The Pleasure of Concentration

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The Buddha described the path that he taught as a middle way between two extremes—indulgence in sensual pleasures on the one side and self-torment on the other side. But that doesn’t mean that it’s a halfway path—a little bit of pain, a little bit of pleasure, or a neutral feeling. One of the factors of the path is right concentration. It starts out defining the first jhana as pleasure and rapture, born of seclusion. Then in the second jhana you move into pleasure and rapture, born of concentration. Then when you’ve had enough of the rapture, it’s just pleasure. Then you settle down in equanimity with a sense of satisfaction. It’s important to remember that every time the Buddha teaches equanimity, it’s not just being neutral. You teach yourself to find a sense of well-being inside, either through insight or through concentration. Then, based on that well-being, you can settle in equanimity. Equanimity in this case is not a small-minded, defeatist equanimity. It’s equanimity that comes from having a sense of enough. In his image of the path as being like a fortress, the Buddha put the four jhanas in there as the food for the soldiers of right effort and the gatekeeper, which is right mindfulness. So the nourishment, the sense of well-being, that comes from getting the mind in a right concentration, is an important part of the path. And it can be quite extreme. You really get absorbed in the breath. The sense of well-being can fill the whole body. That’s not a middling pleasure. In fact, it’s an important pleasure. Sometimes we’re told to watch out for jhana. You’re going to get stuck on it. And the Buddha said, “Yes, it is possible to get stuck, but when you think about being stuck on the pleasure of jhana as opposed to being stuck on other pleasures—the pleasures that come from breaking the precepts, the pleasures that come from indulging in sensuality—you realize that the pleasure of concentration is much less dangerous. It’s not harmful to you, and it’s certainly not harming anybody else. So the question is, how do you gain a sense of well-being? We’ve got a lot to work with here in the body. There is a potential for pleasure. There is a potential for a rapture, a refreshment. Every body has this. The question is where to find it. In some cases, you start with the breath. You experiment with different types of breathing—deep, shallow, heavy, light, long, short, fast, slow, broad, narrow. Or, if that seems too mechanical, you can focus on your hands. Try to relax all the little muscles in the hands as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Sometimes you notice there’s a slight tension to tense up between the breaths or as you start breathing in. Resist that. Keep everything relaxed. The breath doesn’t need your hands to be tense in order to come in and go out. As the hands begin to relax, the sense of the blood flowing into the hands gets stronger. Then you can move up the arms, up to the shoulders. Start with the toes. Go up the feet, the legs, the back. Allow the breath to find whatever rhythm feels good. Work at the sense of ease, either through the in-and-out breath or through the sense of the breath energy that spreads through the body. Ultimately, of course, you want to connect both. And your ability to stay with this is what’s going to make it more refreshing. The image they used to use back in the days of records was to put a needle in the groove and don’t let it bounce around. And you find that as you stay with the breath in this way, continually, whatever little bumps and irregularities will smooth out. Learn how to appreciate that sense of well-being because as you appreciate it, you’re beginning to open up more to it. And it’s an opening up to it that becomes more absorbing. So wherever there’s a sense of being closed up anywhere in the body, allow it to open. And think of the breath bathing you on all sides. There is that tendency sometimes to think that you’re on one side of the breath, watching it, say, from the back of the head. But there’s actually breath going down the back of the head. There’s breath going down the sides, in the front. There’s breath going around the body, at the surface of the body, inside the body. Let all of that meld together. You need this sense of pleasure as part of the path. You don’t have this sense of pleasure that comes from inhabiting the body in this way. And no matter how much you may see the drawbacks of sensuality, you’re still going to go back to the sensual pleasures that you had abandoned, or even worse. So if you’re going to be stuck on something, this is a good thing to be stuck on. And it gives nourishment to all aspects of the path. One of the things you have to learn how to resist, in terms of your old habits, is that you’re going to be dealing with pains. Whether the pains come from the illnesses you already have, or from the work you’ve been doing, or from simply sitting in long periods of time, you’re going to need reinforcements. Reinforcements come from this sense of well-being that you can induce. So the potentials are here. And Ajahn Lee gives you some pointers on how you can make the most of them. But he also points out that there are a lot of things you’ve got to learn on your own about how you relate to the body, how you relate to the breath, and how you can use the sense of well-being that you can induce inside. First, by maintaining it, and then by letting it spread. And then once it’s spread, keeping it full throughout the body as best you can. That’s one of the main uses of concentration, the sense of well-being. But the Buddha said it’s also a good basis for mindfulness and alertness. You try to practice mindfulness throughout the day, which means remembering to try to develop skillful qualities. And abandon unskillful ones. It’s a lot easier to do when you’re coming from a sense of well-being. Concentration, he says, can also be a basis for psychic powers, and it’s a basis for overcoming the affluence in the mind, the defilements in the mind. Because as the mind gets more and more still, you can see things. You can see things more clearly, what’s going on inside. This is partly an aspect of alertness, but then seeing them in terms of whether they’re really worth going for or not. If you’ve got a sense of well-being like this, it’s a lot easier to say,”No, I don’t really need that anymore. I can see the drawbacks.” When you’re starved for pleasure, you’ll go for whatever pleasure you can find. When you can fill the body with pleasure, why go for the pleasures of unskillful thoughts, unskillful attitudes, unskillful habits? There’s a passage where the Buddha lists the different things that are going on in the mind in concentration. You don’t have to be aware of them all the time. He said that Venerable Sariputta was aware of them as he did them, which is a sign of his excellent discernment. But it’s interesting that part of the list comes down to the factors called “name” in dependent co-arising. In other words, the mental faculties, the mental events, that form the basis for your sensory experience. And through your sensory experience, you go to feeling and craving, clinging. In other words, the raw material from which you can create a lot of suffering, if you’re ignorant of it. But here you can become clear about it. It’s all right here. When the mind is still, you can see these things. And as you remember, the Buddha said, “You don’t attack the problem of becoming right at becoming. You attack it at the things that lead up there.” So this is why concentration is such an important part of the path. It exposes all the different things going on in the mind very clearly. The concentration, where there is this well-being, has its uses for the well-being itself and for the strength it gives you to continue with all the different things required by the path, and for the fact that it opens up the mind to itself. The various things you have to do to get the mind concentrated, as you get it more and more deeply concentrated, are the things that you need to know, things you need to be aware of, so you don’t create suffering. It’s all right here. It’s where you can settle in right here with a sense of well-being, to the point where you’ve had enough rapture, you’ve had enough pleasure. Think about that. There comes a point where you’ve had enough of these things. The mind can settle down and be very clear. The concentration can allow you to see a lot of things you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. So if they say you’re stuck on pleasure, let them say it. You may be stuck on a good pleasure, but it’s pleasure for the sake of getting beyond itself. You don’t stay right here. You use this pleasure. You learn how to create it, and you learn how to use it. As Jon Vu used to say, those are the three steps in the meditation. Doing it, maintaining it, and then using it. The pleasure concentration is something really worth doing and maintaining and putting to use.

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