

Pleasure on the Middle Way

May 16, 2017

Always start with some good, long deep in-and-out breaths. This is a way of sweeping the energy through the body. Then try to find a rhythm that feels good. If you're not sure about what feels good, ask yourself: Where are your most sensitive spots in the body? For some people, they're in the area around the heart. Or they might be the stomach. For some people, it's deep inside the brain. Think of the energy going into those spots. Ask yourself, what would feel really good there? The more you allow yourself to be sensitive to the breath and the more you open up these sensitive spots to the breath, the more you see that the breath really does have the potential to create a good strong sense of pleasure.

This is an essential part of the concentration. Sometimes there will be a resistance to opening up, for fear that in the past you've breathed in ways—not consciously of course—but you've breathed in ways that were harsh and uncomfortable, and there are parts of the body that will close up as a result. But as you start breathing in a way that feels good in some parts of the body, these other areas might begin to open up. That's when the pleasure of concentration can spread and get really satisfying. This is part of the definition of right concentration: pleasure of different kinds, rapture of different kinds.

We hear that the Buddha taught a middle way, but it's not a middling way between pleasure and pain. It's a way of practice that looks at pleasures and pains, and learns how to use them properly. Pleasures and pains come partially from past karma, but partially from what we're doing right now. We have the choice as to which ones we're going to focus on and develop. So as we practice, we make the most of that by being very conscious of what these feelings can do to us. There are some pains that are actually useful for the practice, others that are not. There are pleasures that are useful for the practice. They have a good impact on the mind, and they come from good actions. Those are part of the path as well.

That was the Buddha's standard for judging them: Where do they come from, where do they go? Some sensual pleasures come from breaking the precepts, so stay away from them. If they're perfectly innocent in terms of the precepts, then you have to look at what impact they have on you, and this is going to be an individual matter. There are some monks in Thailand who can meditate perfectly well in the comfort of a monastery, and others who can't get their act together, unless they go out in the forest and deprive themselves of a lot of the comforts of the monastery.

It's going to be an individual matter. The same principle applies for everybody. The impact that a pleasure has on your mind is something you have to be very honest about. That's sensual pleasures.

The same goes for what the Buddha calls pleasures not of the flesh: the pleasures of right concentration. As he said, this is a kind of pleasure that you can be devoted to. It provides you with nourishment. There's a question you hear all over the place: What about the dangers of being stuck on the pleasure of concentration? When I was teaching in Paris last week, that was one of the questions that came up when I was talking about the pleasure of concentration. People said, what about the dangers of getting stuck on these pleasures? Those dangers are far too much emphasized.

The Buddha himself spoke about them only in the sense that they don't lead to unskillful states of the mind, they simply get you stuck on not wanting to go any further. But then you look at the impact of sensual desires, and sensual pleasures in the mind, it's obvious that it's much worse because they can cause people to kill, steal, have illicit sex, do all kinds of things under the impact of their desire for sensual pleasures. Nobody kills over jhana, nobody steals or has illicit sex over jhana. It's an essential part of the path, because if you don't have this pleasure that comes from being able to sit here and be satisfied with the breathing, the mind's going to keep going back to its old ways. Even when it's old ways are relatively innocent, still there's always the danger of clinging too much to those pleasures.

You need an alternative. It's like having many irons in the fire. If you have only one iron in the fire, then you're really concerned about that. If it doesn't come out well, then you can get really upset. But if you have alternatives, then when things come and go in your life, your relationships with other people, you find that you don't have to feed so intently or desperately on them if you've got this alternative. Because that's what clinging is: feeding. When we have only a few things that we really feed on, that we take seriously in our life, we're going to be very concerned about the ups and down, and the fact that these things are inconstant, and what you do to struggle to make them more constant that they can be. That makes life miserable for everybody.

But if you have this alternative—a good sense of well-being inside that you can develop through the path—then even though you're still feeding on things outside, it's not quite so desperate. It doesn't have the same edge, the same fear. You can begin to look at your attachments outside and see them in a lot more objective way. After all, when we come into this life, we don't know people beforehand, we don't know where the people in our family came from—where our friends came from, where they were in previous lifetimes, what kind of

relationships we had, where they're going to go. We have this brief time together. And so, realizing it's going to be brief, you ask yourself: What's the best way to leave a gift for that person before we have to part?

In other words, even though you're feeding on them, you offer them something to feed on as well, and you want to make it something good. And because you have this alternative source of pleasure, this alternative feeding spot, you can allow yourself to be attached to it. In fact, if you're not attached to it, it's going to be hard to really develop it well. But if you got this alternative feeding spot, then the thought of your other sources of food disappearing doesn't dig so sharply into the heart. You can view these impermanent relations of the world with a lot more equanimity. And a lot more discernment. And a lot less desperation.

So the pleasure of concentration is an important part of the path. You can't do without it.

Sometimes you hear that right concentration is an optional part of the path, that you can just go straight for insight. But that's like that saying they have in Thailand, which is something of a joke: *farang tham koen*. That means that the foreigners do too much. The story goes, and this often happens, that you get an engine in Thailand, it needs fixing, you have to take it apart, then when you put it back together again, you see there are a few screws left on the floor. You have two options, one is realizing that you didn't put it together right, and the other is saying, well, they put too many screws in the first place. That's what it means for foreigners to do too much: They put too much in.

In the same way, you sometimes you hear the Buddha put too many factors in the path. There's that extra factor, that when you put the path together you can leave the right concentration on the floor. But then, like an engine missing some screws, it's not going to work. It may chug along a little bit, but eventually it's going to break down. So you need this pleasure. Allow yourself to get attached to it—not in the unhealthy way where you're just going to do this and neglect all your other duties, but with the sense that you want to nurture this, care for it, look after it, and use it as a source of refreshment.

Use it as a source of well-being, use it as a food source for yourself, so that when your other food sources start ending, or begin to run out, you're not desperate. You've got this alternative. And it's part of the middle way. It's a pleasure that has a good impact on the mind, it comes from good activities in the mind, and it leads to good results in the mind.

Learn how to open yourself up to the possibility that simply sitting here and breathing can be really satisfying, for the sensitive parts of the body, and then it

will go deep into the mind. When you've finally developed a sense for that sensitivity, look after it well.