

Locate Your Craving

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As we ordinarily go through life, when we come across sensory pleasures, we learn that they don't last, and so we try to milk as much as we can out of them when they do come. But when you come to meditation, you have to adopt another attitude entirely. You're focused on your breath, not because you want the breath, you'd like the pleasure. You have to be frank with yourself about that, but at the same time, if you focus on the pleasure once it comes, you lose your foundation. You've lost them both, the breath and the pleasure.

So you have to remind yourself the pleasure will be there, and as you keep doing the work of staying with the breath consistently, the pleasure will stay and do its work. As the mind begins to settle down even more with the breath, you can start thinking of the breath spreading through the body, and that'll take the pleasure along with it.

Think of the breath going down the spine, down the legs out to the toes, starting again at the back of the neck going down to the shoulders, the arms to the tips of the fingers, going through the torso, going through your head, eyes, ears, nose. As you have a sense that the breath energy can flow in these places, the pleasure will go along with it. That'll be soothing to the body, but again, you stay with the breath. Just let pleasure do its work on its own.

This teaches you several important lessons. One is that you've got to focus on the causes, and the results will come—as when you're focusing solely on the breath, you're thinking about the breath and you're evaluating it. It's called directed thought and evaluation. As you try to stay there, all the way through the in-breath all the way through the out, those three activities—singleness of preoccupation, directed thought, and evaluation—are the causes. As for the sense of pleasure and even rapture that can come, those are the results. You don't have to do those. You do the thinking, you do the evaluating, and then you make sure that you stay with this one object, which is the breath. That's all you have to do. The pleasure comes and it'll follow the breath.

Part of the evaluation is this activity of thinking of the breath going to the different parts of the body and of adjusting the breath as you need to, because as the mind settles down, the way you breathe is going to change or the breathing that feels best for the body will change, so you want to be on top of that. You have to be alert, you have to be mindful to do what needs to be done, and let the pleasure take care of itself.

Secondly, you're learning some important lessons about craving, and learning lessons about how you're going to understand your mind. You'll notice this when the mind wanders off: An image will appear and you'll go into it. In fact, it happens so quickly, usually, that we don't even notice it. All of a sudden you find yourself someplace else. Well, there's a series of steps that go into that. They start with a craving to go do something that you particularly like, and then that little world will appear around it, and your sense of yourself going into that world will happen. As long as you're going along with it, you don't notice it, you don't really understand it.

As the Buddha said, if you want to really understand anything in the mind, you have to be able to step back from it, you have to see it as something separate. And so working with the breath, even though you want the pleasure, is a good way of seeing the pleasure as separate. The pleasure is where your craving is aimed but you're not going to go there. You have to stick with the breath and you want to perfect this skill because it's going to come in really handy as you meditate further, as you try to get more and more insight into what your mind is doing.

Try to get so that when the mind moves, you don't have to move with it. It veers off in a new direction, but you don't veer along with it. You stay right where you are. You'll see that if you don't follow it, that impulse will go for a little ways. In the Forest Tradition, they called that the current of the mind. It'll go for a little ways but then—because you're not following along with it, you're not pushing it along or riding it—it'll stop. It needs you to jump in for it to continue to go, but if you don't go with it, it stops, falls for a little ways, and then, it's gone. Then you begin to see the extent to which you are creating these things. In particular, you're going to learn some interesting lessons about craving.

As I said, we're here because we crave the pleasure but we can't go directly to

the object of the craving. This is a good lesson in seeing the craving itself as something separate, and it helps you get a clearer idea of where your craving is located.

There's an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha says: "Those things that you've never seen or sensed, is there any craving there?" And part of you might say, "Well yes, there are lots of things that I haven't seen that I would like to see." But that's not what the Buddha's asking. The craving isn't there in the seeing. The craving is there in your thought about the seeing. You want to detect exactly where the craving is so that you can understand it, because that's where your allure for going into a particular mind state is going to be found.

You know those five stages the Buddha advises for dealing with anything coming up in the mind that you know will lead you to the wrong direction. The first thing you want to do is to see its origination. In other words, when it arises, what sparks it? Say you have a desire to go someplace: What brought that desire on? Maybe a feeling in the body or a little image appearing in the mind. A random thought goes through the brain and sparks this new desire. You want to see that, because all too often the things that cause us to do some very unskillful things are pretty minor to begin with, so minor that we hardly even notice them.

