

The Pleasure of Concentration

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We start the meditation every evening with thoughts of goodwill for the entire world. So why are we sitting here with our eyes closed? Why aren't we out there helping the world? We're sitting here with our eyes closed helping the world. After all, everyone in the world wants happiness. Everyone in the world wants well-being. And for the most part we're looking for our well-being in the pleasures of the senses. But as the Buddha points out, there's never a sense of enough with those pleasures. Even if you could have it rain gold coins, it still wouldn't be enough to provide for one person's sensual desires. Another place the Buddha said that you could have two mountains the size of the Himalayas, all made of gold, and still it wouldn't be enough to satisfy people's sensual desires. There's never the word *enough* out there, no matter how much you help people in that area. It never comes to an end.

Then of course there's *your* quest for sensual pleasures, too, and here's where the meditation comes in. The Buddha speaks of the pleasure of concentration as a way of pulling yourself away from your sensual desires, your lust, your greed: the things that create trouble in the world. Wherever you go looking for something, somebody else has already laid claim to it, which means you have to fight other people to gain those pleasures. And when that pleasure comes, it just slips through your fingers like water. Ajaan Suwat would often say, "Your sensual pleasures from last week: Where are they now?" There may be a memory of some of them, but most of them you've forgotten. And even with the ones you can remember, it's not necessarily a good memory. Either you get wistful over the pleasures that have gone, or you can think about the unskillful things you did to gain those pleasures.

It's because of our thirst for sensual pleasures that there are fights within a family, fights between families, fights between nations, so the ability to find an alternative source of pleasure is actually a moral act—seeking a source of pleasure that doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else. Which is what we're doing right here: trying to develop the potentials we have for pleasure within the body, within the mind, here in the present moment.

We work with the breath because of all the elements in the body, all the properties in the body, that's the easiest to manipulate. You can think of breathing in long, and the body will breathe in long. You can think *short*, and the body will take a short breath. You can ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel really good right now.

This is where it's important to develop your sensitivities, because all too often we've learned to be insensitive to the needs of the body, especially its breath needs. We push the breath energies around in line with our emotions. So in the very beginning, it's as if the body's a little bit leery of the attention we're paying to it, like a wild animal that's been abused by human beings. Even if you come at it with the kindest intentions, it's going to be suspicious. So you have to show yourself to be trustworthy. Listen to what the body needs right now. Gain a sense of where its most sensitive spots are, and of how the breath can nourish those spots, refresh those spots.

And again, remind yourself that sitting here blissing out on the breath is not a selfish thing. If you can find well-being in here, one, you're not taking anything away from anyone else. And two, you develop an inner strength from your inner resources, so you don't have to go feeding off of other people. Then when the time comes to help other people, you're not coming with a sense of hunger. You're not trying to feed your neurotic needs. You're coming out of a sense of inner wealth, inner satisfaction. And that kind of help is a lot more reliable.

So pay more attention to the breath coming in and going out. Pay more attention to how the subtle breath energies flow in the body—what feels good, what doesn't feel good right now. I've often found that the area around the heart, if it's going to be open to you, can be very sensitive to breath energy, so try to get it to open up and then try to provide it with the kind of breath it needs.

Now, there may be parts of the body that tend to be closed off. Originally when I was starting at meditating, the area around my heart was hard. It was as if it didn't trust me. So I focused on the area immediately around it and treated it very gently.

In cases like this, you don't go barging in to straighten things out. You listen and then try things out very gently. And you listen again. This is in line with the Buddha's general principle for how the Dhamma is nourished. He says you commit yourself to it and then you reflect. The committing means that you do what the Dhamma says. You devote yourself to a particular practice. And then you look at the results over time to see if there's anything that needs to be adjusted, anything that needs to be dropped or encouraged more. You're feeling your way.

This is a practice where you're making the Buddha's instructions your own meditation. He gives you the basic outlines for your own exploration. He tells you to breathe in and out in a way that's conducive to feelings of refreshment, and why you do that. You ask yourself, where's the potential for refreshment in here? Look. Listen. He tells you to breathe in ways that give rise to a sense of ease.

Again, look, listen: Where's the potential here? When there's a sense of ease, he says to think of it spreading throughout the whole body.

One of the images he gives is of a bathman. In those days, they didn't use bars of soap. They would take soap powder and mix it with water and you'd get a kind of dough, like the dough we make bread out of. You have to mix the water and the powder until the water moistens every bit of the dough. In the same way, you want the pleasure to moisten and refresh every part of your body. How do you do that? Ajaan Lee gives some ideas. Think of the breath energy flowing, that there are channels of energy flowing through the body: out to every pore, out to the tips of every finger, out to the spaces between the fingers, the tips of the toes, the spaces between the toes. And be sensitive, as the Buddha said, to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication. This is largely an issue of the perceptions that you use around the breath.

Remember, we're not trying to pump air into a solid body. Our immediate experience of the body is breath energy. So as the breath flows in, it's simply energy mingling with energy. As it flows out, it's energy draining out from energy. There are no clear dividing lines. If there are strong movements of energy from one part of the body to the other, think of them dispersing out so that they don't get lodged or locked into a certain corner of the body. You want everything to be wide open from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes.

And indulge in this pleasure. That's one of the words the Buddha uses. We don't think of him as an indulgent type, but it is important that you appreciate the fact that you can find pleasure in this way. The body can be bathed in pleasure simply by the way you breathe in and out, by the way you perceive the breath, conceive the breath to yourself.

When you've learned how to do this, then learn how to do it more and more quickly each time you sit down. That way, you'll be able to have it on tap whenever you need it, because when strong, sensual desires come up, you need some form of pleasure to counteract them, and this is your main medicine. This is your main alternative.

So learn where your sensitive spots are. Learn how you can nourish them quickly and keep them nourished. Then keep reminding yourself of the value of having this kind of pleasure. For many of us, meditation is simply one more pleasant thing to do, to add to our repertoire of things we like to do. But you have to remember that this is the way of finding pleasure that's the most moral: the best for you, the best for the people around you.

There are times when you want this instead of something else, because we do have to make choices. In our garden of practice, we begin to realize that some of

the things we pursue are like eucalyptus trees. We might like the idea of having something exotic from another part of the world, the smell of the tree is nice, but it kills the other plants in the garden.

In the same way, there are a lot of pleasures in life that are not both/and; they're either/or. You have to make a choice. As the Buddha said, when you see a greater pleasure that comes from sacrificing a lesser pleasure, the wise person would go for the greater one. And *greater* here doesn't mean more charged, more exciting. It means more lasting, more reliable, more ethical. This is an aspect of the meditation that people don't really appreciate: There's a moral side to meditating in that you're creating less of a burden on the world, less of a burden on the people around you. Nobody ever killed, stole, had illicit sex, lied, or took intoxicants because of the pleasure of jhana. The pleasures of sensuality are precisely the things that lead to those misdeeds.

At the same time, when the time comes to be generous with other people—with your time, with your knowledge, with whatever you want to be generous with—the fact that you're coming from a sense of well-being inside means that your help to other people is not predatory. You're not helping them simply because it feels good to your self-image. You're helping them because you see that there's something they really need and you have the opportunity and the ability to help. And you're happy to do it because you're coming from a position of wealth: the wealth of well-being inside.

So it's good all around: good for you now, good for you in the long term, good for other people, now and in the long term. As Ajaan Mun used to say, any form of goodness that's without drawbacks is genuinely good. And there are so few forms of goodness in the world that are good in that way.

Now that you found one of them, make the most of it.