

## *Stupid about Pleasure*

*September 27, 2007*

When it comes to the issue of pleasure, we prefer both/and. We don't like either/or. The more ways we can find pleasure, the more types of pleasure we can find, the better. After all, that's a lot of what pleasure is about: the variety. We don't like the idea of having to be stuck with one particular type of pleasure, or of having to abandon some of the things we already like for the sake of something else we also like. We want to have it all. As the Buddha once said, even if it rained gold coins we wouldn't have enough to satisfy people's desire for sensual pleasures. We always want more and more. That's why we tend to be pretty stupid about the issue of pleasure.

Psychologists have shown that even when people know the drawbacks of a certain activity they like, they still go back to it again and again and again. Even when they know they have better things to do—more lasting, more solid forms of pleasure they can work toward—there are still some fleeting pleasures they can't let go of. So it's not the case that when you find a better pleasure, your attachments to your old, lesser pleasures simply fall away like leaves off a tree. The tendency in the mind is to keep trying to gather more and more: adding new pleasures to the stock of old pleasures we want to keep in store.

You can see this even among some of the least advanced of the noble ones: the stream-enterers. The Buddha had to counsel them to be heedful. That was his last instruction. Of all the monks gathered at the Buddha's passing away, the least advanced were stream-enterers. And yet the Buddha had to counsel them to be heedful. There are other places in the Canon where he explicitly states that even a stream-enterer can be heedless. After all, when you've reached that level you know for sure that there's a deathless, that you're destined for nibbana. You'll have at most only seven more lifetimes and they're all going to be human lifetimes at the very least. And a sense of security can develop around that thought. Because of that sense of security, it's possible for a stream-enterer to become complacent—to say nothing of people who've simply experienced jhana, or right concentration. Just the fact that you've encountered the really refined pleasures of right concentration doesn't mean that you automatically let go of your attachments to other forms of pleasure. The principle of both/and applies here as well. People want to enjoy their concentration along with all the other pleasures they've managed to gather up in the course of their lives.

This is why we also need discernment to remind us that there are a lot of important areas where things are either/or. In particular, discernment is needed to see the drawbacks of many of the old pleasures we've been wallowing in. This is a lesson we resist. One, we don't like to be told that we've been engaging in harmful or unskillful behavior. And two, the mind has an incredible tendency to put up walls to screen out the negative sides of our pleasures. Because we like our pleasures so much, we resist acknowledging their drawbacks.

I was talking recently to a monk who had been to the police morgue in Bangkok, where they allow monks to come and observe autopsies. He saw the doctors working in the morgue very efficiently, going through bodies, opening them up, opening them up, with all the guts and stuff spilling out. And he wondered: How do they still manage to go home and sleep with their wives and enjoy their old sensual pleasures? Then he walked into their office and saw girlie calendars all over the walls. That's when he understood. They were determined to maintain the perception of the beauty of the body in spite of what they were seeing every day. The side of the human mind that wants to maintain its old attachments: It doesn't give them up easily. It does everything it can to hold on. You give things up only when you really see that there's a direct connection between suffering and the pleasures you've been enjoying—and that there's a better alternative. Only then will the mind begin to let go.

This is the duty of discernment: to see the drawbacks of these things. This is why right concentration on its own, or jhana on its own, is not enough to cut through your other attachments. Simply because you can sit here and be very blissful, very equanimous, doesn't mean that you're going to see the connections between unskillful pleasures and their negative consequences. That insight requires an act of determination. You really have to be heedful to remind yourself that these issues are either/or. You have to work at developing the strength and determination of discernment that can see this clearly.

Ajaan Chah, in one of his talks, refers to the knowledge of the three characteristics not as a truth, not as a form of discernment, but as a strength. That's what it is: a strength. It gives you a solid place where you can stand outside your attachments and really look at them. For the most part, we just jump into our attachments, jump into our pleasures, and totally lose perspective. When they slosh around, we get sloshed around as well. But being able to step back from these things gives us a solid place to stand. And that solid place to stand is a strength in the mind. It helps us to resist the temptation to go jumping back in.

So this is a theme you have to contemplate over and over again: the theme of either/or, together with the theme of the connections between the pleasures you enjoy and the drawbacks they carry in their wake. This is why the path has right

view right at the very beginning, and why the Buddha said that of all the various strengths in the mind, the strength of discernment is what holds the others together. The image he gives is of building a house. You're putting up the beams to form the roof, but only when the ridgepole is in place are the other beams secure. Up to that point they can still sway back and forth. They're still not quite solid. But when you finally get that ridgepole up across the top, everything fits together properly and stays solid.

The ridgepole is discernment. Until discernment is strong, everything else—your conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration—can sway back and forth. You may like your concentration, but you can also like whatever else life has to offer. You treat your life like a big flower garden or a vast buffet where you can choose all the things you want. That's your preferred attitude. You come to your senses only when you clearly see that things are either/or. The more you let your mind go wandering around in sensual desires, the harder it is to get back, the harder it is to turn the concentration into something transcendent. Even when you've hit the transcendent for the first time, you're still not totally safe. There can still be the complacent thought that this is good enough. You've reached the point of being a noble one for sure, guaranteed against falling into the lower realms, guaranteed that nibbana will be attained within seven lifetimes. So it's possible to be complacent even on that level. Your work on discernment still isn't complete.

So while we practice, we need to develop this added strength, the strength of discernment. It helps us see connections between our pleasures and their consequences—and it also helps us to see where there's a disconnect: where you have to choose one form of pleasure over another.

There's a passage in the Dhammapada: "When you see a greater form of happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser form of happiness, the wise person abandons the lesser form for the sake of the greater." Note that not everybody does that. It's only the wise person who does. Someone who once translated this verse said that this couldn't possibly be the meaning of the verse because it's so obvious. Everyone knows enough to abandon the lesser pleasure in favor of the greater. But that's not really the case. Very few people do this. Very few people see that it's an either/or. They want the both/and/and/and/and/and. This is because we're so stupid around pleasure. Sometimes we intentionally make ourselves stupid. We don't want to see the connection between our pleasures and their drawbacks. We don't want to see the way one pleasure fights with another, is inconsistent with another. Even when it's right before our eyes, we refuse to see.

So while it's important that we develop concentration, we also need to develop the discernment that makes it *right* concentration, that keeps it on track,

that helps you to appreciate it for what it is. The pleasure of concentration is one of those rare pleasures that has no drawbacks. It may be shaky in the beginning, and that's probably one of the reasons why when we start out we don't want to place all our hopes on it, because we know how difficult it is to attain. But later on, when it becomes easier and more consistent, we can get complacent about that, too, thinking that we can tap into it whenever we want. So you have to develop the discernment, the strength in the mind that can help overcome both forms of complacency, both reasons for wanting everything to be both/and. As long as you're still on the path, the either/or has to be kept in mind. Only the wisdom of either/or can get you beyond.