A Pleasure Independent of Sensuality

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We meditate because we want to see how we’re creating suffering and how suffering begets suffering. It’s like the Bible has all those begets. The Buddhist teaching has a number of begets as well. But a lot of what it comes down to is simply that the way we suffer is an activity, and it feeds other activities that make us suffer some more. The Buddha defines suffering as the clinging aggregates. It’s because we cling to them, when the aggregates themselves don’t cling, we cling to them, that we suffer. And then in clinging we create more aggregates. As the Buddha said, that’s how our experience of the aggregates comes about. It comes about through passion and desire. Passion and desire are the definition of clinging. The two sides feed each other. In a process like that, you’ve got to figure out where can you gain an entry to understand it so that you can put an end to it. In other words, see where it’s coming from. This is why we get the mind really quiet, because it helps us get rid of the major clinging, the one form of clinging that the Buddhist has no use for at all. There are three kinds of clinging. There’s clinging to habits and practices, clinging to views, and clinging to doctrines of the self. And those actually have a skillful version that we actually use on the path. For the habits, we develop the precepts. For the practices, we practice meditation. We develop right view, and we try to develop a healthy sense of self that enables us to see the worth of following the path and to have the confidence that we can do it and has a sense of responsibility. So those forms of clinging actually play a part in the path. But sensuality doesn’t. It constantly gets in the way. Sensuality doesn’t mean sensual pleasure so much. It means our fascination with thinking about them. We like to think about our next meal, or the next place we’re going to go travel to see pleasant sights, and our fascination with thinking about this sort of stuff. We think about all the nice sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations that we’d like to have in whatever mixture we’d like to have. And that totally pulls us off the path. After all, right resolve is the resolve to resolve. Renounce that kind of thinking, and it gets carried out by right concentration. The beginning definition for the first jhana is secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental states. You enter the first jhana. Now there’s pleasure and rapture there in the jhana, and you need that. Because otherwise you’re going to go back to looking for your pleasure and sensuality again. The Buddha said that as long as you don’t have this kind of pleasure, the pleasure of being well-concentrated, then no matter how much you know about the drawbacks of sensuality, you can read all the Buddha has to say about the drawbacks, and you can think about it. But if you don’t have this alternative pleasure, you’re still going to go back to it. And if you don’t go through the front door, well, then you’re doing the back door. In other words, you deny to yourself that you’re doing it, or you do it in sneaky ways. And that just compounds the problem. So we try to find a pleasure here that is totally independent of sensuality. One of the perverse things about the way the Dhamma is often taught here in the States is that sometimes they’ll mention the jhanas and immediately say, “Watch out, they’re dangerous,” as if they’re so begotten. They’re just going to get sucked in and never come out. But the dangers of getting the mind into jhana are much less than the dangers of hanging out in sensuality. It’s because of sensuality that people kill and steal and cheat and do all kinds of horrible things to one another. Whereas even though they talk about the jhana wars, nobody ever got killed over jhana. Nobody ever stole. In fact, the Buddha said the main danger of getting the mind into concentration is that you don’t want to leave. But it’s relatively minor compared to the dangers that come from hanging out in sensuality and being enamored and clinging to sensuality the way we ordinarily do. There’s so much emphasis in the forest tradition on getting the mind into good, strong concentration. And it often starts with contemplation of the drawbacks of sensuality, the thirty-two parts of the body. In other words, one of the main objects of sensuality. Just look at what you’ve got. The purpose there is not so much to be down on the body as basically to see, “Well, this mind can do. It can take something that is not really worthy of getting all lustful for, and it can paint pictures for itself. But this is the way it is, and that’s the way it is, and it can create stories.” All kinds of things. We want to see through that. In other words, the problem is not out there. The problem is in here, the fascination the mind has with its own fantasies. That’s sensuality. So when you see that the objects out there have nothing to do with the fantasies, then you turn and look at the fantasies to realize that these are the problem. Once you can see that they are a problem, then the mind is much more likely to settle down. And even though it doesn’t cut through that particular fetter, still it’s able to clear the decks for a while to understand what’s going on. Because the mind in concentration is the ideal place, it’s the ideal laboratory to understand these aggregates that we cling to. Because what have you got here? You’ve got the breath, which is form, and you’ve got the feelings of either pain in the body or the pleasure that can come from staying continuously with the breath. That’s feeling. And then you’ve got the labels that you use to keep the mind with the breath, the way you picture the breathing process to yourself and picture the way the breath moves around in the body. You picture your idea of where you are in relationship to the breath in the body. That’s perception. Then there are fabrications, three in all. There’s bodily fabrication, verbal, and mental. You’ve got all those here. Especially in the