

## *The Pursuit of Pleasure*

*January 16, 2007*

The pursuit of happiness is a principle that we're pretty much in agreement on. It's enshrined in the founding documents of our nation. The pursuit of pleasure is more problematic. We've all known instances of pleasure that carried a high price, and there are times when we even become afraid of them.

There's the story of the Buddha, going through those six years of austerities before his awakening, doing everything he could not to let his mind get overcome by pain or by pleasure, submitting himself to an awful lot of pain and denying himself any pleasure at all. Finally he realized that that was a dead end.

That's when he remembered a state of mind he was able to attain when he was young, meditating under a tree, gaining the pleasure and rapture of the first jhana. He asked himself, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure? Is it blameworthy or blameless?" It's blameless, it doesn't hurt anyone, and it doesn't have the usual drawbacks of a lot of pleasures that get the mind complacent, intoxicated, and heedless, so that it ends up doing and saying and thinking very unfortunate things. He realized that this pleasure was something different. The mind was fully mindful, fully alert, fully aware, and yet there was pleasure. It was when he decided he was not afraid of this pleasure that he was able to start pursuing the path that actually led to the end of suffering.

This is an important story, because a lot of us have indulged in pleasures that have been really harmful and we get burned. So we learn not to trust pleasure, to be afraid of it, thinking somehow that depriving ourselves of pleasure is going to be a good thing. And on top of that, there's a natural tendency of the mind: It's almost as if we had little scouts and sentinels at all the nerve ends, quick to sense whenever there's pain, and then send warnings. So we tend to be more familiar with the parts of the body that are in pain than we are with the ones that are pleasant. We trust our pains to be more real than our pleasures.

You combine these and you get all kinds of attitudes, like the idea that it's because of pain that we become strong, and there's a strength that comes from dealing with pain. But if you don't have a basis of pleasure, the pain overwhelms you. If you had nothing but pain, you would die. So we need a certain amount of pleasure for the mind be strong enough to deal with the issues that come up in life. But it has to be a pleasure that's not complacent, that's not intoxicated. It has to be a pleasure that keeps the mind sharp.

That's the kind of pleasure that actually forms the path to the end of suffering. And this is what we're working on as we meditate. It's a pursuit of pleasure. It's instructive to know that in Pali, they don't have different words for pleasure, happiness, bliss, ease, and well-being. These are all one word, *sukha*. They do distinguish different types of *sukha*. There's limited and there's abundant, abundant being the *sukha* that's large and long-lasting. The beginning of wisdom is when you realize that it's worthwhile to be able to forsake a limited happiness, a limited pleasure, a limited *sukha*, for the sake of the abundant.

There's also the distinction between *samisa sukha* and *niramisa sukha*. The word *samisa* literally means meat or flesh or bait. These are the kinds of pleasures that are bait for the mind, to get you stuck on the hook of greed, anger, and delusion. Obviously, you don't want to fall for them. But the opposite is *niramisa sukha*, a form of pleasure that's not baited at all, doesn't depend on the flesh at all.

It starts with right concentration and goes on and culminates in *nibbana*. That's the kind of pleasure we try to use as our path, because this pleasure is not intoxicated. The mind is not dulled. It's a pleasure that comes from a sharp mind, learning how to use your powers of observation to sharpen the mind, at the same time that you're getting a sense of ease in the body. It's something to be developed. It's part of the path.

So don't be afraid of it. At the same time, learn how to recognize where it is. The body has a potential for pleasure. There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the potentials for serenity, the potentials for rapture here in the mind and the body. In the parts of the body that are still and relaxed, there's the potential there for ease, pleasure, even the fullness of *piti*, or rapture and refreshment. So you learn how to recognize them and make the most of them. There's a principle in the Buddha's teachings that there is no *sukha*—no pleasure, no happiness, no bliss, no well-being, no ease—apart from peace. So it's the peaceful parts of the body that you want to learn to focus on, and these are precisely the ones we tend to ignore because we seem to be hardwired to look for the places that are problematic, where there's pain. We're awfully good at stitching the different pains in different parts of our body together into one big mass of pain. That just weighs us down even more.

So try to take the opposite approach. Find the areas of the body that are at peace, that feel refreshed, relaxed—although maybe “refreshed” is too strong a word in the beginning. It feels relaxed, okay, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Learn to focus on them in a way that allows them to maintain that same sense of open relaxation, and think of them opening up to one another. Instead of

stitching together patterns of tension in the body, you began to allow patterns of ease to radiate out and blend with one another. This gives you strength.

This is the kind of pleasure you can really use that has a real minimum of dangers. Sometimes you hear about the horrors of getting attached to concentration, or being attached to jhana. There is no passage in the Canon at all where the Buddha talks of jhana as something to be afraid of. It's something to be developed, something to be indulged in. You settle in, and he actually says that you indulge in the sense of well-being, so as to strengthen it, so that it becomes really solid, something you can depend on, tap into, whenever you need it. Because it is the strength of the path.

In the similes the Buddha uses for the different qualities of mind you need to bring to the path, jhana is food, and good food at that. It's a sense of ease and well-being that'll give you the strength to do some of the difficult work that the path involves. It's a strength, it's a pleasure you really can use, because it's conjoined with a sense of clarity in the mind: full mindfulness, alertness.

When the mind is at ease and fully alert, you begin to see where the subtle areas are where you cause yourself unnecessary stress, what you can do to stop doing that, what you can do to stop identifying with your unskillful habits. We really do hold on to these pretty strongly. It takes a lot of determination, a lot of repeated observation, to see where these habits are unskillful, and how you have alternatives. You don't have to keep following the same old unskillful ways in which you've related to the body, you've related to the mind. That requires strength, and the pleasure of the jhānas, the pleasure of right concentration, provides that strength. So it's not a pleasure to be afraid of. It's a pleasure to search out for, look for, develop, cultivate, until you finally learn how to maximize it.

This is why Ajaan Lee recommends learning how to experiment with the breath, how to conceive the breath energy in the body on different levels: the in-and-out breath, the sense of energy flowing in the nerves and the blood vessels, and the still breath that underlies them all. As for the breath energy flowing through different parts of the body, there's up-flowing energy, going from the soles of your feet up the legs, up the backbone; there's energy that goes down; and you have learn how to balance these two. If there's too much up-flowing energy, it can cause headaches and a sense of dullness surround your brain. When there's too much down-flowing energy, it's hard to sit up straight.

So take the time to explore. Get a sense of where the different pleasure centers of the body are. They're not going to be very precisely located, because one of the qualities of pleasure is that its boundaries tend to be kind of vague, but that's okay. Think of all these vague but pleasant feelings of well-being, ease in different

parts the body spreading out, merging with one another, so that they begin to dissolve away the old patterns of tension that you've been holding on to. These feelings in and of themselves are pleasant in the body and, at the same time, they put the mind in a position where it can see things clearly.

When the Buddha talks about indulging in right concentration, that's one stage. The next stage is then to learn how to maintain that sense of pleasure, and analyze it at the same time, to see where it's coming from, what the mind is doing to maintain it, because it's in learning to see these actions of the mind that real insight comes. You see what your intentions are and how they're shaping your present experience. It's through that kind of understanding that liberating insight comes. You can see it clearly only when the mind is at peace, and the mind can be at peace only when there's a sense of well-being.

So try to cultivate the kind of well-being that really does enable you to see clearly. It's the pursuit of this pleasure, the pursuit of this bliss, that leads to a happiness that's really genuine, solid, and lasting.