The Pleasure of Form (outdoors)

September 5, 2019

When we think of gaining pleasure from the body, it’s usually in terms of sensual pleasures. But when we come to the breath, we’re looking for pleasure of a different sort. The pleasure that comes from fully occupying and being very sensitive to how the body feels from inside. We have lots of words, lots of ideas about sensual pleasures. We can describe them in a lot of detail. But the way the body feels from within, our culture is very impoverished in the way it describes it, the terms it gives for us to use. This is why it’s good to try to learn the Buddha’s vocabulary. It’ll take a while, and it may seem foreign, but he’s actually referring to something that’s very close to you, how you feel the body from within, and the various aspects of this inner sensation, and how, once you’ve got a sense of the potentials in there, how you can manipulate them. We need this pleasure because it’s different from sensual pleasures. Sensual pleasures are not necessarily part of the path. In fact, often they can get in the way. Our fascination with them definitely gets in the way. That’s why we had that chant just now, to remind us that if you’re looking for sensual pleasure from the body, it can provide them, but it also provides a lot of other things. They’re not so pleasant, and it in and of itself doesn’t have much of any essence. If we’re going to look for any essence in the world, it has to be in the mind. We can’t just give up our desire for pleasure as we practice. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have an alternative to sensual pleasure, you just keep going back to them, no matter how much you may realize the drawbacks of sensuality. The mind needs pleasure as its food. But the pleasure that comes from this sense of form, i.e., how you feel the body from within, can actually play a role as part of the path. It’s not intoxicating. It doesn’t create unnecessary burdens on anybody. It’s a very clear-eyed pleasure. After all, if your pleasure requires that you take things from other people, you’re going to be pretty insensitive to what it is you’re taking from them. As long as you see that it’s necessary for your pleasure, you can justify just about anything. So there’s pleasure we look for inside. It’s good not only for us, but it’s good for other people, too. So what are some things we need to know about this sense of the body from within? First, it has four aspects, four properties. There’s earth, which is the solidity of the body. There’s breath, which is the flow of energy in the body. There’s water, which is the coolness in the body. And then there’s fire, which is the heat. And then permeating them all and surrounding them all is space. You might want to ask yourself, “Where do you feel these different properties most prominently in the body?” The Buddha has you start with the breath, because that’s the most responsive to your thoughts. But you can play with the other properties as well. Ask yourself, “Where is the warmest spot in the body?” and focus on it. Then think of the warmth spreading. “Where is the coolest spot in the body?” Focus on that. Think of the coolness spreading. “Which parts of the body seem most solid?” You can play with each of these. But the most complex and ultimately the most satisfying is the breath element. As you relate to it, you have to hold in mind the perception that breath can flow. We’re not saying that there’s air being pumped through your nerves or air being pumped through your blood vessels, but there is a breath energy. That flow is in the body. In some places the flow is more prominent than others. So try to find that spot. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? The feeling that tells you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” That’s the breath we’re talking about here. So hold in mind an image that the breath does flow. Even if you don’t feel it at first, try to open your mind to that possibility. Try imagining some of the ways in which Ajahn Lee tells you to let the breath energy flow down the back or come in right at the heart, at the middle of the chest, and then go down through the intestines. Let it run along the arms, run along the legs. You can think of it coming in and out your eyes, in and out your ears. Just hold that image in mind because it opens you to possibilities. Possibilities that, for the most part, we tend to filter out. The mind has its filters. That’s how we engage in the world. Without the filters, we wouldn’t be able to function. It would be just too much coming in. It would be too complex, too much of a buzzing confusion for us to get a handle on it. So we have to be selective in what we focus on. Because as we’re selective in what we focus on, sometimes we miss other things. You’ve heard of that story of that experiment where they had people watch a video of people playing a game with a ball. They were told to follow the ball very carefully to figure out what the rules of the game were. They were so intent on watching the ball going back and forth and people throwing it that they missed the fact that there was a gorilla or a man dressed up as a gorilla walking behind the players. Focusing on one thing, you tend to filter something else out. So the flow of the breath energy in the body is there, it’s just we’ve filtered it out. It requires an active imagination to open us to the possibility that it’s already there. It’s like telling a child that the world is round. The child has no experience to say yes or no. Its immediate experience probably says, “No, everything looks flat.” As they taught us in school, if you go out to the beach and you look at a ship coming in from the ocean with a telescope, you can see the mast of the ship before you can see the lower part. The curvature of the earth is just enough for us to detect that. And as you get older you find that the curvature of the earth is useful. Knowing that the earth is curved, you can cut off a number of hours as you travel to different parts of the world. Going from Los Angeles to Bangkok, for instance, you travel over Alaska. If the world were flat, you’d be adding a lot of hours. But because the world is round, you’re shaving hours off your time. But for the child, to begin with, it has to be an act of the imagination. It’s the same with the breath. You imagine the breath moving so that you can take advantage of the fact that it actually does. As the mind settles down and you get more sensitive, you move away from the image and toward the actual experience of the breath and the body. And you learn where you may be pinching it off, say, at the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath, where you learn how not to pinch it off. So the breath comes in and out like the tide. There’s no clear line between the ebb and the flow. There are times we know for sure it’s ebbing. There are times we know for sure it’s flowing. And there’s a time in the middle when you’re not quite sure. Well, let it be not quite sure. You don’t want to pinch things too much. What you’re trying to do is create a sense of full energy in the body that’s uninterfered with. And wherever you start, you sense that fullness first, try to breathe in a way that maintains it, and then let it spread. And with the concept of the breath flowing down the back, flowing down the arms, that aids in its spreading. I’ve heard some people complain about it. John Lee’s explanation of the breath energies in the body, saying, “The Buddha never taught about them.” Well, the Buddha does talk about the breath energy flowing throughout the body. He doesn’t relate it to breath meditation, but he does say that you breathe in such a way as to give rise to pleasure, and then you allow that pleasure to spread throughout the whole body. And in John Lee’s analysis of how the breath energy is already spreading, it makes it a lot easier for you to do that. So he’s actually filling in something that the Buddha says to do, but without saying how to do it. John Lee gives us a sense of how. But it does require that we learn how to look at our bodies or sense our bodies from within. First with a new image, and then with a new sensitivity to see that the image is actually true. The breath energy does flow, and the different ways it flows will have an effect on your health. It will have an effect on your ability to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being in the present moment. So you’re in a better position to start peeling away your fascination with sensual pleasures, because you’ve got something better here. You’ve got the pleasure of form. So do your best to explore and familiarize yourself with how the body feels from within, how the energy flows. Because that would be very useful on the path.

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