

## *A Pleasure Not to Be Feared*

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Once your body is in position—sitting up straight, facing forward, your eyes closed, your hands in your lap, right hand on top of the left—the next step is to get the mind in position. Think thoughts of goodwill: a wish for happiness, true happiness, your own true happiness and the true happiness of all the beings. That's the good thing about true happiness: Your true happiness doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else's true happiness, doesn't conflict with it, because it comes from within. That's why we're meditating, to find true happiness, true well-being. The word in Pali is *sukha*. It means happiness, pleasure, well-being, ease.

We often hear that the Buddha's teachings are about suffering. In the chant just now, the four noble truths are about suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. The focus seems to be on suffering, but notice that the truths don't just stick with suffering. They're also about how to find an end to it. And the end of suffering is true happiness. So those four noble truths are not all about suffering. Look in the fourth truth, which is the path to the end of suffering. You find right concentration, and the factors for right concentration include a sense of *sukha*: happiness, pleasure and ease, well-being; and *piti*, which is rapture or refreshment. Those are the qualities we try to develop in the meditation as part of the path.

So focus on your breath as your object of concentration. Take a couple good long, deep in-and-out breaths to see *how* the breathing feels and *where* you feel it most prominently in the body. The breath is an all-body, full-body process. It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the flow of energy as you breathe in, as you breathe out, because the flow of energy in the body is what actually brings the air into the lungs and allows it out. So you can feel the breathing process anywhere in the body: in the chest, in the abdomen, in your shoulders, in your neck, in your head. As you get more and more sensitive to it, you realize you can feel it anywhere in the nervous system, all the way out to every pore.

But in the beginning, focus on whichever spot you find it easiest to notice the breath. And allow yourself to breathe in a way that lets that spot feel comfortable, so that it feels full and at ease. You don't have to strain. In fact, if you strain, you create tension in different parts of the body. So you just pose the question in the mind: What kind of breathing would feel really good right here, right now? See

how the body responds. Then learn how to *read* the spot in the body that you're focused on, so that you can tell when you're breathing too far out or too far in. There'd be a sense of strain, as it gets too full or too empty.

So allow the breathing to stay right within the range of what's comfortable, and see how long you can keep it there. If your mind wanders off, come back and ask yourself: Where were you before you left the breath? Pick things up from where you left off and pose that question in the mind again: What kind of breathing would feel really good? If you want, you can experiment with different types of breathing: longer or shorter, heavier or lighter, deeper or more shallow, faster or slower. Just remind yourself of all the different options you have here. Sometimes this stirs up a memory in the body itself, as to what kind of breathing feels really good, what kind of breathing is possible.

But an important part of the meditation is learning how to read the needs of the body and how to allow the breath to meet those needs, to whatever extent it can. After all, you need a sense of ease and well-being on the path in order to stay with it. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if there's not that sense of fullness and refreshment, the path begins to seize up like an engine that hasn't been lubricated. As the oil wears away, the engine seizes up and just can't go anywhere. In the same way, the practice stops going anywhere because there's no sense of refreshment that comes with it. It becomes very dry.

So the pleasure that comes from staying with the breath, allowing mind to settle down with the breath, is something you really want to pursue. Think about the Buddha. As a prince, he indulged every desire, every wish for pleasure, and as so often happens with someone who's been indulging that way, when he decided that this was not the way to true happiness, he went to the other extreme, denying himself of any happiness and pleasure at all. He was afraid of pleasure.

Those similes occurred to his mind: For the mind to gain awakening, it has to be like wood that's totally devoid of sap and kept away from water, with no moisture at all—in other words, not indulging in pleasure and not thinking about pleasure. So he forced himself to go without food. He forced himself to stop breathing. Kept up this practice for many years, until he was nothing but skin and bones, fainting every time he went to the bathroom.

And you know what keeps people going like: a sense of pride. He wasn't indulging in sensual pleasure but he was indulging in his sense of pride that he was better than the people who were indulging in pleasure. But ultimately he realized that that wasn't the way, either. Everything was just suppressed, with no real understanding.

