Heedful of Pleasure & Pain

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All skillful qualities of mine are rooted in heedfulness, the realization that everything we do has consequences and that our actions really do make a difference. This is especially important when we think about our pursuit of happiness, our pursuit of pleasure and well-being. The Pali word sukha covers all of those things. Years back I was asked to write a review of a book on positive psychology, and asked to take a Buddhist perspective on the topic. I ended up focusing on this issue that positive psychologists talk about happiness, but they don’t talk about the consequences. Happiness is taken to be a goal in and of itself, and very little attention is paid to the goal. The author of the book was proud of the fact that he included people doing extremely immoral things to find happiness, including his analysis of levels of happiness. He said it was a sign of objectivity. But you can’t ignore the consequences. That’s why you look for happiness, because the one very important thing is that it’s going to affect how long your happiness is going to last. If your happiness depends on creating trouble for other people, harming them in one way or another, they’re going to do what they can to stop your happiness. The editor of the magazine was surprised that I focused on this issue of karma. Of course, I was surprised that he was surprised. He was expecting something on emptiness, which is not really all that relevant. But when you’re looking for happiness, you have to look at how you look for happiness, because that makes all the difference. And you have to look at your attitude toward happiness once you’ve gained it. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about meditators being developed in body and developed in mind. And “developed in body” doesn’t mean having a large or strong body. It means learning how to be with pleasure but not be overcome by it. “Developed in mind” means learning how to be with pain and not being overcome by it. Both of these are essential skills in life. On the one hand, the Buddha says that if you develop these skills, it’ll keep you from being overcome by past bad karma. In other words, if your mind becomes resilient to the issue of pleasure or pain, and when old karma moves into your life, the pain is not going to affect you. On the other hand, being resilient to pleasure and pain means that you’re less likely to be led along by desire for pleasure or fear from pain. This is how they control people, promising you pleasures or threatening pain. This is how your defilements control you. Greed, aversion, and delusion know how to promise pleasure or threaten pain. And you end up doing all kinds of unskillful things as a result. So it’s important that children learn how to develop the ability to not be overcome by pleasure and not be overcome by pain. And what may seem paradoxical is that as we meditate and develop stages of concentration, we pursue pleasure so that we’re not overcome by it. There’s a popular belief that you get into concentration, you just get stuck in the pleasure and don’t want to move on. The real danger of pleasure, though, is that you actually lose your concentration. You get focused on the breath. Your focus gets steadier and steadier, and the breath gets smoother and more gratifying. And you just drop the breath and let go. Let the breath and go for the pleasure. When you lose your focus, things blur out. You can stay there. It’s not necessarily that you’re going to get distracted again, but you’re in a state of delusion concentration. You’re still, but you don’t really know where you are. You can even get to the point where you come out of that state and you’re not really sure if you were asleep or awake. It wasn’t quite asleep, but it wasn’t quite awake. That’s not the kind of concentration you want. You have to learn how to work as you feed on the pleasure. Keep on working. Otherwise, you’re the type of person who gets a job, gets your first paycheck, and then you go off and splurge for a weekend and have nothing left. Sometimes you splurge for longer than a weekend and you end up losing your job. You want to learn how to be with the breath and allow the pleasure to do its work. Because this pleasure is useful in two ways. It keeps you in the concentration, and two, it helps pull you away from other pleasures. There are so many pleasures out there in the world that have all kinds of beguiling storylines around them. And a lot of those stories are lies. But we’re all too willing to fall for the lies again and again and again. So you want to pull yourself out of that. You need an alternative pleasure, one that’s right here, right now. So the next time the lies come up, you’re more willing to see them as lies and less likely to fall for them. So the pleasure of concentration is very useful. In fact, that’s the ideal attitude to have toward pleasure. It’s to see it as something useful, not as a goal in and of itself or something you just want to wallow in when you get the chance. You stay with the breath and it gets comfortable. You think of what use can this comfort be put to. You can think of spreading the breath energy through different parts of the body, thinking of the breath channels in different parts of the body all opening up and getting connected, so that pleasure can spread around. Because you’re aiming for a state of mind that is centered but broad, large enough to fill the whole body. And you want the pleasure and the sense of fullness, of really feeling gratified with the pleasure, you want that to be able to spread through the whole body at least as much as you can. This is one way to use the pleasure of the breath. Ultimately, you want to see that even this pleasure has its drawbacks. But first you want to be sure that you’re not going to just slip back to the old sensual pleasures and all the lies that go around them that you fell for before. So you want to master this as a skill, something you can access whenever you need it. It’s something you want to practice day by day. This may sound strange, but you’re pursuing what the Buddha calls pleasure not of the flesh, so that you learn how not to be overcome by pleasure. Because the skill of staying with a concentration does require this ability to be heedful of what you’re doing. If you want the pleasure, you have to work on the causes. If you work on the causes, you can’t let yourself get distracted by the pleasure. This is one of the important skills in learning how to be, as the Buddha said, “developed in body,” i.e., learn how not to let the pleasure overcome you. As for pain, we learn how to sit with pain as we concentrate. When I was teaching in France, that was one of the questions that came up several times. Why do we have to work with pain? Why can’t we just sit comfortably? We can’t take the pain of sitting still for a while. How are you going to deal with the bigger pains that are going to come in the future? Or the threats of pains that come in the future that have you scared? When the pain overcomes you, how can you trust yourself to act in ways that are skillful? So you want to be able to be with pain and not get overcome by it. You realize that you have the choice. You don’t have to stay with the pain. You can stay with the sense of pleasure that comes from the breath. Let that develop. Allow the pains to be in another part of the body where you’re not inhabiting it, so you’re not in the line of fire and you’re not trying to move in the same space where they are. Once you can get a sense of solid pleasure that you can rely on, then think of that comfortable breath energy spreading through the pain. The pain is not solid enough to block it, so the pleasure can go right through it. The breath can go right through it. So if the pain is in your knee, think of the breath going through the pain all the way down out the toes. So you can sit with the pain and not be shaken by it. You can develop perceptions around the pain. Think of the pain as something that comes not as one big solid block, but as something that comes in individual moments. And each moment, as it appears, it’s going away, going away. I’ve told many times the image of sitting in the back of a car, one of the old cars that had seats facing backwards. And as things come by on the side of the road, you’re watching them going away, going away. They’re not coming at you. You’re not the victim. You’re not the target. You’re just watching the pain disappear, disappear, disappear. That puts you more on top of it. The important thing is that your attitude is that you’re not going to just let yourself be the victim of the pain or the passive recipient of the pain. You want to be more proactive. You’re going to go on the offense, try to figure this pain out. Because once you have that question in mind, not the question of, “How do I end the pain?” or “How do I run away from it?” or “How do I push it away?” The question is, “How do I understand this? How do I comprehend this? What’s going on here?” Just keeping those questions in mind puts you in a different position, so the pain is not so overwhelming. In both cases, heedfulness underlies being developed in body and being developed in mind, learning how not to be overcome by pleasure and not be overcome by pain. This lifts your mind above its normal slavery to craving. Because the pleasure that craving promises, you begin to see it’s not all that worth following. The pain that it threatens you with, it’s not all that scary. When your mind has this attitude, you’re more in control.

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