Unadorned Happiness

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Jon Lee would often say that when you’re sitting here meditating with a group, try to put aside the perception that there is the group sitting here. Just have the perception of you sitting here with your breath. In other words, your relationships with the other people in the room can be put aside right now, and your main concern is your relationship with the breath. Can you find enough in the breath to keep you satisfied, to give you a sense of well-being, just sitting right here? What ways do you adjust the breath? What ways do you adjust your focus? What ways do you straighten out your views? Because meditation is not simply a matter of technique. It’s also a matter of values. What you tell yourself is important in your life. This is a necessary part of the meditation because the pleasure of concentration is just pure pleasure. And we like it on the one hand because it’s unadulterated, but there’s another part of us that doesn’t know what to do with it because it’s unadorned. There are very few stories you can make about your breath. If you went back and kept a diary, today’s breath was like this and then it was like that. The narrative would get pretty boring after a while. For most of us, a lot of our pleasures have to have adornment. And it’s good to think why. We’re born into this life with needs. There are physical needs, emotional needs. We have this big gaping hole within us, and we look around to others to help fill it up. And as long as we’re alive, we’re going to be needing other people, at least for material needs. But our emotional needs, that’s another matter. And this is one of the hardest things to give up, because we have such elaborate stories around our emotional needs. The need for love, the need for attention, the need to be needed. A lot of our life stories revolve around these issues. And yet there are also the stories about the suffering we have about the things we need, the places we feed. We feed emotionally on other people. We feed emotionally on our stories. And a lot of the stories, even though they have some elements of pleasure, they’re about how we suffer around our needs, how we suffer around where we feel we have to feed. And the relationships inevitably end one way or another and leave us feeling with a lack as we go looking for other relationships. We feed also off of the words of other people. And John Lee has a great image for this. He says it’s like picking up something they’ve spit out and chewing on it. But that doesn’t solve the problem. The great image is a great image, but it doesn’t solve our problem. We need the respect of other people. We need the praise of other people. We’re constantly going around with our mouths wide open, trying to feed on things. Whatever comes our way, we take it in. And then, of course, we get upset. We find ourselves taking in garbage. Garbage or poison. And the trick, of course, is learning how to be so you don’t have to feed on other people. So when their words come by, you’re not sitting there with your mouth open, ready to take them in. Of course, it’s our ears are wide open, like big sails, ready to catch the slightest tone of voice that would indicate favor or disfavor, hoping for the favor, hoping to feed on the favor, but find often that we’re choking on the disfavor. So the Buddha’s approach is to find someone who will teach you how not to need other people. As he said, we do depend on the Buddha, we depend on others who are further along the path. But let us know that there is such a path, and that it’s a good path. When I first learned about Buddhism in college, the idea of an arahant seemed awfully dry. Not appealing at all. But that was because it was presented by someone who’s not an arahant. Then I started meeting noble disciples over in Thailand, and I’m convinced there were quite a few of them. Their example, the life they led, showed me that this was something that was really worthwhile. And so we need these people as examples, and we benefit from their advice. So to that extent, we have to depend on them and we feed on them. But their whole purpose in teaching us is to learn that we can turn inside and find nourishment within through training the mind. And finally, we get the mind, of course, to a place where it doesn’t have to feed at all. But again, it’s kind of scary. It’s a place with no narratives. So we have to learn how to adjust to it. Adjust to our attitude to realize that this pleasure of concentration, the pleasure of meditation, is something of great value. And it’s a pleasure that doesn’t need a lot of the adornment, doesn’t need those narratives. So many other pleasures do need narratives. We have that reflection on the body right now. There’s so much written about carnal love and intimate relationships, dressing up the fact that what you’ve got is basically two disgusting bodies very close to each other. So we have to dress it up. And we resist looking at it, at what’s actually there, because it gets in the way of our narratives. But when you realize you can look at this and it actually frees you from all the suffering that goes around those activities, then you learn to appreciate these teachings more. They really do make you more independent. Of course, as the Buddha pointed out, when you do contemplation on the body, it’s also necessary to have breath meditation there to