

The Karma of Pleasure

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A couple years back, when the psychology of happiness was beginning to become popular, I was asked to review a book on the topic to give a Buddhist perspective on the issue. I said one of the things the book was missing was an understanding of karma, that in your pursuit for happiness, you do things that have an impact on other people, and have an impact on yourself. And so you have to weigh the happiness that you get from those actions against their long-term results. And the editor of the magazine that I wrote this for said he was surprised that I had focused on that as the Buddhist issue, while I was surprised that he was surprised.

Because the principle of cause and effect is what the Buddha said lay at the heart of his awakening. When he summarized his awakening in one sentence, he'd state it as the principle of "when this is, that is; when this isn't, that isn't; from the arising of this comes the arising of that; from the cessation of this comes the cessation of that." Then he would expand on what that meant. But that for him was the essence of his awakening, in particular "the arising of this" or the "when this is."

One of the big issues, of course, is the arising of your intentions. When intentions arise, what happens? These intentions have both an immediate impact and a long-term impact. We have to take both into consideration as we look for happiness, because sometimes the things we do will give a short-term happiness, but then in the long term they cause trouble for ourselves and for other people.

I was amazed that the book on happiness didn't consider at all how people's conception of happiness would actually have an impact on other people. The book was trying to be scientific. It said, well, sometimes torturers and terrorists have their views on happiness, and who are we as objective observers to pass judgment on them? But of course you have to take into consideration the impact these activities have on other people, because other people aren't going to just sit still and let you enjoy a happiness that's going to cause them suffering. Even if they die from your efforts, they're going to come back. Their relatives and friends are going to come back at you. That's built into the way things are.

So as you look for pleasure and happiness in life, you've got to take into consideration what you're doing to get that happiness, and what the long-term impact of that doing is going to be. Pleasure, happiness, bliss, ease: the Pali word for all of those things is *sukha*. And as you look for *sukha*, what is it? It's a feeling. Feelings are fabricated. In other words, even in the experiencing of a feeling, there's already a certain amount of intention. We have potentials that come in from our past actions and then our present intentions shape those potentials into a feeling. That's what the mind spends a lot of its time creating all the time.

We're doing it right here as we meditate. We've got a body that's relatively healthy. We have a certain amount of experience with the breath. That's the past karma we're working with. And then we're trying to fashion that past karma into an experience of well-being in the present moment. In the beginning, you focus

on trying to create a sense of ease and well-being with the breath. To get established in that sense of ease, you have to indulge in it. That too is a type of action, a type of karma. You create the feeling and then you settle in it. But the trick is that if you simply wallow in the feeling of pleasure and let go of the breath, the pleasure's not going to last very long.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a person who works and gains a salary. Some people, as soon as they get their first paycheck, skip work and spend their money. To keep getting your paycheck, you have to keep on working. If you want to get a raise, you have to keep on working well. The same principle applies to the meditation. If you stick with the breath, even in the midst of the pleasure, the pleasure keeps on coming. If you get more skilled in how you stay with the breath, the pleasure increases. Even when you don't wallow in it, it's still there, doing its work for your wellbeing. And you're allowed to enjoy the pleasure because this is a blameless pleasure.

The Buddha, like so many rich people, led a life of total indulgence when he was still a prince. When he left the home life, he went off to the other extreme. He was afraid of pleasure. He had seen the impact of pleasure on his mind, that it made him intoxicated, blurred his understanding. So he ran off in the other direction: total self-torture. He would go into a trance where he wouldn't allow himself to breathe; and even though it caused huge pains in the body, he just stuck with it. He would eat as little as possible, till he would faint each time he would urinate or defecate. And finally, after six years of that, he realized that this was as far as you can go in self-torment: fainting and growing weak. It didn't lead to awakening. The question was: Could there be another way? Because self-torment obviously wasn't getting results.

He recollected a time when he was a child and had naturally entered the first jhana. He asked himself, "Could this be the way?" And something inside him said, "Yes." "If so, why am I afraid of that pleasure?" Because prior to that he had lumped all pleasure together as bad. He asked himself, "Is there anything blameworthy about that pleasure?" "No. It doesn't harm anybody else. It doesn't intoxicate the mind, doesn't blur your awareness." He said, "Okay, this is a pleasure I can pursue." But he realized also that he would have to eat if he was going to have the strength to do that. That's how he got onto the middle path, realizing that there are some pleasures whose pursuit is blameless.

