Creating a Blameless Pleasure

September 2, 2017

Find a spot in the body where the breath feels good. Keep track of it. This is what anupasana means. Literally, it’s “washing” and “following.” This can be anywhere in the body, the spot that you choose. It feels good when the breath comes in; it feels good when the breath goes out. The mind needs this kind of pleasure. As the Buddha said, if it doesn’t have the pleasure of concentration, it’s going to fall back on the pleasures of the senses. It sees that those are the only alternatives to pain. What’s unpleasant? We’re having some nasty weather right now. A lot of what we can think of is, “Where’s a nice, cool spot? Where’s a nice, restful place?” Find some sort of pleasure in terms of sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. But the problem with that kind of pleasure is that often we do very unskillful things to get it. And it can have a very bad effect on the mind. Not every sensual pleasure is pleasant. Some of them are. And so we end up throwing away our real treasure, which is the treasure of our actions, for the sake of pleasures that just come and go, go, go, go, go. So we want to find a pleasure that has a better impact on the mind, that doesn’t require unskillful actions to gain it. This is why the Buddha realized that the pleasure of concentration is blameless. We know the story of his quest for awakening. After having lived in the palace and indulged in all kinds of sensual pleasures, he did what a lot of people who’ve been very indulgent tend to do, which is to go swinging in the opposite direction, denying himself, starving himself, out of fear of pleasure in general. But he found that that wasn’t the path. And the first factor of the path that he thought of was right concentration. He realized that this was a pleasure he’d had once when he was a child. His mind had spontaneously entered into right concentration. So he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure? After all, there’s nothing blameworthy about it. It’s not harmful in any way. And that realization was what got him started on the path. But the important consideration right then was that it was harmless. Because you think of all the things that people do for gaining wealth, gaining status, gaining all the pleasures that they can think of. We see it all around us, all the unskillful things that people do. And if that’s all that life has to offer, it’s pretty sad. But we do have our actions. We can use our actions to develop a different kind of pleasure and learn how to stick with it. This is why mindfulness is a necessary part of concentration. You have to remember to stay here. Remember where you started. Remember where you’ve made up your mind to go. And then be observant as you go along the way. Because the mind in concentration is in a good place to be observant. After you’ve had your dose of pleasure that comes from concentration, then the mind can put that aside and then just be very, very still and watchful to see where it might start sending out tentacles. Or just to see what it’s doing as it’s there in concentration. This is what the Buddha said when he made his comments about the kind of people he would be happy to teach. He said,”Let someone come who is observant and truthful and no deceiver.” In other words, they’re honest and frank about what’s going on in their practice when they talk to the teacher. When they make mistakes, they’re willing to talk about them. And that connects with the quality of being observant. This is one of the reasons why the forested jhansas are constantly trying to train their students to be more and more observant about what they’re doing and what needs to be done. I want to stay with the jhana for a moment. He said, “Don’t expect me to explain everything.” In other words, to learn the Dhamma, you have to want to learn the Dhamma. And you have to learn to notice things on your own. Simple things in the monastery, like how things were kept clean, how things were put into order, what needed to be done at what time. There were no signs posted. But I began to realize there was a very clear idea of what was right and what was wrong, what was appropriate and what was not. And I had to figure it out. It was almost like a jhana friend was playing a game with me, but it was a game with a serious purpose. As a meditator, you have to be observant of what you’re doing. There’s nobody in your mind to say, “Now look at this, now look at that.” We have the Dhamma talks here. They can only give you a few pointers when you have to be able to be on top of the fact that, say, greed is arising, or sensual desire, ill will, restlessness. You have to see these things as they’re beginning. The same for the factors of getting the mind into concentration. Concentration is a balancing act. As the Buddhist says in one of the suttas, sometimes you have to simply watch with equanimity, sometimes you have to put some energy into your focus, and sometimes you have to put more energy into dealing with unskillful thoughts as they come through. You can’t just sit there and be equanimous all the time, or stay focused all the time, or be putting a lot of energy into your focus. If you just stay focused, he says, the meditation doesn’t go anywhere. If you’re watchful, you don’t even get it. If you just watch, you don’t even get it. If you’re just putting out energy, you get restless. You have to learn how to balance things. And what’s the point of just right? That’s something you have to observe for yourself. The Buddha gives the analogy of a cook. The cook has to watch the person he’s fixing food for. Today my master says, “Today my master reaches for the salty curry,” or he praises the sour curry, or takes extra helpings of the sweet. Sometimes the master will say something about the food, but often he will not say anything. But you have to observe. What does he like? And you provide more of that. That way, the Buddha says, you get a reward. If you don’t observe, you’re a master. You just keep producing food, but without really noticing what the person likes or doesn’t like, you’re not going to get any reward. It’s the same with the meditation. You have to figure out, what does the mind need right now? Does it have too much energy, not enough? Is this the time to be pushing? Is this the time just to be watching? These are questions you’re going to ask, but you have to answer them for yourself. No one else can answer them for you. Which is why it’s so important that you be observant. So try to be observant all around you as you practice here. And that quality will then come into the mind. Because this pleasure of concentration is something that requires nurturing, it requires skill. It’s not like the pleasure of seeing a movie or drinking a milkshake. Those pleasures don’t require much skill at all. But this is something you have to create, and this is something you have to bring into balance, and this is something you have to tend to. This is a pleasure that requires work. But, as I said, it’s a good pleasure because it helps you see the mind a lot more clearly. And the work you’re doing doesn’t involve anything unskillful at all. So approach this as a skill, with all the mindfulness and alertness that you can. That you can muster, because otherwise it’s not going to happen. In the Buddhist case, there was no one to tell him at all. He had to figure these things out. But again, it was through his powers of observation as to what was working and what was not. We have the advantage that he’s put down all kinds of observations about what the mind can do and how the mind can be brought into line. But even so, we have to use our own powers of observation to figure out what’s the right time and what’s the right place for the different instructions. It’s helpful to have good examples around, but again, to get the most out of the good examples, you have to be observant. That’s the only way that the meditation will develop.

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