give you a sense of well-being so you don’t feel like you’re suddenly bereft of all sense of solidity or sense of what’s worthwhile in life. And there’s a value to the body. And the value to the body, of course, is that you can practice with it. You can do good things. You can practice generosity. You can practice virtue. You can practice meditation. But those things don’t require lots of narratives around the body. So a large part of the meditation, a large part of Right View, is weaning you off your appetite for those narratives. Because once you start seeing through the narratives, you begin to see that they’re covering up a lot of suffering. And they’re the mind’s ways of deceiving itself. There’s a lot of ignorance that goes into the narratives we weave around the pleasure of feeding off this kind of relationship or that kind of relationship. And you can look squarely at the fact that you’re putting yourself in a bad position, having to feed off of other people. With little children, it’s natural. They don’t have much ability to depend on themselves. But now we’re adults. We’re approaching adulthood. This means we’ve got to learn how to depend on ourselves. We have to learn how to stand on our own two feet. That means giving ourselves good feet to stand on. This is what the breath provides. A sense of well-being inside that doesn’t have to depend on anybody else. You don’t have to depend on anybody else. You have to lean on other people in order to get this sense of well-being, a sense of satisfaction, a sense that there really is nothing lacking inside. Because that’s what hunger is. It’s a sense of lack. You’re missing something. And you go around looking for somebody to fill up the precise shape of the hole you feel in your mind or in your heart. So we’re training the heart so it doesn’t have to have those holes. You can give it a sense of being entire and not lacking anything. This is why rapture, the sense of fullness that comes with meditation, gives you a visceral sense that, yes, you really do have what you need right here. Take a sense of well-being that comes from the breath and use it to permeate the entire body. Permeate, pervade, suffuse down to your fingertips, down to all the little spaces inside the body. And then you learn how to maintain this so that you go around without this big gaping hole inside your heart. You have something full inside here. And when you’re acting and speaking and thinking from fullness, you can live with the world and see all the ups and downs in the world, and they really don’t get to you. Because you’re not trying to feed on them. You’ve got something here already. In some ways it sounds impersonal, but that’s because we’re used to the kinds of narratives that dress up our other pleasures. And this is one that is undisguised, because it doesn’t need any disguise. It may not be as interesting as the narratives, but it’s an interesting life. Remember that purported Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times.” Years back I was reading a novel written by a friend of mine in school, and there’s a place in the novel where the main character is in prison and he gets a letter from his wife talking about how she’s trying to deal with the fact that he’s in prison. And she’s going to a grief counselor and she’s going through the five stages of grief. And in the novel it’s meant to make her sound trivial, that she’s going to just pack up her grief and deal with it one, two, three, four, five. Whereas the main character doesn’t have any grief counselors and he’s going through his grief in a lot more interesting ways. But the question is, were they effective? And are we here? Are we here just to be interesting? I’ve told you about that cartoon in The New Yorker. The man is sitting in a living room in meditation, and we’re in the next room with his wife and her friend looking in on him. And the wife is saying, “Harold used to be such an interesting neurotic before he took up yoga.” We’re making ourselves less interesting to other people, but that’s a plus. It means that we’re getting out of that back-and-forth of the feeding that people do on one another, the needs we have and the needs to be needed, which have no end, unless you take the Buddha and his disciples as an example. And say, “This is a much better way of living.” It may put us in a position that’s less interesting, but it’s got a lot more bliss and it’s got a lot more happiness. And the happiness is totally blameless and doesn’t need to feed on anybody. So as the Buddha said, an important part of the practice is seeing that nirvana really is genuine happiness. It’s the best happiness there is. And even though it doesn’t sound like happiness, like a lot of the other things we take for happiness, that’s simply because we’ve been dressing up all our other happiness to disguise the pain. But this is a pleasure that doesn’t need any dressing up. It’s unadorned. Even concentration, which is not the same as nirvana, gives you a sense of happiness that doesn’t have any drawbacks, a sense of well-being with no drawbacks. And so it doesn’t need to be dressed up. It gets you used to the idea that just plain pleasure, plain well-being, that doesn’t need to feed off of other people, is a really good thing. It’s a really good skill to master, both for your sake and for the people that you’ve been feeding on.

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