A Pleasant Abiding

March 23, 2017

That phrase in the metta chant, “May I look after myself with ease, may all beings look after themselves with ease,” can also be translated as “May I look after myself with pleasure, may all beings look after themselves with pleasure.” This is what we’re doing as we meditate, is finding a pleasure that’s harmonious, something that won’t turn into something else. When the Buddha lists the uses of concentration, this is one of them, a pleasant abiding in the here and now. So find a topic that you find pleasant. This is one of the reasons the forest tradition doesn’t have a single meditation technique. Here we emphasize the breath, but some people find other topics more pleasant. The point is you want to be able to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being that comes from within, so you don’t have to keep chasing after things outside. Not too often you hear that you should watch out for concentration or jhana because it’ll be intensely pleasant and you’ll get stuck on the pleasure. But think of what the alternative is. If you don’t have this pleasure to depend on, you keep going back to looking for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that you like. And the harm that can be done from attachment to sensuality is much worse than the harm that comes from being attached to your concentration. Think of all the murders and all the horrendous things that people do to one another. Just because they want the pleasures that come through the senses. So here’s a pleasure that comes from within, the sense of the body, the form of the body. And that doesn’t require taking anything away from anyone else. So there’s no struggle, there’s no conflict. This is your space to inhabit it fully. That’s one of the reasons we work with the breath. It’s so you can have a sense of being comfortable throughout the body. That enables the mind to settle down. And then when the mind can settle down with that sense of well-being, it can see itself a lot more clearly. This relates to some of the other uses of concentration. Mindfulness and alertness. In other words, seeing what’s arising in the mind and remembering what things are skillful and what things are not, and what to do with the skillful things and what to do with the unskillful things. It’s not that you just sit there and accept everything and leave it there. The acceptance of mindfulness means, basically, you’re truthful to yourself in reporting what’s going on. Then you have to move on to alertness and ardency, alert to what’s happening and being ardent in trying to do what needs to be done. There’s also the use of concentration that leads to the ending of defilement. We can see the way in which you cling to things is causing suffering. We’re not going to see that unless the mind has a sense of well-being that allows it to step back from the things it ordinarily clings to. The same with the mindfulness and alertness, the tasks that have to be done. Sometimes things come up in the mind and they’re very alluring, but you know that they’re going to pull you back into looking for pleasures that require that you get into conflict with people. Having a sense of well-being leads to a sense of strength inside. There’s nothing to be sniffed at, nothing to be avoided. You need this sense of well-being in order to do the work of the path. So work with the breath. Get to know your breath. There are many different levels of breath in the body. There’s the obvious level, which is the in-and-out breath. But then there are other subtle energies in the body as well, the energies that go along the blood vessels, that go along the nerves, all the way down to the tips of the toes, all the way down to the tips of the fingers, all around you. Can you get a sense of that? Not often, when we start out meditating, the body just feels like one solid lump. But you have to remember that your awareness of the body gets filtered through the energy. That’s how the mind is aware of the solid body, from the energy side. So think of the energy as being prior. And when you look at it that way, what does that do? Hold that perception in mind that energy is already there. It’s simply a matter of allowing it to connect with you. And think of it being all around. It’s not only in front of you, but also behind you, to your left, to your right, above and below. Think of your awareness, the background awareness and your foreground awareness, melding into each other. So it’s one large field of awareness here. And whatever comes up just goes right through the field. But you don’t lose track of the field. This is one of the ways you can get a concentration that you can actually carry into your daily life. Because if your concentration requires that you be focused intently on one spot, then as soon as the spot moves, you’ve lost it. But if you have this sense of this larger field, then everything that comes through the mind, everything that comes through your awareness, just goes through that field. But the field stays. Even as the body moves around, as you get involved in other activities, the field is there. And you want to be aware of that. And have a sense that to whatever extent you can focus on the breath, or be sensitive to the breath, and it’s just the body, they’re flowing well. It requires an attitude of relaxation. In fact, the more relaxed you are, the more freely things are going to flow. So think of the energy going down the spine, out the legs. This is especially important if you’re going to sit here for long periods of time. Sometimes you’ll find there’s pain in one part of the body, but the pain is actually being caused by the fact that the breath energy is not flowing well in another part, like pains in the knees, pains in the hips. It often comes from tension in the back of the neck, tension in the back. So you start with the back of the neck and go down the spine. Think of the breath energy coming in from the back of the neck. When Ajaan Lee gives his instructions for surveying the breath energies throughout the body, that’s where he starts. One of the reasons is because he discovered this method when he’d had a heart attack. Tension builds when there’s problem in the heart up in the back of the neck. So he released that, released that, and then went down the back. But you’ll also find, just in the simple matter of sitting here, that the back of the neck is tense, and everything else begins to tense up as well. And then the hips get tight, and your knees get tight, and your leg falls asleep. There are pains in different parts of the body. So start with the back of the neck. You can go down, down, down. Look at the front of the torso. Think of your arms, your legs. Try to think of everything getting connected. The more fully these energies can flow into one another, the easier it is to settle down. And the more stillness you get in your concentration, the in-and-out breath itself will grow stiller. Because when everything’s well-nourished with breath energy, the need to breathe in and out gets less and less. So see what potentials for pleasure there are here in the Buddha’s instructions for breath meditation. Those are the first two instructions in the area of feeling. Try to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of rapture. The word bhitti in Pali can also mean a sense of refreshment, a sense of fullness. And then a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure. The two are distinct. The rapture tends to deal more with energy. The pleasure tends to deal more with just a sense of lightness and pleasantness, calmness. So look at how you’re breathing. Look at how you’re relating to the energies throughout the body. This allows you to have a sense of a pleasant abiding in the here and now, which is one of the main uses for concentration. It’s your food on the path. The Buddha compares the different levels of jhana to different types of food that feed the soldiers of your right effort and the gatesmen of your right mindfulness. There’s a passage where the Buddha reports that some of the other sectarians – especially the ones who are into painful self-torture – accused the monks of being addicted to pleasure. And the Buddha said, “Well, there’s one way in which that’s true, but there’s another way in which it’s not true. The way in which it’s not true is that they’re not addicted to the pleasures of killing, stealing, having illicit sex, or just indulging in sensual pleasures. But you can indulge in the pleasure of concentration, because it prepares the mind to be more mindful, to be more alert, to be more discerning. Because discernment is not just a matter of seeing things, it’s a matter of seeing things and admitting them. Sometimes you find that your attachments are there because you don’t see any other source of pleasure for the mind. So you hold on to them. Here the Buddha, though, is giving you an alternative. A blameless alternative, an alternative that allows you to step back from those other pleasures and see them for what they are, and admit that, yes, it’s unskillful to follow them, to pursue them. And you don’t have to feel deprived, because you’ve got something better here. So explore this potential inside the body. The potential for pleasure is here. The potential for ease is here. Just give it a chance to grow.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2017/170323_A_Pleasant_Abiding.mp3>