So that's why we're here: to develop this blameless sense of pleasure and then to use it further. You don't just stop with the pleasure. You try to use it as a basis for understanding the mind even further. Particularly, you want to understand the issue of suffering. You want to comprehend it. That's the duty the Buddha says we have with regard to suffering and stress: You want to comprehend it. You comprehend it by knowing it so thoroughly that you become dispassionate toward it. Ordinarily you might not think that we have passion for suffering, but we do. So many things that we enjoy in life involve suffering and stress. Yet we get quite passionate about them.

So you want to understand the process through which you're creating a lot of unnecessary stress, a lot of unnecessary suffering, both for yourself and for others. See the drawbacks of that kind of attachment, that kind of passion. And the only way you're going to see those drawbacks is to give yourself a more blameless form of pleasure, so you can look at, say, sensual pleasure, and not be

so hungry for it. If you're hungering for it, it's got to be good. That's the attitude we have.

But if you can appease that hunger for pleasure with the pleasure of a well-concentrated mind, then you can look at these other pleasures and willingly admit that they do have their drawbacks. They involve intoxication. You have to blot out large areas of your awareness if you're going to enjoy them. It's like listening to a concert of music. The concert hall is designed so that you lose your awareness of other people. It's dark. Everybody is supposed to be quiet. You don't want anything interfering with your experience of the music. And so you have to blot out large areas of your awareness: your awareness of the people around you, your awareness of any background noise. That's one of the drawbacks of that kind of pleasure. The mind becomes less attuned to a lot of things. It has to blot out huge areas of awareness so that it can wallow in what it wants to focus on.

That's a metaphor for a lot of our lives, and the pleasures that we have. We have to pretend that a lot of things aren't there so we can focus exclusively on the details we like. That's pleasure.

And then there's pain. How do you deal with, how are you going to comprehend pain? Because for most of us, our experience with pain is that we want to push it away. We feel threatened by it, invaded by it. And the only way you're going to actually comprehend it is to have this alternative foundation for the mind, a place where you take a stance and can feel at ease, settled, secure—secure enough that you can then look into the pain and not feel so threatened by it; have a certain amount of objectivity in the way you look at it, so you can really comprehend, "Oh, pain comes from this, and this is what I've been doing to create it." Only when the mind has this sense of an inner security from the concentration can it really perform our duty with regard to stress, which is to comprehend it to the point of dispassion.

So that's the skillful way to deal with pleasure, the skillful kind of karma around pleasure. Try to create a pleasure that's harmless, then use that experience of pleasure for a further purpose. That's not the way we usually relate to pleasure. We like to indulge in it. And we don't like to hear that there's karma associated with that. We want our pleasures to be free. The only pleasure that's really free, though, as the Buddha said, is nibbana. Even the practice of jhana requires that we have a body that's alive and needs to feed, so there's a certain amount of burdensomeness placed on other people, other beings. The only truly free pleasure is one that's not even a feeling. As the Buddha says, it's a pleasure that doesn't come under the five aggregates. It's known by a consciousness that doesn't come out of the five aggregates, and isn't known by means of the sense media. That's something really special.

But the only way to find that is, first, to develop this ability to create a sense of ease and well-being within the body through the breath, a sense of ease and well-being that come from secluding the mind from unskillful states, getting the mind concentrated, and really seeing the karma of pleasure. This is what you've got to do in order to create a sense of well-being that's relatively blameless. Then you can use that pleasure for the purpose of even higher pleasure, an even more blameless pleasure: free both in the sense that you don't have to spend any

money for it, you don't have to do anything for it, and in the sense that you're not harming anybody at all because it's totally outside of the patterns of cause and effect.

But to get there, you have to understand how pleasure—our usual experience of pleasure—is totally enmeshed in cause and effect. Then you have to weigh the things that you're doing to give rise to that pleasure, the things you do as a result of that pleasure, and then the impact they have on other people. All those things have to be weighed very carefully. But when you approach the issue with wisdom and understanding, you finally can get to the thing we all want: the pleasure that's totally free.

So as you go through life and find yourself consuming pleasures, realize that there's an intentional activity even in the production of the pleasure, in the experiencing of the pleasure, and in the enjoyment of the pleasure. Try to become as sensitive as possible to what that intention is, and what its effects are, so that your attitude toward pleasure can become more responsible, and more productive on the path that leads to a pleasure that's totally free.