

Gratification

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Psychologists make a distinction between two kinds of happiness: pleasure and gratification. Pleasure is simply a matter of enjoying pleasant sensations, pleasant emotions, contentment, thrill, ecstasy. It's a more passive kind of thing, just trying to consume whatever nice feelings come by. That's basically taking pleasure in things. Whereas gratification requires a more active role. It comes from developing a skill, developing your strengths, to the point where you get so involved in an activity that you become completely absorbed, completely immersed. That, they say, is a higher form of happiness than simple pleasure.

But from the Buddha's point, both types of happiness involve a kind of activity. They're just that, activities. When you enjoy a pleasure, there's an element of fabrication even in the present moment of the enjoyment. When you try to enjoy a nice sound or a nice sight, the mind embroiders an awful lot around the sound and sight in order to enjoy it, because those things are pretty fleeting. The mind has a tendency to advertise the sound and sight to itself, telling itself that this is really something special. This is something you really ought to pay attention to. You try to draw out the pleasure as much as you can.

That's a type of skill in and of itself, but it doesn't go very far. It stays totally in the present moment and leaves you no better than you were before. Whereas with the second sort of skill, you're actually investing in trying to develop strengths that will be useful in the future. That's a lot more useful, a lot more helpful. It has a carryover. You develop not just the craving to get a particular pleasure, but also a strength, an ability that you can fall back on again the next time you need it.

The psychologists rank gratification as a higher form of happiness than simple pleasure, but the question they don't ask is: In seeking gratification, which skills are the best to develop? As far as they're concerned, anything where you get a sense of immersion or what they call "flow" is perfectly fine. You can get it from riding with a motorcycle gang or dancing, singing, shooting a rifle. Wherever you get your kicks, that's perfectly fine from their point of view. They don't really look into the issue of what strengths does everybody need in order to face what's sure to happen in life? Aging, illness and death are sure to happen. Separation is sure to happen. So when aging, illness, separation, and death are sure to happen, what skills do you need so you don't suffer from these things?

We generally assume the suffering there is inevitable, that there's nothing much you can do about it. But the Buddha's great discovery was that even though these things happen, you don't have to suffer from them.

That's what the four noble truths are all about. The suffering that really gets to the mind is the suffering that comes from craving—not from the arising and passing away of things but from the craving that makes us try to take these things that arise and pass away and turn them into a foundation for happiness. But they're not reliable enough to provide a basis for a reliable happiness. So we end up disappointed, again and again and again. We do this out of ignorance. So we need skills that can get rid of ignorance, get rid of craving. That's why we're meditating.

This is why this is such an important skill. It should be a basic skill for everybody, because given the course of our lives, we all have different kinds of problems. If you're good at sports, you have sports problems. If you're involved in work as a lawyer, you have lawyer's problems. If you're in a relationship, you have relationship problems. Those specific problems require specific skills. But the universal problems of aging, illness, separation, and death: Those are problems we all face. So that skills we need to develop are the ones that will give us the strength we need to deal with those inevitable things.

In our society, when you go to school, after you get basic lessons in reading, writing, and arithmetic, they start to channel you. Wherever your aptitude seems to be, they'll channel you in that direction. So we get used to developing our skills in areas where we already have the aptitude. What we're missing are skills in how to learn to get good at things where we don't have the aptitude. Because it's not always the case that the skills necessary for life come easily.

In the same way, when you practice the Dhamma, it's not always the case that mindfulness or alertness comes easily. Concentration, discernment: These things are often very hard, yet they're the skills we need to develop if we don't want to suffer.

So a second level of skill is learning how to develop skills in areas where it's hard. That means you have to learn how to talk yourself in the right way—one, to remind yourself how important the skill is, so that you feel more encouraged to spend time, devote time, invest time in mastering that skill.

This is why the Buddha has you contemplate things like the foulness of the body or death, realizing that these things are inevitable. The body is going to start falling apart. It's going to start getting sick. It's going to start getting weak and old, if you live long enough. At any rate, it's sure to die. And if your happiness depends on things that die, what are you going to do then? Death can come at any time. So

don't waste your life dithering around with other things and then suddenly have, say, three weeks, when the doctor says, "Oops, three weeks left." We all know death is going to happen someday. So it's good to get prepared now.

