three, the fact that you’re pursuing this pleasure, does it make you burdensome to other people? Does it get you entangled with other people? If it does, okay, you avoid it. You drop it. You turn inward in trying to find the pleasure that comes from being generous, that comes from being virtuous, and particularly the pleasure that comes from getting the mind rightly concentrated. Remember the Buddha, after he’d gone through all of his austerities and realized that that was not the path, the question was what was left. He’d tried total indulgence in sensuality when he was a prince and thought that it had a bad effect on his mind. But then he found that total avoidance of any kind of pleasure was not good either. Then he thought at the time when he was young, and his mind had naturally entered into a state of the first jhana. He asked himself, “Could that be the way?” And something inside him said, “Yes, that could be the way.” He said, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure?” Here was someone who had avoided pleasure for six years. Why was he afraid of that pleasure? Well, there’s nothing to be afraid of. And he looked at it in terms of two dimensions. One, that it wasn’t based on any unskillful qualities of mind. And two, that it was blameless, i.e., it didn’t harm anybody. So those are the main things you have to think about when you look at the way you engage with pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. There’s no way you’re going to avoid it. That passage that describes the first jhana, saying that you’re secluded from sensuality, doesn’t mean that you’re secluded from pleasant things. If you had to be secluded from pleasant things, we couldn’t be here at the monastery meditating. We’d have to find some horribly noisy and ugly, foul-smelling environment. He says you’re secluded from sensuality, which is a different thing entirely. Sensuality is the mind’s fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. That’s what you want to drop as you’re trying to get the mind into right concentration. Which is why concentration based on lust or concentration based on anger, even though it may be very intense, is not right concentration. So, secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities. That, to find, is everything from wrong view up through wrong mindfulness. In other words, for your concentration to be right, you have to work on the other elements of the path as well. The Buddha talks about them as being requisites for the right concentration, supports for the right concentration. Right concentration is the heart. After all, it was the first part of the path the Buddha discovered. And he found that it needed these other supports as well. So as you go through the day, you’ll find that the way you engage in, say, the food that you eat, the things you look at, will leave traces in the mind. So try to make sure that the traces are not getting in the way of your concentration, getting in the way of your right concentration. That way you find that pleasure does not have to be an obstacle. There’s nothing wrong with pleasure in and of itself. But the way you pursue it, that’s what has a huge impact on the mind. And that’s what you’ve got to be careful about.

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