

The Taste vs. the Reality

August 1, 2007

In India they have an interesting theory about why people enjoy art. It's based on a distinction between an actual emotion and the taste of the emotion. They say that people enjoy art—this includes drama, music, literature, all the fine arts—because in looking at the depiction of a particular emotion they don't actually experience the emotion. They taste it. The taste is always pleasant even when the emotion being depicted is very unpleasant: fear, anguish, or sorrow. If it's well portrayed, the audience likes the depiction because they like the taste. They taste, for example, the taste of grief, which is not grief itself, but compassion. The taste of fear is not fear, but excitement. So we enjoy art not because we're actually experiencing the emotion being depicted, but because we like the taste.

This distinction is useful to keep in mind when you contemplate your thoughts, especially when you're sitting here meditating. Sometimes focusing on the breath starts to lose its appeal. You lose interest. Even when you get nice long periods of bliss and wellbeing, part of the mind gets bored. It wants some action; it wants to taste some emotions. So you start thinking about all kinds of other things. But you have to remember that no matter how attractive and tasty those alternatives—all the different worlds that you can create in your mind—may seem, actually living in them would be pretty miserable. So don't get beguiled by the taste.

We had an incident of this in my own family. A relative of mine was a novelist, and her novels were pretty melodramatic. She liked stories filled with scandalous surprises: murder, incest, intrigue, infidelity. They made for very interesting stories. But when in her own life she encountered some marital infidelity, it was the end of her. The sorrow caused her death. So it's one thing to imagine these things, but it's another thing to live them. Always keep that in mind.

Even the stories, the narratives we like to make about our own practice, about the progress we expect, about how we'll attain concentration, and from concentration we'll quickly move on to insight, and there it will be—liberation: We like those stories because of the taste. We like to read the stories of the ajaans, because the stories are contrived in ways to make them very compelling. They're designed to make you want to practice. What you miss in the stories, though, are

the long days where nothing happens at all, or the long fallow periods in the meditation: meditations that may have been perfectly pleasant but with no ups and downs, or meditations that were actually unpleasant because the mind was unwilling to settle down. Those are the parts not depicted in the books, but when you actually meditate, everyone's bound to experience those things.

So you've got to keep a perspective on your thoughts, on the stories you like to tell even about your own practice. We're here to train the mind, and part of training the mind involves doing things over and over and over again: pulling the mind away from distraction over and over again, keeping the mind with its object over and over again, taking a skill that you develop while you're meditating and learning to apply it in daily life over and over again. That may not be exciting or compelling, and the mind will have a tendency to rebel sometimes, but you have to ask yourself when you're rebelling, "Where are you going?" If you think of dream worlds or pleasant worlds where you could be right now, ask yourself, "What would it actually be like to be there?"

There's a great story in Ajaan Lee's autobiography where he tires of being a monk and starts thinking about disrobing. So one night he decides to think seriously about disrobing: what's actually going to happen, what it's really going to be like. He starts out with a story that sounds pretty good. He gets a job and then a raise in pay. He's doing pretty well—so well that he decides he wants the daughter of a nobleman for his wife. That, in reality, would have been pretty unlikely. Ajaan Lee was the son of a peasant in the northeast. It's very unlikely that he would have gotten anywhere near the daughter of a nobleman. But he was able to contrive a story whereby he actually meets one, and she gets attracted to him, and they end up getting married.

That's when reality sets in. The daughter of a nobleman is probably very delicately brought up, yet for the family to survive she would have to work. So she gets a job, and she has a child, but with the stresses of work and pregnancy she dies soon after childbirth. He's left with the kid, and her parents want nothing to do with him. So he hires a woman to be the wet nurse. At first, she's good with the kid, and after a while she works herself into his affections. They eventually get married. But then she has her own child and she starts playing favorites. That's when it gets really bad. He comes home from work at night and the mother has one version of the day's events, the first child has another version, and the second child has still another version of the story. They're all fighting. Ajaan Lee feels like he's being pulled in three different directions. He thinks to himself, "Boy, I wish I were back as a monk." Then he realizes, "Of course, I'm still a monk." That puts the issue of disrobing in a different light. In other words, he talked himself out of doing something foolish by allowing his dreams of disrobing to get real.