first jhana, there’s direct thought and evaluation. That’s verbal fabrication. Then you’ve got the breath, of course. That’s bodily fabrication. And then you’ve got feelings and perception. That’s mental fabrication. And to get the mind into concentration, you have to learn how to use these aggregates as tools. Consciousness, of course, is simply aware of all these things. You’ve got all five aggregates here. So you use perceptions and use direct thought and evaluation. You focus them on the breath in such a way that the mind is willing to settle down. Getting the mind into concentration, that you see, “Oh, these are what the Buddha’s talking about when he talks about aggregates. They’re activities.” The term “aggregate” is unfortunate in the sense that it sounds like pieces of gravel. Aggregates are not a bunch of things, they’re a bunch of activities. Even the body is an activity, or a sense of having the body here requires that the mind constantly have that perception and identify. This is the body and this is outside of the body. When you’re feeling your hand from within, if you’re going to pick something up, you have to have a sense of your hand from within. You move the body around and the body’s constantly changing. As the Buddha said, it’s constantly wearing away. So it’s a process as well. It’s when you get hands-on experience with these processes in the concentration that you can begin to see how they also act in the world outside. This is where one of the skills of meditation should be brought out. When you’re dealing with a situation outside and you find that you’re suffering over it, where is the fabrication, where is the perception, where is the feeling that you have in the body? If it’s creating suffering, why do you keep doing it? At the very least, substitute the unskillful aggregates with skillful ones. Say you’re perceiving yourself as a victim. That creates a lot of suffering in some ways, and it’s all too tempting to pass that suffering on to other people. How about changing the perception? Whatever suffering is there, it’s not so much that you blame yourself for your suffering, but you can change your ways and suffer less. So look inside instead. Change the narrative. That would be the verbal fabrication, the story you tell yourself about your past leading up to this particular moment, and the skills you have to apply to take charge of the moment so it doesn’t create suffering. Tell yourself and stitch together a narrative that is really helpful. So it’s in this way that getting the mind into concentration on the one end helps pull you out of your sensual thoughts so you can think straight and look clearly at what’s going on, and secondly, give you some insight into the processes of the mind and how you can take these aggregates and turn them into a sense of pleasure that fills the body, or you can take the aggregates and make yourself miserable. The fact that you’ve been able to develop this sense of inner pleasure through the concentration, that changes the narrative. Because the narrative of your life depends a lot on the skills that you have. The skills that you develop, the skills that you develop and then abandon, or the skills that you develop and then maintain, are actually put to use. What’s sad is when you develop skills and then just kind of leave them. Here, you’ve got these skills and you can apply them. So when you get out in the world, try to take apart the narrative and instead make it a matter of, okay, where is the feeling, where is the perception, where is the fabrication? In what way am I clinging to these things and unskilled? In what way could I cling to them, at least in a skillful way, if I can’t totally let go of the clinging and give myself better ones to hold on to and hold on to them in better ways? Develop skillful habits and practices and develop skillful views and develop a skillful sense of yourself. This is why right concentration is one of the factors of the path. All the factors of the path are necessary, but it’s the biggest one. You look at the description in the sutta that analyzes the factors of the path, and the passage on right concentration is the longest and most complicated, because it’s the big scale we have to work on. The other, as the Buddha said, are the requisites for it. They build up to right concentration and they’ll come together right here. It’s not that you develop right view and then leave it and move on to right resolve. Right view has to be part of right resolve, and then right view and right resolve are part of right speech and all the way up to right concentration. They should all be here if it’s going to become noble right concentration. But at the very least, try to get this skill under your belt, the skill of talking the mind into settling down and then getting quiet. As it observes what’s going on with the breath, it observes what’s going on in the mind, and then begins to understand what it’s like to have a still mind. What are the processes that go into a still mind? Well, they’re these same aggregates. But instead of being a load on your shoulders, they’re part of the path. You’ve taken those bricks off your shoulders that you’ve been carrying around, and you put them on the ground, and you make a path. And then you go home. You put them back on your shoulders again. And then you begin to ask yourself, “Why? Why do I have to do that? Why don’t I just leave them there on the ground and continue making a path?” You observe your mind all the time and notice, “I’m clinging to this. I’m creating suffering. I’d better learn how to find something better to cling to.” And so someday, hopefully, you’ll get to the point where you don’t have to cling. But in the meantime, choose your clinging well. And if you’re going to cling, this is one of the best things to cling to—the mind in right concentration. And then the mind that has learned from right concentration how to understand what’s in itself and straighten out its feelings and perceptions and fabrications. So that load of suffering gets less and less.

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