The Pleasure of Concentration

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There’s a passage where the Buddha is being quizzed by Sachaka, who’s from another tradition. In the course of his answers, the Buddha mentions that ever since he went out from home into the homeless life, he never let pain or pleasure overcome his mind. And Sachaka says, “Well, maybe you didn’t have any extreme pains or extreme pleasures.” So the Buddha tells him the story of his quest. He talks about all the austerities he went through, the extremes of pain that he went through, that didn’t overcome his mind. And then he talks about the pleasures, the pleasures of right concentration. He talks about the rapture and pleasure that he developed staying with the breath. And these, too, didn’t overcome his mind. We often think of pain as being an obstacle to concentration, but pleasure can be an obstacle, too, if you don’t handle it right. You’re deliberately trying to make the breath pleasant, give the mind a good, comfortable place to stay. But if you’re not careful, that pleasure can overcome the mind, and your concentration turns into what’s called delusion concentration. In other words, you are still there, but there’s no real awareness of what’s going on. It’s kind of like falling asleep. It’s not totally like falling asleep. You come out and you wonder, “Was I asleep? Was I awake?” It was kind of neither. But that concentration is not useful for giving rise to discernment, which is why you want to avoid it. And the way you avoid it is by not letting the mind get overcome by the pleasure. You work with the pleasure, but don’t let the pleasure work you. In other words, you find a way of breathing that feels good. You keep on top of that because the needs of the body will change. Sometimes the need for the breath will grow less and less and the breath grows more calm, more refined. And this is the point where you have to be very careful. As soon as the breath gets comfortable, you’ve got to let it spread throughout the body. You can’t force it. You don’t pump it through the body. Think of it spreading like the vapor of alcohol, something very light, something very quick. It can go anywhere, around the body, in the body. And then as you do this, you will be aware of the different parts of the body. And eventually you want to get so that you can be aware of the whole body all at once. You want one big receptivity to the entire body. And then try to maintain that. Because that breath of your awareness will help keep you from falling asleep and getting overcome by the pleasure. You’re still with the breath. The breath gets more and more refined until what you’re with is not so much a moving breath but a still breath. When all the breath channels in the body have been connected, if there’s a lack of breath energy anywhere, a breath excess from any other part of the body will flow right there. Think of everything balancing out like this and being very quick. Again, you don’t have to gradually push things through. In fact, if you try to push things through, you’ve spoiled the quality of the breath. Think of it spreading on its own. And it can spread through anything. Think of your entire body. Your entire body is being permeable, like the soil where the water can permeate down through all the grains of the soil, the grains of the sand, the grains of clay. Feel everything. And you’re right here. This way you’re with the pleasure but you’re not overcome by the pleasure. And that distinction is crucial. Because some people think, “Well, if concentration involves pleasure and you’re going to be addicted to it and attracted to it, you want to learn how not to get attached to it so you just don’t do the concentration.” But then they miss a huge part of the path. I mean, there’s one big factor. Right concentration is right there. Without it, the path is hobbled. It doesn’t go to its goal. You’ve got to do the concentration and get the benefit from the pleasure. Because without that benefit, it’s hard for the mind to peel itself away from other desires, other pleasures. As the Buddha said, “No matter how much you may know the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, if you don’t have the pleasure of jhana or something better, then you’re just going to go back to those sensual pleasures again.” The “something better” there, of course, is one of the noble attainments that can come. But at the very least, you’ve got to have right concentration to feed the mind, to give yourself a sense of refreshment, or in Ajaan Fueng’s terms, “the lubricant that keeps the practice going.” So you don’t avoid the problem of pleasure by not concentrating. You’ve got to do the concentration, but you’ve got to learn how to treat the pleasure in just the right way. Think of the Buddha’s image of the snake. You want something out of the snake. Perhaps it’s venom. If you grab the snake in the wrong way, it’ll bite you. If you grab it the right way, in other words, put a forked stick behind its neck, then no matter how much it writhes around the stick or writhes around your arm, it can’t do you any harm. And you can get the venom you want from the snake. Now, the people who don’t want to do concentration are the ones who say, “Well, I don’t want anything out of the snake anyhow. I’ll just let it go.” But there are things you can do with snake venom. You can create anti-venom. So even though there is a danger in the concentration of getting attached to the pleasure, or even just dropping the breath and going right into the pleasure, that’s a danger that can be avoided. This way you don’t keep falling into a sleepy state, a dull state, a blanked-out state, where it’s impossible to get any discernment. You’ve got a state where you’re alert, clear, settled. Sensitive all around. That’s the kind of state that gives rise to insight. Whether the insights come quickly or slowly, insight isn’t something you do. You do the concentration. And in the course of doing that, the insights will come. So focus on the causes and get very clear about when you’re focusing on the breath and not drifting off into the pleasure. Remembering the need to do what the Buddha calls evaluation. Evaluating how comfortable the breath is, and when the breath is comfortable, you don’t stop there. Evaluating what’s the best thing to do with this pleasure that it’s spread around. And then evaluating how not to get sucked into the pleasure by letting your awareness fill the body. That’s how you get the benefit out of the concentration that makes it part of the path.

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