Smoothing It

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John McPhee tells a story of one time when he was writing a piece on people living in Alaska. He had spent some time with a couple who were subsistence farmers living in the forest. They lived a really rough life. Everything they ate, everything they used, they had to make themselves. They had to put up with the cold of the Alaskan winter, the dark of the Alaskan winter. And after staying with them he was going to go out, take a hike through the forest to get to the river. And from the river he was going to go back to a little town, Eagle. And it turned out the couple decided that they had to go on a hike back to Eagle as well. So they accompanied him. They had to spend one night in the forest. So they pitched their tents. And John McPhee is embarrassed that he has a little inflatable pillow. And he confesses to the wife that he feels that he is not genuinely roughing it. And she said something really interesting. She said, “We’re not here to rough it. We’re here to smooth it.” This in spite of all the difficulties in their life. The things that they could make smooth, they did. It falls in line with the Buddha’s principle that when you’re practicing, you don’t weigh yourself down with unnecessary pain. But you do have to look carefully at your mind. If you find that you live at your ease, your defilements grow, you’ve got to take on some pain. But if you take on the pain and that makes your defilements grow, then you’ve got to learn how to live more easily. So the real cage of how difficult the practice is going to be for you is what gets results. If you find that sitting with pain focuses your mind, it’s perfectly fine. There are people who say that because the Buddha said that the middle way is the middle way between self-torture and self-indulgence, that you shouldn’t try to inflict any pain on yourself at all. But that’s ignoring huge parts of the canon where the Buddha says it’s really going to depend on the individuals, how much pain they have to endure. The important thing is you don’t see the pain as a virtue in and of itself. You sit with the pain because you want to understand it. And so it’s not so much understanding the pain, it’s understanding how the mind creates the pain, the potentials for pain. You sit here right now and you can find parts of the body that you can focus on in certain ways and make them very painful. You can focus on the same parts of the body and make them very pleasant. For the sake of concentration, for the sake of giving the mind a place to rest, you take the second option. And you pursue that until you run into times where the second option just doesn’t work. And Jhana Mahaprabhu talks about the time when he had developed a fairly reliable concentration practice, until one night the pain in his body got so bad that it knocked his concentration off its basis. And the only thing he could do was to use his discernment to figure out how it is that the mind takes a physical pain and brings it into the mind and makes it a mental pain. So he found himself cornered at the end of his rope, as he said. And that caused him to come back out. Come back out of the corner with his discernment. That was the lesson he learned that night. How much the mind creates pain or fashions pain. How much it’s involved in the fashioning of pain. And that’s what we’re here for, is to understand that kind of process. We don’t believe that by enduring pain you’re going to burn off your old karma. The Buddha was quite snide It’s hard to imagine the Buddha snide, but he was actually snide about the idea that you could burn off your old karma. He asked the Jains, who endured self-torture, and they claimed that they’d burned off karma. How do you measure the amount of karma you’ve burned off today? There’s no measuring stick. What’s important is that you gain some insights that lift the burden of pain off the mind. That’s a real measure. That’s something you can actually talk about and see for yourself. So we’re not here inflicting pain on ourselves simply for the sake of pain, or believing that pain in and of itself is going to purify us. But it does give the chance for discernment to come and purify us. So if you find that living by your ease, you’re getting complacent, you’ve got to figure out some way to deal more with pain. And the Buddha talks about pain here. He talks about physical pain. And he also talks about painful meditation topics like the contemplation of the body, or contemplation of the foul nature of food. But he never talks about inflicting bad moods on yourself. His teachings were always to urge, encourage, rouse you. To give you energy. Now sometimes a rousing talk could be a very stern talk, but it’s meant to give you energy. So when you find that you’re simply enduring things, you don’t say, “Well, I’m just going to grit my teeth and endure.” You’ve got to figure out some way to lift your spirits, because that’s how you endure things wisely. Otherwise you just wear yourself down. And the Buddha talks about six different things you can delight in as you practice that lift your spirits, no matter how bad the situation is. These things can give you encouragement, make you realize you’re doing something really valuable here. The first topic is delight in the Dhamma itself. We have a Dhamma that explains the big issues of life. It gives big answers. It doesn’t flinch. In the face of the question of what happens at death, what are the consequences of my actions going to be? To what extent can I actually shape my life? To what extent is my life imposed on me? The Buddha was quite critical of the belief that everything is determined from the past, or you have no free will. He said, “If I were the case, there would be no past and the end of suffering.” It’s because we do have this ability to shape the present moment with our actions. We can make changes, and those changes can lead all the way to the end of suffering. That’s a good Dhamma to believe in, a good Dhamma to take as your working hypothesis. It was found by somebody who was totally pure in his motives, and was totally pure in the way he taught. So I think about that. This is why the Buddha recommends not only recollection of the Dhamma, but also recollection of the Buddha and the Sangha as ways of giving delight to the mind, to