

Afraid of Pleasure

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You probably know the story of the Buddha's quest for awakening. As a young prince, he had all the pleasures you could imagine. Yet when he reflected on aging, illness, and death, he realized that the pleasures he had would not survive aging, illness, and death. That realization ate away at him. He developed a sense of what's called *samvega*, a very strong sense of the meaninglessness of life as it's ordinarily lived, and a sense of urgency in the need to find a way out. All of a sudden, those pleasures seemed like a trap. So he left home.

First he went to study with some of the teachers of those days who had taught a path to what they said was true happiness. He mastered their paths, but wasn't satisfied with them. So he went off on his own and started practicing austerities, engaging in extreme self-torment, trying to stop his breath, going on an absolute minimum of food, one handful of beans a week. And he discovered that that extreme didn't work, either. That wasn't the way out.

The story goes on to say that he began to reflect on his childhood. There had been a time when he was a young boy, when his father was out plowing—and the original version of the story just says that: His father was plowing. Later on, the idea of the Buddha's father plowing disturbed people, so they said it was a royal plowing ceremony. But there he was, sitting under a tree, and he came to a sense of great contentment as his mind entered the first jhana, or stage of mental absorption. There was a very steady state of well-being, rapture, refreshment, simply focused on his breath. So now he reflected on that. He asked himself, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure? Is there anything blameworthy about it?" The more he reflected on it, the more he realized there was nothing to be afraid of there. So he decided to see if that would be the way to awakening.

That's when he got on the right path. It's interesting that when he later formulated the noble eightfold path, he started with right view and ended up with right concentration, which is the four stages of jhana. But in the story he reflected first on jhana, and decided to make that the path. There are other passages in the Canon that talk about the path as being essentially right concentration with seven ancillary factors, helpful factors, which are the seven other factors, starting with right view. So right concentration may not be first in the teaching of the path, but it was first in the Buddha's pursuit of the path. It's central.

It starts out with directed thought and evaluation. As the Buddha said, after you've put aside your obsession with sensual pleasures and other unskillful mental

qualities, you focus on one object, direct your thoughts to the object, and then you evaluate the object. Those processes are what give rise to a sense of ease and rapture, pleasure and rapture. For instance, when you're focusing on your breath, that's the directed thought. You keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath.

Then you evaluate it. This is where the real work of the meditation comes in. How does evaluation lead to pleasure? How does it lead to a sense of refreshment? You evaluate different ways of breathing until you come across one that begins to feel pleasant, begins to feel refreshing. This is why thinking plays an important role in the practice. Think about the breath and then look at it, asking yourself, "Is this really as good as it can get? Is this really comfortable? Do I like being with this kind of breathing?" If the answer is No, "Well, let's change."

So there's this little dialogue there in the mind: "How about this? How about that?" You try different kinds of breathing until you find the one that feels good. Then you stay with that until it doesn't feel good anymore. Then you allow it to change again.

So in the very beginning stages of the meditation, there has to be thought, there has to be evaluation, because they're needed for that sense of ease, that sense of pleasure. And that ease and pleasure are very important. Without them, the meditation gets dry. No matter how strong your willpower to stay in the present moment, it's an uphill battle if there's no immediate payoff. So that's what you try to provide for the mind: a sense of refreshment that comes simply from sitting here breathing.

In the beginning, it may not be especially intense, but give it time. Whatever sense of ease, refreshment, satisfaction comes from breathing in a particular way, you might think, "Every little cell in the body has the right to order what kind of breath it wants," and see how the body breathes in response to that thought.

All too often, we occupy the body with other thoughts. You may have noticed at the end of a day of a lot of thinking and mental activity that the body feels tired, too. That's because when you think, there are patterns of tension going through the body. Then your thought worlds take over. Whatever breathing needs the body may have get shoved off to the side. At the end of the day of work like that, the body feels exhausted.

