

The Safety of Jhana

November 8, 2007

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Think of the breath ventilating the whole body, the energy of the breath flowing through the nerves, down along the blood vessels, energizing every cell, nourishing every cell. Keep doing this as long as it feels good. Then, when long, deep breathing starts feeling laborious, you can let the breath quiet down. Let it find a rhythm that feels good, feels gratifying, feels satisfying. Keep monitoring your progress, because the needs of the body will change. All you have to do is keep tabs on what feels good.

This is a blameless pleasure. And it's a necessary pleasure. It's part of the path. As the Buddha said, you can't overcome your attachment to sensual pleasures unless you know this pleasure: the pleasure of concentration.

So allow yourself to pursue this pleasure, this happiness, as much as you want. Sometimes you hear about the dangers of concentration, or the dangers of getting stuck in the pleasure of concentration, as if people starting to practice concentration are opening themselves up all sorts of new dangers they'd never encountered before. Actually, the danger of being attached to concentration is much less than the danger of what people already are attached to, i.e., sensual pleasures. No one has yet killed anyone over the pleasures of concentration. Nobody steals because of the pleasures of concentration. Nobody engages in illicit sex, lies, or takes intoxicants because of the pleasures of concentration. Sensual pleasure: That's what's dangerous. They say that by far the largest number of murders that are committed are between people who've had sex. If sensuality were such a good thing, this wouldn't be happening.

So as long as we're still attached to sensual pleasures, that's where we really are in danger, because you never know. If you don't have an alternative, it's very easy to start getting obsessed with sensual pleasure. When that obsession gets thwarted, you can do all kinds of unskillful things. So for your own safety, developed an attachment to the pleasure and the rapture of concentration. Develop this skill, develop this sensitivity, become a connoisseur of your breath, so that you can tap into that sense of ease and well-being, and even rapture, whenever you need it.

There's a sutta in the Canon where Mara arranges one day, when the Buddha's out for alms, that nobody wants to give food to him. The Buddha goes back to where he was resting, and Mara comes to him and says, "Okay, now that I played a trick, you can go back and get your alms. People will feed you, put alms in your

bowl.” The Buddha says, “You’ve made a lot of demerit, Evil One. I’m not going to fall for your trick.” Then he says, “How happy we are, we who need nothing. We feed on rapture,” Rapture is food for the mind so that you don’t go around hungering for sensual things.

So you can pursue this pleasure as much as you want. Sometimes you read about the middle way as being halfway between intense pleasure and intense pain as if it were sort of a middling pleasure and middling pain: pleasure but not too much pleasure, pain but not too much pain, kind of a neutral gray state, as if we were right in the middle on the continuum between extreme pleasure and extreme pain. But that’s not the case. The middle way is off the continuum. Instead of measuring the path in terms of how much pleasure or pain it involves, the Buddha has you take a new attitude toward pleasure, to develop new skills around pleasure, new skills around pain, understanding how to use pleasure and use pain. That’s something radically different.

As part of the path, you use pleasure, as I said, as your nourishment. And you find a different way of gaining pleasure. You don’t have to have nice sounds or nice sights or smells or tastes or tactile sensations to be happy. You can breathe, learn to focus the mind, let the mind settle down, become unified around the breath, and you’ve got a source of pleasure that’s totally your own and has no drawbacks, carries no blame.

It does have its limitations. After all, it is conditioned. And the Buddha says, if you stay attached to it—in other words, if you’re not willing to use it for any further end—it’s like having your hand covered with resin. Whatever you hold on to, it’s going to stick. But that’s only if you have the wrong attitude toward the pleasure. The pleasure itself is not dangerous. Not only will you not kill anybody because of this pleasure, nobody’s going to kill you over this pleasure, either, because you’re not taking anything away from anyone. It’s nothing that anyone can take from you.

Practically speaking, you need to have some sense of attachment to the practice in order to get good at it. It’s like learning how to play a musical instrument. You have to like the sound of the instrument, you have to want to hear it again and again, if you’re going to get good at it.

So allow yourself to enjoy the pleasure that comes from concentration and don’t worry about being attached. This attachment is ultimately a lot easier to pry away than the ones we’re more used to. So learn how to use this pleasure. Once you’ve gained it, use it to see. What do you see? As the Buddha says, you see things as they’ve come to be. This is something special. Most of us look at a situation and the first thing we think of is how we’re going to change it, what we’re going to

make out of it. When the mind is in concentration and isn't thirsting after sensual pleasures, when it finds itself in a good steady pleasurable state of being, it's more inclined to look at things simply as they arise in and of themselves. That way, it can see this process of becoming. You've got your old karma and then you've got consciousness, focused in on whatever old karma presents in terms of form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, or consciousness itself. Instead of delighting in the idea of making something new out of these things, you can simply see them as they arise and pass away.

That's how you go beyond the dichotomy between being attached to becoming and being attached to non-becoming. This is one of the ways in which you use pleasure. And it's an important way. This is the way to use the pleasure of concentration to go to even higher a happiness.

The Buddha once talked about the happiness of nibbana, and some people complained, "How can it be happiness when there's no feeling in nibbana?" He replied that there are forms of happiness that are not related to feeling at all. It's a different kind of happiness, a different kind of pleasure or bliss or however you want to translate the word *sukha*. It's a kind of *sukha*, a kind of happiness that's something separate, that doesn't depend on conditions. The happiness of jhana, the rapture and the sense of equanimity and ease that come from strong concentration depend on conditions, but they can get you to the unconditioned.

As for using pain, that comes under right view. Once the mind is settled down like this, you can look at pain not with the agenda of trying to get rid of it, but more with the purpose of what the Buddha said is the true duty that we have with regard to pain, which is to comprehend it. You can sit here and watch it because you have a foundation, a good place to sit so that you can watch and not feel threatened by the pain. When the mind has been well fed and well nourished by the breath, well fed and well nourished by concentration, you find it a lot easier to stay with the pain, again, simply as it is in and of itself, when has come to be, *yathabhutam*, without trying to think about how you're going to push it away or run away from it. You can sit with it and watch it: What is this? What's the nature of the pain? What's the difference between the physical pain and the mental pain? How are they connected? What are we doing to connect them? Can we learn how to stop doing that?

These are things you can learn only when the mind is well centered with a sense of solidity and steadiness inside, a sense of confidence, knowing that you have your reactions to pleasure and pain more under control. You're more skillful around pleasure and pain because you regard them not as ends in and of

themselves, but as means to a greater end. That's where the middle way is really radically different from any other way that's out there.

So don't be afraid of the rapture and pleasure that come from concentration. They're extremely useful in and of themselves, and blameless. And they can lead to a happiness that no one else can touch, that no conditions can ever impinge on.