He remembered a time when he was young: He had been sitting under a tree very quietly, and his mind settled down into a state of ease, rapture, singleness of preoccupation, focused probably on his breath. The question then occurred to him: Could this be the way to awakening? And the answer appeared to him: Yes, it could. “But why am I afraid of this happiness? Why am I afraid of the pleasure that comes along with the concentration?” he asked himself. “Is there anything blameworthy about it?” No, it doesn’t oppress anybody, doesn’t involve intoxication in sensual pleasures. “So why I am I afraid it?” The more he contemplated it, the more he realized there was nothing to fear. But then he realized that because he was so emaciated, it’d be hard for him to get the mind to settle down into that state, so he returned to eating food. That was how he found the middle way.

Now it’s up to us to find the middle way, too. Most of us tend to indulge either in pleasure or are afraid of the pleasure that comes from a concentrated mind, that comes from allowing the breath to be comfortable, and to develop that state. The Buddha said that once there’s that sense of ease and well-being, you can allow it to spread throughout the body. Think of yourself kneading that pleasure through the body as you would knead moisture through a ball of dough, so that it’s not just this one spot that you’re focused on that feels good. You allow the whole body to feel good. You let that feeling of ease and pleasure spread around to the different parts of the body: out your fingers, out your toes, through your head, all over the body.

As the Buddha said, there’s no way you’re going to really overcome your attachment to sensual pleasures, your desires for material objects, unless you can find a higher sense of well-being and ease that comes from a concentrated mind—or the even higher levels of well-being and ease that come from states of awakening. The mind wants pleasure, it wants ease, it wants well-being. If you try to stamp out that desire, it goes underground where you can’t see it. And there’s no way insights are going to arise if you keep putting things underground, denying what’s going on. So you bring that desire out into the open and learn how to satisfy it in a skillful way.

This is an important part of the path. Once the mind is nourished in this way, then when you do start letting go of other desires, other attachments, you’re doing it from a sense of well-being. It’s not neurotic. It’s not done with hate or aversion, it’s simply dispassion: You’ve found something better, something more solid, something more reliable, something less blameworthy, a pleasure that allows the mind to be clear rather than clouded. As you look at all the other pleasures you’ve been pursuing through your life, you begin to realize that they don’t nearly match

this. And so you let them go—not because somebody told you to let them go, but simply because you realize you’ve got something better.

As you develop this sense of inner well-being even further, you become more and more sensitive until you finally realize that this, too, has its drawbacks. It’s not totally constant. It’s not totally without stress. It’s not totally under your control. It’s fabricated. It’s willed. As you begin to see the slight variations and slight fluctuations in this sense of ease and well-being, you look for something deeper, more solid.

That’s how right concentration becomes a step to greater insight. You can become more and more a connoisseur of pleasure. Your sensitivity for what’s stressful and what’s inconstant gets more and more refined. Without this refinement, your understanding of what the Buddha taught about things being inconstant, stressful, and not self is very crude. The practice of concentration helps to develop your sensitivity for what true well-being really is, and how refined it can get. That’s what sharpens your insight.

So the pleasure of concentration is nothing to be feared. You actively pursue it. You openly pursue it. The Buddha said that when the mind finds an object that’s comfortable and easeful, you allow it to settle in. You indulge in that sense of well-being. You allow yourself to fully enjoy it. You let it spread throughout the body, so that your whole nervous system is illumined by that sense of ease and well-being, refreshed by that sense of ease and well-being, so that the insights that come to you don’t come with a neurotic fear of anything. They’re simply realizations that this is much better than the pleasures you’ve been pursuing before.

And it piques your curiosity. Is there something even better than this?

Sometimes you hear about the danger of being attached to the pleasures of deep concentration. But if you compare those to the dangers of being attached to sensuality, they’re very minor. When people are attached to sensuality, they can kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, take intoxicants, harm one another, and harm themselves. That’s the real danger. When you learn to find a better pleasure for the mind, a deeper pleasure for the mind, you’re less likely to engage in that kind of behavior. The only drawback of deep concentration is if you get satisfied with it, saying, “This is good enough for me, I don’t want to go any further.” But that kind of attachment is relatively easy to overcome.

This is a pleasure that’s not to be feared. As the Buddha said, it’s totally blameless. So give it your full attention. Try to master the skills that can bring on this pleasure, so that you can bring the path to fruition and find the even greater happiness, even greater well-being, that lies at its end.