lift your spirits, to urge, rouse, and encourage you. The second topic of delight is to delight in abandoning. The third is to delight in developing. Basically, to delight in the fact that you can abandon unskillful qualities, and you can develop skillful ones. As the Buddha said, if we couldn’t do that, there wouldn’t have been any point to us teaching. All too often we delight in coming up with desires and then seeing what we can do to fulfill those desires. And a lot of them have to do with greed, aversion, and delusion. Our problem is we delight in developing those things. We should learn how to delight in developing mindfulness. Catching yourself when the mind is about to go into something unskillful, and being able to say, “No.” And the developing and the abandoning go together there. And see that as a victory. Remember what the Buddha said about victory. Better than the victory over a thousand other people is victory over yourself. Which means you have to draw the line inside which parts of yourself are the ones that have to come out victorious, and which ones are the ones that are going to have to be defeated in this practice. Learn how not to identify with the second ones, and identify with the first ones. Because they’re on your side. That question the Buddha has you ask, “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The voice is inside you that says, “Think about the long-term. Care about the long-term.” Those are your true friends. Those are the ones that you want to have come out victorious. The fourth topic is to delight in seclusion. This can be both physical seclusion and mental seclusion. Physical, of course, is when you get away from people. Have some time by yourself. And even though you’re going to see a lot of things in your own mind that you don’t like, it’s better that you see them than that they stay hidden. So if you see greed coming up, delight in the fact, “Okay, I can see that.” It means you can do something about it. If you see unattractive habits that you have, it means you know you can do something about them. Then there’s mental seclusion, when you get the mind quiet, in a state of right concentration. And learn how to appreciate that, the quietness of the mind. Delighting in the fact that you get the mind to a state where you can begin to see really subtle things inside. So not just getting quiet for quiet’s sake. Getting quiet for the sake of understanding. That’s the proper use of seclusion. So don’t be lonely, and don’t focus on how lonely you feel or how much you like to talk to other people. Realize that you have a chance to start questioning the perceptions you’ve picked up from society. This is one of the things I appreciated about Ajahn Fu when I first met him. I’d been living in Thailand for two years, and pretty much learned a lot of basic Thai attitudes that permeated the entire society. And here was someone who had stepped outside the society and could look at it with a critical eye, meaning that he’d learned how to look at his conditioning and see which parts of his conditioning were in line with the customs of the noble ones and which ones were not. So when you get still and quiet like this, you can question those. You can question even more basic perceptions you have. Like you’re sitting here, you have the idea that there’s a boundary surrounding your body. Is there really? Where is the boundary? How do you sense it? It’s a line that you draw with your imagination. Focusing on the breath energy helps you to erase that idea that your body ends with the earth element. There’s breath around the body as well, and the borders of that breath body are very ill-defined. So you’re sitting here meditating, you can think in those terms. You can erase a lot of perceptions you have about the body and the mind and their relationship to each other. You learn a lot that way. And then when you have to deal with people, you put on the attitudes that you have to develop to deal with people. When you move around, you have to put on those perceptions of where your body ends. So you can use them. And you learn these are perceptions that you can pick up and put down. That’s what seclusion allows you to do. So learn how to delight in it, rather than feeling lonely. And the last two things you delight in are aspects of nibbana. One is that it’s unafflicted, and it causes no affliction to anybody. Nobody is harmed. You are not harmed. You don’t harm anybody else. You think of all the various pleasures in life that cause harm. The fact that we have to eat. All of our needs for the basic requisites of life. They place burdens on other people. In addition to the burdens that we have to assume ourselves. So learn how to delight in the idea that you’ll finally find something that is totally unafflictive. And finally, the other attitude of nibbana to delight in is that it’s free of objectification. You don’t have to create a sense of who you are. And you don’t have to deal with all the things that come in as a consequence of that. When you define yourself as a being, beings are defined by how they feed. You don’t need a world in which to feed. And your world overlaps with the worlds of other people who are also feeding. Which is why when the Buddha talks about objectification in this way, he always talks about how it leads to conflict. So what it comes down to is you find a state inside, and that’s what we’re here for, to find that state where there is no conflict at all. Learning how to delight in these six things, the dhamma, developing, developing, seclusion, non-afflicted, non-objectification, retrains our ideas of where happiness can be found. So it has to be a conscious decision that you’re going to learn how to delight in these things. The Buddha gives lots of examples of how to think, how to hold perceptions in mind, even how to breathe, so you can delight in the fact that you’re here on the path. So when there are things you have to endure, at the very least you’re not having to endure a mind that’s weighing itself down. The mind lifts itself up. And that’s how you can endure things, without getting ground down by what’s difficult. Focus on the strengths that you have. Focus on the fact that you’re on a good path, going to a good place. And delight in everything that that implies.

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