

Pleasure on the Path

June 15, 2015

When the Buddha first described his path, he called it a middle way between two extremes: indulgence in sensual pleasures on the one hand, and self-affliction on the other. This has led a lot of people to think that the path is kind of a neutral mind state, not all that pleasant, but not all that painful. That's not the case. An important part of the path is right concentration, and right concentration has some very intense pleasure and rapture.

It was the Buddha's realization that sensual pleasure and pain were not the only alternatives—or as he put it, that sensual pleasure was not the only escape from pain. There's an alternative: the pleasure that comes from what he calls form, your sense of the body as you feel it from the inside as you're working with the breath.

As you breathe in and out, notice the flow of energy, not only the flow of the air, but the flow of energy through the body that allows the air to come in, go out. Notice where it seems to be flowing well and where it doesn't seem to be flowing well. See if you can figure out a way to make it flow better. Part of that has to do with relaxing some of your muscles, maybe changing your posture a little bit so that things aren't blocked. Part of it has to do with your mental images of what's going on in the body.

There may be some tight passages where you're trying to force the breath through them, and that makes them even tighter. The breath doesn't respond very well to forcing. It responds to allowing. Allow the energy to flow. Maybe those tight passages are simply passages of breath energy that are flowing in a different direction from where you think they should. Allow for that possibility, because maybe that's where they should be flowing—not where you think they should, but where they are. The more you fight it, the worse it gets.

So play around a little bit with your perceptions of the breath, too.

Then as you find yourself getting more and more interested in this flow of energy in the body, the mind begins to settle down. A quality of ease comes with that, when the mind has one place where it can stay and doesn't have to go jumping around. It's like trying out different places to sleep and none of them quite work, so you have to get up and move around. That one doesn't work. Get up and move around. This one doesn't work. Get up and move again. There's a part of the mind that doesn't really want to settle in until it's found a place it

really likes. Well, try to make the breath a place that you really like. Then watch over it.

The watching over it is important, because otherwise, as a sense of pleasure comes up, you go for the pleasure and you drop the breath. This can lead to what Ajaan Fuang or Ajaan Lee would call delusion concentration, where things are very still in the mind, all very pleasant, but you're not really sure where you are or what you're focused on. Sometimes you can stay in that state for a while and, when you come out, you ask yourself if you really were awake or not. You weren't quite asleep, but you weren't very clear either. That comes from dropping the breath and just going for the pleasure.

Another important aspect to the path—in addition to finding an alternative escape from pain through developing the pleasure of concentration—is to learn how to get the mind so that it's not overcome by pleasure and not overcome by pain. This means that, as you're watching the breath and there are pains in the body, you learn to treat them with some equanimity, accepting the fact that there will be pains in different parts of the body.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a tree that has some old leaves and new leaves. The new leaves nourish the tree. The old leaves are ready to fall away. They're not much help. So you focus on the new leaves. Focus on the areas where it is pleasant and accept that as a natural part of having a body: There are going to be physical pains. There are going to be potentials for pains, and what you do with them is going to make a big difference in their impact on the mind. If you focus on them and get all worked up about them, sometimes the pains can be very minor, but you can make them very upsetting.

If you learn some skills in how to handle pain, you can be with strong pain and it's not going to have that much of an impact on the mind. All of this has to do with your intentions and your attention: how you pay attention to things, and your perception of this whole issue of potentials in the body.

It's not as if pains and pleasures are totally given. The given is the potential that come from your past karma, but there's also what you contribute right now. The impact it's going to have on the mind is totally dependent on what you can do with it now. So we want to learn some skills for dealing with pleasures and pains so that neither of them overwhelms the mind.

This principle applies to the pleasure that begins to develop in the body as you work with the breath. You stay with the breath. You don't leave the breath to go to the pleasure. As the pleasure gets more intense, you want to make sure that your awareness fills the whole body and that you take that as your frame of reference. This is because the breath at that point starts getting more and more

refined, and if you're not careful, you can lose your bearings. Where there was breath, it seems to be more and more difficult to find.

Well, if you take the whole body as your frame of reference, then even as the breath gets more subtle, you're not lost. You don't fall into those little air pockets that can happen when you're focused on a small spot of the body and then the breath seems to suddenly disappear.

The fact that you're trying to keep your awareness filling the body also gives you work to do. This is an essential principle: that you're *working* with the pleasure. You're not just wallowing in it. You want to work with it. You want to understand what's causing it. The Buddha's observation is that the fact that of being alert to the breath is one of the causes for pleasure. If you keep that alertness continuous, the pleasure smoothes out, and as it gets smoother, it gets more intense. It develops a kind of momentum. It builds up. And whatever good it's going to do for the body, whatever good it's going to do for the mind, you don't have to go making exclamations about it to yourself.

