Don’t Fear the Pleasure of Concentration

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The mind has a maddening quality. It tells itself it wants peace, it wants happiness. When it’s overwhelmed with work and responsibilities, it looks for a time when it could put the work down, put the responsibilities down. And then when it finally gets that opportunity, it doesn’t feel right about it. It either feels guilty that it’s abandoning some of its responsibilities, or it feels that it doesn’t deserve the happiness that comes with getting the mind to settle down. This is true even of the Buddha. He spent all those years engaged in self-torture, and when he finally realized that that didn’t work, he stopped to think, “Could there be another way?” He thought of a time when he was younger, sitting under a tree and spontaneously entering the first jhana, rapture in pleasure, born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. And something inside him told him, “This could easily be the path.” But then he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure?” So he thought about it. And he realized it had no drawbacks. It had no way of causing harm to anybody. It was blameless. So he decided, “I won’t be afraid of that.” Notice that he decided. It was an act of the will. So if you find your mind having this problem, you have to make up your mind that you’re not going to listen to the voices in the mind that try to pull you away. The ones that tell you that you’re being irresponsible are really wrong. Because you’re looking after your mind. The mind needs its healing. It’s wounded by its life as it goes through the process of the world. The Buddha talks about the body being subject to rubbing and abrasion. Well, the mind has a lot of rubbing and abrasion as well. It needs to learn how to look after itself if it’s going to be able to maintain its responsibilities. Otherwise it just wears out and drops all of its responsibilities with a big thud. So the part of the mind that says you’re being irresponsible, tell it that it doesn’t understand what it means to be truly responsible. It’s through meditation that you can maintain your precepts. It’s through meditation that you can maintain your will to develop the perfections and all their ramifications. That’s for the part of the mind that’s afraid of pleasure, that feels that if it indulges in a pleasure that’s as really intense as this can be, everything’s going to turn on it. There’ll be a punishment of some kind. There is that thought in some people’s minds. You have to remind yourself that this is a kind of pleasure that is clear-eyed. The problem with most of the pleasures of the world, especially the sensual pleasures, is that they blind you. In order to enjoy those pleasures, you have to turn a blind eye to a lot of aspects of reality. Think about those 32 parts of the body. If you find pleasure in the human body, you’re looking at a place where there are a lot of drawbacks. So you have to turn a blind eye to them. And in turning a blind eye to them, you turn a blind eye to a lot of other things, too. That blindness is the problem. So we’re entering into a state of well-being, clear-eyed. You have to be mindful, alert, keeping the breath in mind, alert to what the mind is doing. This is not the kind of pleasure that’s going to obscure your vision. It clears your vision so you can gain some discernment. So you don’t have to be afraid of it. As for the voice that says, “You don’t deserve this.” Remember, the Buddha never talks about deserving or not deserving to suffer or not deserving to have pleasure. He said there are results of past actions that will lead to pleasure or lead to pain. But you’re not just that. You’re the hapless victim of those actions. The extent to which you suffer for them depends on your skill here in the present moment. And you’re totally free to develop the skills you need not to have to suffer from past bad karma. The Buddha makes a comparison to the lump of salt that’s the past bad karma. If you put it into a small cup of water, the water would be too salty to drink. But if you throw it into a clean, large river, you can still drink the water in the river. The small cup stands for a mind that’s limited, the Buddha says. A mind without virtue, without discernment, that allows itself easily to be overcome by pleasure or overcome by pain. Whereas the water in the river stands for a mind that’s unlimited. Practice the Brahma-varas. Goodwill for all. Compassion for all. Empathetic joy for all. Equanimity, when necessary, for all. Train the mind not to be overcome by pain or pleasure. Train it in virtue. Train it in discernment. That kind of mind, the Buddha says, when the results of past bad actions come up, will hardly notice them, will not have to suffer from them. So there’s never any place where the Buddha says that people deserve to suffer. There may be pain, but you can learn how not to suffer from the pain. The mind can keep itself protected. This is one of the reasons why we’re meditating. Think about it. When people would come to the Buddha with the problems of their lives, he would ask them, “Do you deserve to suffer? If you deserve to suffer, I’m not going to teach you.” There’s never any question of deserving or not deserving. This is something you can do, even in the case of Angulimala, who had killed all those people. The Buddha saw that he had potential, and he was able to train Angulimala to the point where he didn’t have to suffer the karmic consequences, at least as heavily as he would have otherwise, of what he’d done. People would still throw things at him when he was on his almsround. Angulimala was disgruntled by the fact that he was not let off and executed, but his mind wasn’t pained. So look into your psychology. Meditating helps to bring a lot of these things to light—your attitude toward pain, your attitude toward pleasure. The weird attitudes we have toward pain, the weird attitudes we have toward pleasure. Be willing to question them. If you don’t question them, they lurk around. Think about pain. Sometimes we feel like the pain, especially if it’s a long and persistent one, has a will against us. It’s there trying to harass us. You have to realize that pain has no intention. If it’s there, it’s there. We have the choice of taking the physical pain and making a mental pain out of it. We have that freedom to choose whether we’re going to suffer from it or not. It requires skill. We’re not really free to make the choice until we’ve developed some skills. But this is what we’re doing as we meditate. And we’re doing it in a way that harms nobody. There’s no big cosmic balance sheet that demands that we have to suffer x amount or that we’ll have to pay for any pleasure that we experience. So as you breathe in, you have the opportunity to breathe in with as much pain or as much comfort as you want. We have this freedom in the present moment—how we breathe, how we talk to ourselves, the perceptions we hold in mind, the feelings that we focus on. This is our freedom right here. We use it to create suffering, which many of us do. But we can also learn how to do these things with knowledge. Breathe with knowledge. Talk to ourselves with knowledge. Develop perceptions around the body, around the breath, with knowledge. Choose the feelings you’re going to focus on with knowledge. So instead of being a path to pain, they become a path to happiness. This is the opportunity that’s offered to us. This is why we can meditate. If we’re just sitting here passively observing whatever is going to come up, having no choice in the matter, it wouldn’t really make any difference. But the fact is we do have choices, and they do make a difference. So we want to learn how to meditate. We want to learn how to explore this opportunity we have in the present, where even there may be physical pain, but we don’t have to suffer from it. There can be pleasure, and we don’t have to suffer from the pleasure. That’s one of the more perverse sides of the mind. We feel guilty about pleasure. We feel we don’t deserve it. We feel that we’re going to be punished for it. We feel that we’re being irresponsible. All these are attitudes that we’ve got to learn how to question, because they’ll lurk around the rest of our lives if we don’t. And they’ll lurk around the rest of our attitudes toward other people, too. If we resent other people’s pleasure, it may be because of our own feeling ill at ease around our own pleasures. And then, of course, that’ll affect our attitude toward them. If we feel that we’re being irresponsible by meditating, then that’s going to affect our attitude towards other people who meditate. They’re being irresponsible, too. So these weird attitudes we have towards pleasure and pain can really poison our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with other people. So when they do come up in your meditation, take it as an opportunity to question them. Dig around a little bit to see where they may be coming from, what cluster of attitudes they represent, so you can start taking those apart. So you can have a healthy relationship to pain, a healthy relationship to pleasure, and the rest will improve your life, both inside and out.

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