So this is one way of dealing with the allure of distracting thoughts. Ask yourself, “If I really lived in that situation, what would it be like? What would the constraints of that situation be?” When you think of the different worlds you could be going to, the worlds of lay life, the worlds of being a monk in the forest in Thailand: While you’re thinking of those worlds, they seem like open opportunities. But you have to realize that each of those worlds has its constraints, its constrictions. And the taste of the thought is very different from the actual emotion of being there.

So if a particular thought is really beguiling, ask yourself what it would really be like to go to that particular state of being. You’d probably find yourself wishing you had some quiet time to be by yourself. But here you already have quiet time to be by yourself, so make the most of it. If thoughts of boredom come up, question those thoughts. This desire for playing around: There’s a sutta in which the Buddha says that this is why beings fall from the bliss of the higher realms. They start getting wanton and reckless. They see some of the lower realms. They say to themselves, “What does that taste like?” It’s through their carelessness and wantonness—wanting to play around a little bit, wanting to sample new tastes, wanting a change of scenery—that they fall and then just keep on falling. The universe evolves not because of a divine plan, but because of recklessness and irresponsibility.

So these irresponsible thoughts: Watch out for them. Remind yourself that when suffering comes, it’s real. After all, it’s a noble truth, and it really is painful, it really does hurt. And as for the anguish of the mind that’s stuck in a particular situation, you’re outside of those situations right now, so don’t let yourself slip back in. This is why the Buddha says we should reflect day after day after day on the reflections we chanted just now. We’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. These things are real, and the suffering they entail is real. In the original sutta, the Buddha advises reflecting not only on that, but also on the fact that all living beings are subject to these things. No matter where we go—in the deva realms, the brahma realms, whatever—we’re all subject to death. That should give you a strong sense of *samvega* and a desire to be heedful. *Samvega* means a sense of dismay, a sense of urgency in trying to get out of being trapped in a situation. And heedful means watching over your actions very carefully, realizing that your actions do have ramifications.

They’ve been making a big deal recently about the fact that psychologists are now studying happiness. Well, Buddhism has been studying happiness for 2,600 years. And it focuses on the most important thing that most psychologists tend to ignore, which is that the way you look for happiness is going to have strong ramifications. The actions you do, the things you do and say and think in order to attain happiness: If you’re not careful, they can lead to some very unhappy

results. They can turn around and devour you. No intention is free from ramifications. In other words, anything you do with a dishonest intention is likely to lead to an experience of suffering. Even though it may yield happiness in the short term, there are long-term ramifications. You can't get away from that fact.

The way most people live nowadays is based on the premise that it doesn't matter what happens down along the road. "That's in the future. I want happiness right now. I want it fast." So people like to be told that the only thing that matters is the present moment, where that's all there is: just the present moment. But your intentions in the present moment act as a cause for things further down the line, on into the future. You want to make sure that those things coming in the future will be good to experience. This sometimes means doing things you don't like to do right now, but you realize that they'll lead to a long-term happiness. Or you may have to stop yourself from doing things you'd like to do right now because they would lead to long-term pain—not just a tangy taste of pain, but the anguish of the actual thing. Your skill in talking yourself into doing what would lead to long-term happiness and into avoiding things that would lead to long-term pain: That's one of the most important skills you can develop, not only in meditation, but in life as a whole.

So remember the difference between the taste and the actual emotion. The taste of the emotion is always pleasant, which is why we enjoy art, why we enjoy works of the imagination, why we enjoy our dreams and fantasies. But the emotion itself often entails pain. So you do your best not to be heedless. Don't fall for the taste.