This is not like sensual pleasure. Sensual pleasure requires that you dress it up. You go and spend a lot of money, say, for a meal in a restaurant. You have to anticipate how really great it's going to be and what great chefs they're going to have and how nice the atmosphere is going to be. And you make comments about it. Nowadays, people even take pictures of their meals and send them to friends. Then you think about it afterwards.

Our habit is the more we make a big deal out of something, the greater the satisfaction we get from it. After all, when you look at eating, there are a lot of the aspects of eating that are not all that attractive. You have to sit there and chew and chew and chew and swallow. Sometimes you swallow and you didn't chew it properly and it goes down the wrong way, or it gets stuck someplace. Think of all the work that goes into getting the food, the work that goes into earning the money to buy the food. The more you think about it, the more miserable it is. Just that little bit of flavor and that sense of fullness that comes, the nourishment that comes, that's what makes it worthwhile. But if that's all we have, then why do we have to spend so much money on getting fancy food or special food or dressing it up?

Sensual pleasures require a lot of elaboration to make them seem worthwhile, whereas with the pleasure from concentration, even though you have to work for a while to get to really appreciate it, you begin to realize that the pleasure itself doesn't require a lot of elaboration. The good it's going to do for the mind is just there. Whether you're exclaiming to yourself about it or not, it soothes the mind.

It soothes the body. It's good for you, which means that your attitude should be more that you do the work, and the pleasure will take care of itself.

Then it becomes more a question of how you make sure that this sense of ease gets translated into the rest of your life so that it's not something you experience only while you're sitting here. If you don't let yourself get overwhelmed by it, you can start noticing: This is how you breathe. This is where you focus. This is how you think about the breath, how you picture the breath to yourself. You can carry that knowledge into other activities. You want to start out with simple things like walking meditation, and then with simple chores. Can you stay with the breath as you're working, say around the monastery?

When we were building the chedi at Wat Dhammasathit, people were noticing that on the days when they were actually meditating, they could sling a lot of buckets of cement and rake up a lot of gravel to go into the cement and do all the other pretty heavy physical chores that were required and not lose energy. The energy stayed up. The breath was helping them. It was their cushion as they worked. It was their nourishment as they worked. If they forgot about the breath, though, then they would work for about an hour and get totally worn out.

So once you have a sense of pleasure that comes from the concentration, don't just let it sit there. See if you can carry it into other activities. Otherwise, you become a sitting junkie. All you can think about is you want to sit, sit, sit, sit, sit, sit and meditate. But as human beings, we have work we have to do. To get the most out of this pleasure, you want to learn how to regard it as a skill and focus on mastering the skill. Get some satisfaction in mastering the skill as you carry the sense of being centered—along with a soothing, healthy breath energy—into lots of different activities.

As you get better and better at this, you can take it into activities that otherwise would have you upset or have you worked up or afraid. You realize that you can breathe through all that. The fact that the breath is comfortable gives you a sense of well-being, a sense of belonging there that you wouldn't have had it otherwise.

This is one of the ways in which concentration practice teaches you how not to be overwhelmed by pleasure. In other words, you learn how to work with the pleasure so that it becomes something more and more ordinary and something you know that it will do its work for you in terms of soothing the body, soothing the mind, nourishing the body, nourishing the mind, whether you wallow in it or not.

In fact, it's going to do a better job of helping you when you don't wallow. In that way, you can take both pleasure and pain in your stride. This skill is what

helps free the mind from a lot of its concerns. If you could find your pleasure only in certain places and only certain postures, you'd be stuck on those places and postures. You wouldn't want to be distracted from wallowing in the pleasure, which would make other activities irritating. That's not helpful. The attitude should be, "Here I am producing it, and as I produce it, it's going to do its work." If it's not doing its work in certain parts of the body, it's simply a sign that you haven't learned how to spread the breath energy to those parts.

So if you're doing work that requires thought, let the breath spread around behind the eyes, around the eyes, deep into the brain. If you're doing heavy physical work and you've hurt yourself, okay, figure out some way to focus on the breath and use the breath energy so that it can heal the wound. Sometimes that will require focusing directly on the more painful spot and thinking of the breath permeating it; not pushing it through, but allowing it to slip through easily. Think of all the space between the atoms, even in tight parts of the body. See if you can think of the breath going through that effortlessly.

Other times it will require not focusing on that part, but focusing on some other part in the body instead. This is something you have to experiment with. But again, it comes from approaching pleasure as a skill, getting clearer and clearer about cause and effect. That's how you find out what the Buddha meant by the middle way between indulgence in sensual pleasure and indulgence in self-torture. One, you've got this alternative form of pleasure. And two, you learn how to work with pleasure and pain without indulging. It's there. You make the most of it, but there's part of the mind that's not allowing itself to get overwhelmed. That's what's special about the path. And that's how you learn how to master it.