

Pleasure Has a Price

January 1, 2014

When you focus on the breath, think of the whole body breathing. Every cell is engaged in the flow of energy, so that the breath feels spacious, loosens up any patterns of tension in the different parts of the body—so that it feels good to be here inside your body. If you have any diseases or chronic pains, work around them. Instead of focusing on the pains, focus on the areas of the body that can be made comfortable, spacious, and open. This connects with an important principle of right concentration: that there be pleasure and rapture.

The word for rapture—*piti*—can also be translated as refreshment or fullness, a sense of really satisfied well-being. It's an essential element on the path because without this pleasure, without this sense of fullness, you won't have the energy to deal with the parts of the path that are difficult. If you don't have the energy that comes from a sense of well-being, it'll be hard to master them. But if you feel well nourished and at ease—the mind is in a good mood, the body feels strong from good breathing—it's a lot easier to master some of the more difficult skills of the path and to pry your mind away from a lot of its other attachments.

Many of us come to the meditation thinking that we're just going to add one more type of pleasure to our stock, to our repertoire of pleasures—on the principle that pleasure needs variety, and the more variety, the better. Here's another type of pleasure, so part of the mind says, "Let's just add this pleasure to the stock, so we have a little more variety here. It's not necessary to totally abandon physical pleasure or sensual pleasure in order to meditate." And while it's true that the Buddha doesn't say that all sensory pleasures are bad for the mind, still you have to realize that some pleasures work at cross-purposes, and every type of pleasure has its price. The price, of course, is not the money that you pay for the pleasure; it's what the pleasure does to the mind, along with what kind of karmic consequences it has.

So, with each pleasure, you have to ask yourself what you do in order to gain and maintain the pleasure, and what happens to your mind as a result. There are a lot of pleasures that actually weaken the mind. They weaken your powers of concentration, weaken your alertness, weaken the sense of heedfulness that lies at the base of all your skillful qualities.

Many pleasures require that things outside be a certain way, and you're not going to be happy unless they are just that way. Those pleasures, and the attitude they induce, actually weaken the mind. You find yourself creating a hothouse environment for yourself, and only within that hothouse environment can you be happy. Step outside of it and you can't stand it. Yet, we all know about hothouse plants: They're perfectly fine as long as the temperature is just right, the humidity is just right, but if you change anything, they die.

That's the way it is with a lot of our pleasures: They require that society be a certain way, that the economy be a certain way and have reached a certain level of development. When you stop and think about how much your sensual pleasures are dependent on a huge network—a very fragile network—that could break down at any time, you begin to realize that they're pretty scary. To really enjoy those pleasures, you have to forget about that. That's what leads to heedlessness, and you start blocking out huge areas of your awareness, which gets in the way of mindfulness: That's a price you have to pay as well.

So think about all the different analogies that the Buddha has for the drawbacks of our attachment to sensuality. Sensuality is something different from sensual pleasures. It's the way we like to think about sensual pleasures, to plan sensual pleasures—and that, the Buddha said, is the real problem. Dinner can take a half hour or so, but you can spend hours and hours planning for it and then hours thinking about it afterwards. A lot of our pleasures are like that —there's just a little bit of touch at the senses, then it's gone, but the stories we build up around these things before and after can consume the mind for a long, long time. And if that's what your pleasure is, the pleasure of ruminating over sensual pleasures, then you're taking pleasure in areas that leave you exposed to all kinds of dangers.

Think about common animals: Most of what we know about dogs and cats comes from raising individual dogs and cats in our homes, but being at the monastery in Thailand taught me an awful lot about dogs and cats when they're in packs. The most dangerous time in any dog or cat's life is when it's indulging in pleasure: whether food or sex or sleep or even defecating. If it lets down its guard and gets distracted by the pleasure, it tends to get attacked by other animals. So, it has to be especially wary during those times.

And it's the same with us: When we're indulging in pleasure, we're usually pretty oblivious, and that leaves us exposed. The Buddha compares sensuality to a piece of meat that one raptor's gotten hold of, and other raptors attack it in order to snatch the meat away. Or it's like borrowed goods. You can borrow somebody's nice goods and travel around showing them off, and people may admire you for having those goods, but then the owners find out about it and they take the goods back—and you have no grounds for holding onto them, for they weren't yours to begin with.

So much of our pleasure depends on things that other people can take away from us very easily. What you want is a pleasure that no one else knows about; a pleasure that doesn't require that things be a certain way. This is what we work on in the concentration—to develop that kind of pleasure within. Even though the pleasure of concentration may not be the ultimate goal, it is part of the path. Even though it's temporary, it's a lot more solid and reliable than the pleasures of sensuality. Sometimes you hear warnings about the dangers of getting attached to the pleasure of jhana, the pleasure of concentration, but those are nothing compared to the dangers of being attached to sensuality. People can kill over sensuality. They lie, they steal, and they cheat. I don't know anybody who's done that over jhana.

This is a totally harmless form of pleasure we're working on here. To get really good at it, to even approach it, you have to loosen up your attachment to a lot of sensual thinking. That's because a crucial element in getting the mind to settle down like this is to be with the body and yet not think about the body in sensual terms. Think of it simply as the shape you're inhabiting right now. It's got those elements of coolness and warmth, energy and heaviness: How can you bring those into balance? Not if you're thinking about the body in sensual terms. But you can when you're fully inhabiting the body from within. The more consistently you can occupy the body like this, then the stronger the concentration.

When the Buddha talks about the different levels of noble attainments, the noble attainment that signals full mastery of concentration—non-return—is also the noble attainment where you've totally abandoned any attachment to sensuality, any passion for sensuality.

So with these two types of pleasure—the pleasure of sensuality and the pleasure of jhana—even though it is possible to enjoy them alternatively, to some extent, there comes a point where you have to choose which one is more worth investing in. Because your time and energy are limited, the question becomes either/or: Which pleasure do you want to place your hopes in? Which pleasure do you want to rely on? Which pleasure do you trust? Which pleasure is not going to have a huge bill, a big karmic tally, at the end? It's got to be the pleasure of concentration. That's the one you can rely on, that's the one that really does nourish all kinds of good things in the mind—actually strengthens the mind. And, unlike sensual pleasures, it puts you in a more solid and safer position.

To begin with, nobody has to know about it. One of my favorite lines from Ajaan Lee is in a passage where he talks about the attainments coming from the practice. He says they're entirely private. Nobody has to know, and only when nobody else knows about your pleasures are you totally safe. If your pleasure comes from wealth or status, people will have to know—and when they know, they'll be able to take it away from you. But if it comes from within, nobody needs to know, so nobody can take it from you.

So, even though it is possible to practice meditation as simply one more pleasure in your range of pleasures, there comes a point when you have to calculate and tally up the bill. What's the price of the different pleasures? And how much does your attachment to sensual thinking eat into and weaken the pleasure that you get out of the concentration? You have to do the calculation yourself, but keep in mind that every pleasure has its price, and the bill doesn't all come due only in this lifetime. There are lifetimes to come.

One of the reasons we're afraid of death is because of our attachment to sensuality. Anything you can do to overcome that attachment will take a lot of the edge off the knowledge that someday you're going to have to pass on. If you're carrying the treasure of concentration with you, it's a lot easier, both now and on into the next lifetime. So, calculate these things for yourself, and remember that everything does have a price in karmic terms. Which price do you want to pay so that you end up with a sense that you got a good deal?