Afraid of Pleasure & Pain

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One of the lessons the Buddha learned in the course of his practice was that not all desire is bad, not all pleasure is bad. Like many of people who had been indulging very intensely in sensual pleasure, his immediate reaction as he started practicing on his own was to go in the other direction. He denied himself every kind of pleasure possible, six long years of self-torment. It took him that long to realize that it was a dead end. So the question was, what other way could there be? The text says that his father was plowing and giving him what the later tradition said about the status of his family. The story was adjusted to say that his father was in charge of a royal plowing ceremony. But the important thing was that as the young prince was sitting there under the tree, his mind naturally entered into the verse jhana, rapture and pleasure born of seclusion with direct thought and evaluation. He thought of that and said, “Could this be the path?” And something inside him said, “Yes, it could be.” So the question he asked himself was, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure?” Notice that he’d come to be afraid of pleasure. So he reminded himself that the pleasure was blameless. It was not a pleasure of intoxication. It was not associated with sensuality. It was a pleasure of inhabiting the body from within, your sense of the body, which is something different than sensuality. So that’s how he got on the path. In fact, right concentration was the first factor of the path that he discovered. It’s interesting, that’s the one that everybody seems to want to drop. But for the Buddha, it was the beginning. It was the central factor of the path. In later years he would say that the other factors are requisites or supports for right concentration. In other words, right concentration is the central factor. So as we come to meditate, it’s important that we keep that in mind. There is a pleasure that’s different from sensual pleasures. It’s blameless and it’s non-intoxicating. In other words, it doesn’t do damage to you. It doesn’t do damage to other people. And it clears your mind. And wanting to attain that pleasure is part of the path. The word chanda, desire, is right there in right effort. The desire to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. So the Buddha had to make some distinctions. Some pleasures are good. Some desires are good. In fact, with all the feelings, he said some pains are good and some pains are to be avoided. Some pains, the good pains, are the ones that help you give rise to insight. The pains to be avoided are the ones that come along with unskillful activities. In other words, you can get yourself into a lot of pain. You can get yourself into a lot of pain and a lot of suffering, say, by breaking the precepts or engaging in activities that really are harmful to other people in other ways. That kind of pain is to be avoided. The pain that comes from sitting in meditation is to be cultivated. In other words, you learn how to relate to the pain. After all, you’re going to be sitting here for an hour. In some cases, it simply takes time for the body to adjust to sitting like this for an hour at a time or more than an hour at a time. That’s a pain you put up with. But you don’t just put up with it. You look at how the mind reacts to it. First, you find a good spot to stay centered, a place where you can make it comfortable with the way you breathe. And you do your best to keep your attention with that comfortable spot. The mind has this tendency. It’s like a magnet. It’s drawn to the pains anywhere in the body. There are some good survival reasons why our nervous system is wired that way. But for the time being, you want to turn off those switches and turn on the switch that focuses on where it is comfortable. And if you see the mind slipping off to the pain, ask yourself, “Why? Why do you want to go there?” You learn a lot of lessons about the mind as you have to deal with pain in meditation. You also learn a lot of lessons as you deal with pleasure. A lot of us come to meditation and we don’t trust ourselves around pleasure. We know we’ve indulged in ways that have been unskillful. So when pleasure comes up, we tend to run away from it. So we have to remind ourselves, like the Buddha reminded himself, “This is blameless pleasure.” And it doesn’t intoxicate the mind. You may have heard about people getting stuck on concentration. Well, it’s a much better place to be stuck than where most people are stuck. I’ve looked through the can and found only one spot where the Buddha talks about the dangers of being stuck on concentration, and it’s simply that you get so you like that state so much that you don’t want to move on. But that’s a problem that can be easily dealt with. It’s a lot easier to deal with that problem than it is to deal with people who are stuck on sensuality. In fact, the pleasure of concentration is one of the ways that you can pry yourself loose from the thirst you have for thinking about sensual things and for indulging in sensual pleasures. So you have to keep reminding yourself, “This pleasure is okay, the pleasure of breathing in, breathing out, and letting the mind settle down there. The only danger is that you’re going to lose your focus with the breath and you just slip into the pleasure, which is like slipping into a cloud. It’s pleasant, it’s nice, but when you come out you’re not really sure where you were. There’s not much mindfulness and not much alertness. It’s not the kind of concentration that can really give rise to insight. It’s delusion concentration. So you want to make sure that when pleasure does come up in the meditation, you stay very solidly with the breath. This is one of the ways in which you learn to overcome the tendency to be overcome by pleasure. And you learn how to trust yourself around pleasure more. And the breath is also your lifeline out of any unskillful state you can get into when you’re practicing concentration. I learned this many times, watching Ajahn Fuen teach other people to meditate. People can get themselves into some pretty strange states, but there was nothing that Ajahn Fuen couldn’t get them out of. And the technique always was,”Where’s your breath right now?” This includes, one, the in-and-out breath, and two, the sense of the breath energy in the body. Because there are times, as the mind settles down and gets really, really still, that the in-and-out breath gets more and more refined. This is why it’s important to keep in mind that concept of breath energy. It’s effusing the nerves, it’s effusing the blood vessels, it’s surrounding the body with a cocoon of energy. Because when the in-and-out breathing stops, you can take this other level of breath energy as your object. And if you find yourself losing focus with that, just remind yourself, “Okay, where is the breath? Where is the breath in the arms? Where is the breath in the torso?” And that gets you back to where you want to be, mindful and alert. So basically what we’re learning here as we meditate is not to be afraid of pain and not to be afraid of pleasure. Learn how to make distinctions. There’s healthy pleasure, there’s a healthy relationship to pain, there are healthy desires. And as you gain some confidence with the breath, you find that there’s really nothing that you have to be afraid of. Ajaan Mahabuo once said that one of the best pieces of advice he got from Ajaan Mun was that if there’s something you’re unsure about, just stay with your sense of being aware, aware, aware. That’ll get you passed. Well, in many cases the same thing can be said of the breath. Anything comes up, just watch your breath. Make sure the breath feels good, feels nourishing, doesn’t get pulled or twisted out of shape. And that can be your touchstone to keep the mind alert. It’s like going into battle knowing that you have an amulet that will protect you from any danger. What’s even better than an amulet is knowing you’ve got skills that regardless of what’s going to happen, you’ve got the skill that’s going to get you out. And it may take some testing for a while to get fully confident in your skills, but when you’ve seen them work again and again and again, then you find that regardless of whatever comes up—pleasure, pain, the stopping of the in-and-out breath, a sense of fullness—there’s really nothing to be afraid of. Of course, as John Fruin once said, the only thing to be afraid of is that you don’t do the concentration and don’t get results. That’s something really to be afraid of, because then you have no way out. You’re stuck with your old attachments. When you practice concentration, you’re entering new territory. But there’s nothing in this new territory that you can’t handle.

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