With a lot of addicts, there's just a strange feeling in the body and their immediate reaction is, "I've got to, I need" a hit of whatever the addiction is. Just a little feeling of dis-ease in the body and they want to run to whatever their addiction is. And they can cause themselves a lot of trouble, without realizing that it was just a little word here, a little feeling there, that sparked it. So you want to learn how to see that.

Then you also want to see it disappear. In other words, desires come and they don't last all that long. Our problem is that we dig them up again, and keep them going. We push them again, and again, and again. We revive them because we want to get something out of them. But it's important to see that they're not as solid and monolithic as they sometimes seem to be.

Seeing this gives you a handle on these things, because all too often a desire comes up and part of the mind says, "If I don't give into it, it's just going to get stronger and stronger and stronger until I just can't stand it." What's actually

happening is that it comes back, and each time it comes back, you breathe a certain way around it, and that way of breathing becomes habitual, gets associated with the desire, and it feels uncomfortable. And that's actually what you've got to get out of your system: that uncomfortable breathing. Well, you can do that with the breath, the lessons you learn in calming the breath, adjusting the breath. You don't need to give in to the desire.

So you want to see these things coming and going, coming and going, and then you might want to look for the allure. Why is it that you go for them? Why do you want to go into them? The allure is going to be where your craving is located. It's an interesting idea: the location of craving. In the Buddha's analysis, craving is based on feeling, but where is that feeling based? It can be based in an object, or it can be based in the way you talk to yourself about the object, or the perceptions you hold in mind—what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication and mental fabrication.

Think about advertisements. Often they're not selling the object. They're selling a particular feeling around the object, or an appealing perception around the object. You probably saw that commercial for the BMW Chill a few years back. A guy comes up to the top of an auto-park and he sees his BMW parked among a lot of other jalopies, and a little chill goes through him. He's got the BMW. He's the owner of the BMW. Well, they're not selling the BMW. They're selling that perception, that feeling, the Chill, hoping that you'll associate it with the BMW—and spend all that money to buy a BMW for the sake of the Chill. So you want to be very clear about exactly where the craving is, because that's where the allure's going to be found.

This is especially clear in relationships. All too often, one person is attracted to another person but doesn't actually like the other person. He or she is attracted to an idea about that person or a perception around the person, a feeling around the person. Which is often why relationships don't go very well. You didn't want the other person, you wanted a perception. So to avoid a lot of the problems in life, learn to see where your craving is located, so that you can see through the allure of your unskillful mind states.

This is something that we tend to hide from ourselves because all too often a

lot of the allure is based on things that we really don't want to admit to ourselves, that we're attracted to certain things that we find embarrassing. So we hide them, not only from others, but also from ourselves. You need to see the allure precisely where it is so that you can compare it to the drawbacks, and again, be very honest with yourself about what the drawbacks are. These, too, we can hide from ourselves. If there's something we really like, we can justify almost anything. If it's harming somebody else, we say, "Well, that person doesn't matter," or "It's not really harming them," or "Their suffering has nothing to do with my actions," and we get into huge denial.

This is why the pleasure of concentration is so important. It gives you an alternative pleasure so that you can look at these other pleasures and be frank about exactly where you like them, and at the same time be very frank about what their drawbacks are. Because it's when you see that the drawbacks really outweigh the allure, that's when you can get to dispassion, the escape from that particular unskillful habit.

So this process of getting the mind to settle down with the breath as you're creating a sense of pleasure teaches you a lot of lessons about the different activities going on in the mind, the different functions, and exactly where your craving is located—and how you don't have to follow along with it. You can see it go, but you don't follow it. That's how you can help get yourself free from these things. You begin to parse out the different activities of the mind, the directed thought, the evaluation—what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication—along with the perception that holds you with the breath. How do you perceive the breath going through the body? Notice that the way you change that perception will change the way you feel the breath in the body, but the perception and the breath are two different things.

The directed thought and evaluation use the perception but they're different things, too. As you parse these things out, you're in a better position to see where your secret cravings are, where the hidden allure is for the things you do that part of you doesn't like to do, but the other part seems to really want to do it. This helps you locate where that other part is.

This is why the Buddha said that when you do jhana, when you do right

concentration, you're developing not only tranquility but also insight. The insight and the tranquility help get you into concentration, and the concentration helps sharpen both of these qualities of the mind, too. This is why we stay with the breath—not because we want to get the breath but because it teaches us so many lessons about the mind, and those are the lessons we really want, that are really worth wanting.