I remember reading a Chinese medical treatise one time saying that mental work is three times as taxing for the body as physical work. A lot of that is because the breath energy in the body gets stopped up: bottled up here, blocked there. So no wonder you feel tired at the end of the day. But here when you're meditating, you say, "Okay, no other priorities. The priority is going to be to open things up ,

to allow the body to breathe in whatever way it wants. And every part of the body can have a share in the breathing.”

So who wants what kind of breathing? You go around and ask different parts of the body. Of course, they're not going to answer in words, but just open up this possibility: How about this little spot of tension here? What would feel good for that spot of tension as you breathe in? How long does the breath feel good there? Explore it. Stay with that sense of ease for a while and then you can move on, check out the rest of the body, cleaning up the body, working through the patterns of tension until things are as good as you can make them. They may not be 100% good, but they're good enough. You may want to go through the body and check some more, because as your sensitivity heightens, you begin to detect patterns of tension you didn't see before. So work through those until the body feels pretty good. Then choose whatever spot in the body is your favorite spot to stay and then settle down there.

You can think of your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. Let all the breath sensations connect. And then just maintain that state. It's going to be an act of balance. You feel little thoughts flitting here, running round there, but you don't have to chase them down; you don't have to deal with them at all. You may find yourself clamping down too much on the body, or having too light a touch. That's something you learn simply from experience, from your directed thought and evaluation.

It's important that you make this your priority while you're sitting here. You don't have anything else you have to think about. Whatever other agendas the mind may have, you have to learn how to say No to them. Sometimes they'll say, "Hey look, there's this huge empty space here, all this time, nothing else is going on, let's think about this," and you find yourself in another world. You've got to learn how to drop those worlds, no matter how intriguing they may be, how attractive they may be. One way of dropping them is to figure out, "Where is the tension right now that goes along with that little thought world?" Once you spot which part of the body it's in, you just breathe through there, and the thought world will go away. You can get back to allowing the body to breathe unhindered.

This kind of indulgence here is a very important part of the practice. Some people are afraid of getting stuck on concentration. Well, you never hear the Buddha saying that. He says to work on this. When he tells the monks to go out and meditate, he says, "Go do jhana." There will come a time when you have to overcome your attachment to this, but first develop an attachment here. Because what happens to your attachments otherwise? They go back to their old ways. Other things are easier. You may tend to be good at thinking through things, so

the mind will want to go back to its attachments to its thoughts. Or it'll think up other duties for you: "Got to look at this, got to look at that." Even here at the monastery there's a lot of looking after the physical plant that has to go on, so it's very easy for the mind to get tied up in that.

In other words, if you don't give the mind something really good to hold on to in the present moment, it's going to go back to its old ways. So it's important that you develop a sense of attachment here, a sense of really liking to be here breathing, learning to enjoy it, learning to be a connoisseur of your breath. That helps shift the center of your gravity into the present moment. Only when it's really thoroughly shifted here, when it's solid here, can you start seeing things in the present moment as they're actually happening.

So remember that little question and answer session the Buddha had with himself: "Why am I afraid of this happiness? Is there anything blameworthy about it? There's nothing blameworthy. Is there anything wrong with being here? No, there's nothing wrong with being here. This is the path to awakening."

So try to develop your sensitivity here. For the most part, we've learned to desensitize ourselves to the breath energy in the body so that we can get on with our thinking and other activities. But now it's time to re-sensitize ourselves here. After all, if you're going to see stress and its cause, this is where you're going to have to see them. If you want to be sensitive to very subtle levels of stress, you have to be able to give rise to good strong feelings of well-being. It's there in the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation: training yourself to breathe in and out with a sense of ease and pleasure, training yourself to breathe in and out with a sense of rapture, training yourself to gladden the mind when it needs gladdening, to steady it when it needs steadying, and to release it from whatever concerns that are weighing it down.

The ability to develop a sense of pleasure here, to appreciate that sense of pleasure here and to learn how to tap into whenever you need it: Those are important skills in the meditation. They form the heart of the path.