And these are precisely the skills you're going to need—like mindfulness, so that you don't go running off after your daydreams. Because if those daydreams come in as you die, you must might follow them. Who knows where they're going to lead you?

They talk about samsara, but don't think of samsara as a place. It's a process, a wandering-on. The mind is constantly wandering on. The mind is constantly wandering off. You see this little train of thought coming into the mind and you jump onto it. Then it begins to lose steam, so you catch the next train and then the next train, and the next train. Who knows where you'll end up?

Try to get skilled at bringing the mind back. As soon as you realize you've hopped on a train, hop off. Come back to the breath. That skill is going to serve you in really good stead. When things get difficult, as the mind starts complaining and creating all sorts of scenarios that are really not good for you, you want to be able to pull out as quickly as possible.

So this practice of staying with one object, the breath, and as soon as you catch the mind wandering off, bringing it right back: This is a life-and-death skill. The mind will create all sorts of tricks to make it difficult from time to time, but just learn to take that as par for the course. Try to get quicker and quicker at sensing when you've slipped off—or even before you've slipped off. The mind will give its warning signals that it's getting ready to go, waving around looking for someplace to go. Catch it in a waving before it actually lands on.

It's like an inchworm at the edge of a leaf. It waves around looking for the next leaf. As soon as another leaf comes floating past, then it's gone, onto the next leaf. Try to catch it before that leaf comes. Bring it back here. Try to get more and more sensitive to the breath, so that you can really get absorbed. When you get absorbed in the breath, there can be a sense of sense of ease that you've got a place to settle down. The breath itself becomes more and more pleasant.

This gives you strength. It helps to lubricate the practice. That's the next step, learning how to get yourself through those dry periods. If you can access a sense of ease anyplace in the body, focus on it. If you're having trouble, learn how to give yourself pep talks. Don't be the sort of person who's constantly negative about what you're doing, saying, "See? You can't do that. See? You can't do this." What kind of advice is that? It's not helpful at all. You've got to learn how to encourage yourself. Each time you catch yourself wandering off, remember that it's a good

thing you've caught yourself. You're strengthening your mindfulness. Come right back.

Learn to be encouraging. That's one of the most important aspects of developing a skill. After all, what does it mean to develop a skill? You start out making mistakes, and how you respond to those mistakes makes all the difference between whether you'll be able to become skillful or not. If you get discouraged, you give up, and that's it. But if you say, "Let's come back and try again. Come back and try it again," then there's hope for you. You've got to have confidence both in the path and in yourself.

So an important psychological skill is just this: learning how to be encouraging. It's good to have a sense of humor about the whole practice so that you don't let the downs get you down.

This is a basic set of skills that everybody needs to know: learning how to learn, learning how to master a skill whether you're good at it or not. If you master only the ones that you're good at, you leave huge areas of life undeveloped. And if it so happens that virtue, concentration, and discernment are not your forte, then you're really stuck, because these are skills that everybody needs.

So be the sort of person that takes pleasure in learning, takes pleasure in meeting a challenge. If you don't conquer the challenge right away, okay, just keep trying different angles, different ways. Find some enjoyment in that, learning to become ingenious in tackling the problem from different angles.

That way, the meditation eventually does become gratifying as you learn different ways of keeping the mind centered in different situations—easy situations, hard situations—and figuring out how to deal with setbacks. After all, they are going to come. It's inevitable. What makes or breaks a meditator is how you deal with setbacks. Don't take them as a sign that you're a failure. Take them as a sign that life has its ups and downs. The mind is a complex chaotic system. If you were to chart the progress of even the great meditators, it wouldn't be a nice straight line, ever upward and onward. It would go up and down, again and again. So it's important how you treat the downs. That's what makes all the difference.

Remember that these are the important skills in life. Other things that you master are secondary. The skills you learn in a job, the skills you learn in a relationship, your hobbies, whatever—those will serve you for a time, but then there comes a time when they can't help you anymore. That's when you'll be glad you have these skills under your belt: mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. Because these are the skills that will see you through.