

Don't Be Afraid of Jhana

February 20, 2013

As you sit here trying to find a comfortable way to breathe, don't be afraid of enjoying the pleasure that comes when you've found something that feels really good. After all, one of the factors of right concentration in the first jhana, the second jhana, and the third jhana is pleasure. The first two jhanas have a sense of rapture. In all cases, you want that sense of pleasure and rapture to spread and permeate the whole body.

There are passages where the Buddha talks about allowing yourself to settle into the sense of pleasure, to indulge in it, because the pleasure of concentration is something different from ordinary sensory pleasures. Sensory pleasures are things you feel coming in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue—things that make contact with the body. That's called sensual pleasure. Then there's the pleasure of form, the pleasure you can feel simply by inhabiting your body in a way that feels comfortable. And that's on a higher level.

We know that the path is supposed to avoid two extremes: on the one side, indulgence in self-affliction, and on the other side, indulgence in sensuality. Well, notice that *this* kind of pleasure—the pleasure of inhabiting the body with good breath energy and *you're* inhabiting the body—is a different kind of pleasure. And so it doesn't fall under either extreme.

The Buddha chose his words carefully. You know the story of how he came to this conclusion. He'd had a vision of wood. In one case, the piece of wood was lying in the water. Another piece of wood was lying outside the water, but was still wet. And a third piece of wood was lying outside the water, but it was dry. The water stood for sensual pleasure, and he read the vision in the wrong way. He figured that any pleasure at all was represented by the water. So he had to avoid all pleasures if he wanted his mind to be able take fire

with enlightenment, just as only dry wood far from the water could be used to give rise to a fire. As a result, he endured six long years of self-torture.

When he finally realized that was going nowhere, he stopped to ask himself, "Is there possibly another way?" Then he recalled as a child having sat under a tree and spontaneously entering the first jhana. Sometimes you hear that he gained a sense of oneness with the universe and realized that the path he was looking for was the path of just returning to that childlike oneness. Well, that's not the case; that's not what he realized. It's amazing how these stories get distorted. He simply entered the first jhana with pleasure and rapture permeating the body. And in remembering that experience years later, he asked himself, "Could this be the way?"

And in him arose an awareness that, yes, this could be the way. So he pursued it and found that it actually *was* the way. But before pursuing it, he asked himself, "Why am I afraid of this pleasure?" After all, it is blameless. It doesn't require that you take anything away from anyone else. And the type of attachment that goes with this pleasure is a very different type of attachment. When you're immersed in sensual pleasures, it's very hard to gain discernment. But when you're staying with this kind of pleasure, discernment arises more easily.

In fact, this is where discernment arises, in this power of concentration that allows the mind to settle down, be still, and have a sense of well-being. If the mind lacks a sense of well-being, then whatever insights it gains are going to be distorted through aversion. But when the mind has a sense of pleasure, it's like a person who's eaten well, rested well, and is in a good mood. You can talk to that person about their failings, and they're much less likely to take offense. They'll actually be willing to listen.

It's the same with the mind. A lot of the lessons we're going to learn from discernment are about where the mind's been stupid, telling itself things it really deep down knows are not true and acting on intentions that it knows are unskillful. So to make the mind willing to admit its mistakes,

you've got to get it in a good mood. This is one of the things that concentration does. Both the steadiness and the sense of well-being are really important for the arising of discernment so that you can see what's actually going on in the mind.

At the same time, as you're working on concentration, you're dealing with the processes of fabrication. You're getting hands-on practice with how you can use the rhythm and texture of breathing to have an influence on how you sense the body; how to use the power of verbal fabrication—in other words, directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating the breath—to give rise to feelings of pleasure; and how to use perceptions of the breath to create a sense of well-being in the mind. You're working *directly* with fabrications, and it's precisely fabrication that you're trying to get discernment into. So all these are good reasons why strong concentration, right concentration, is an important part of the path.

In fact, there's one part where the Buddha actually calls all the other elements of the path supports and requisites *for* right concentration – right concentration being the heart of the path. There's another place where he compares concentration to food. In a fortress, you've got the soldiers of right effort. You've got the weapons of your learning and knowledge. You've got a gate-keeper at the gate, i.e., mindfulness, who knows how to recognize who should be allowed into the fortress and who shouldn't—who knows, in other words, what skillful qualities should be encouraged in the mind and which unskillful qualities should be abandoned. Well, the soldiers and the gate-keeper need food, and that's what concentration is for. It's in this way that concentration helps provide protection.

It's kind of perverse that you hear concentration being referred to as dangerous. So many places, you hear, "Don't get involved in concentration. Stay away from jhana because you get stuck on it and you never get unstuck." Well, that's not the case. You *will* get stuck on it, but there's healthy attachment and unhealthy attachment. With healthy attachment, it's not the case that you can't let go. There are

some people who are unhealthy to begin with, who latch onto anything and develop an unhealthy attachment to concentration. But you can induce a healthy attachment to concentration if you approach it with just a little bit of discernment, knowing that this is not the end of the path, but it's an important element to get you to the end. Without it, you can't get there; you can't get to any of the noble attainments.

There are far greater dangers in being attached to sensual pleasures, and that's what usually happens if you don't have this pleasure from concentration to draw on. As the Buddha said, you're not going to be able to pry yourself away from your attachment to sensual pleasures unless you have the pleasure of jhana or something higher. And what do people do when they're attached to sensual pleasures? All kinds of unskillful things. This is why people break the five precepts. Nobody breaks the five precepts over attachment to jhana. There's an even greater danger that comes when people are told that, after avoiding jhana, they've attained some level of awakening, and they haven't gotten anywhere near. That's a danger that goes unmentioned.

As the Buddha said, it's not automatic that when you attain concentration, the mind is going to be ready to let go of its ignorance or its self-identification. So it *is* one danger. In other words, you get satisfied here, and you don't want to go any further. But that's such a mild danger compared with people who are blatantly doing unskillful things over sensual desire, or people who've been told that they've tasted the deathless and it wasn't much of a big deal, so they end up dismissing it. That's a lot more dangerous because that cuts off all the possibility of actually attaining the deathless, whereas attachment to concentration is something that can be dealt with. When you begin to realize that it's not as totally free from stress as you may have originally thought, you begin to see that there's something a little bit wrong with it. It has its ups and downs, even in the highest levels of concentration you can manage. And if you're really looking for a reliable happiness, you want something better than this.

So don't be afraid of the pleasure of concentration. Allow yourself to develop a healthy attachment to it. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you have to be really crazy about concentration to do it well: finding ways to stay with the breath regardless of what your activities are, wherever you are. That kind of commitment is actually necessary. And don't be afraid of enjoying it—the indulgence. As the Buddha said, it's an important part of really getting into the concentration. Simply realize that it's part of the path; it's not the goal. And it is a higher level of pleasure than sensual pleasures. It's the pleasure of form, and this is the kind of pleasure that the brahmas experience. So don't be afraid of concentration, because you need it. It's a necessary part of the path.