

Don't Just Fatten Your Mind

October 9, 2018

We practice concentration as our food on the path. We try to settle the mind with one object, like the breath, and bring the mind to the object in a way that it feels at ease and has a sense of fullness, refreshment. So you work with the breath to see what kind of breathing would feel good, and then you learn to live with that sense of well-being. This is why we practice: to be able to keep coming back to it again and again, to keep ourselves nourished so that we're not so hungry for other pleasures. When you're not so hungry, you can look at pleasures not so much in terms of whether you like them or not. You'll look to see what effect they have on the mind—what they lead you to do.

Ordinarily, we go for the pleasures of the senses: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that we like. We keep going for them again and again because, as the Buddha said, most of us don't see any other alternative to pain. So even though they may have their drawbacks, we're willing to put up with them. But if you have this alternative pleasure—the pleasure that comes from settling the mind in—you can begin to look at those drawbacks, and you can begin to see which pleasures are having a bad effect on the mind and which ones are having a good effect. Because not all sensual pleasures are bad. As the Buddha said, he doesn't deny that some pleasures can be in accord with the Dhamma. But it's an issue for each one of us to figure out which are okay for us and which ones are not.

There are some general principles. The pleasure that comes from going out into nature is relatively harmless, as are the pleasure of solitude and the pleasure of being in the company of virtuous people when there's a sense of harmony in the group. But then there are other pleasures that are more of an individual matter.

Think about alcohol as an analogy. Alcohol is never good, but some people taste it and they don't feel any attraction to it at all, whereas other people can't get enough. So you have to ask yourself which pleasures do you thirst for that you can't get enough of? And what do they do to the mind? You've got to look at the

effect in your actions. We can't just be consumers, consumers, consumers all the time.

True happiness comes from having skills—being able to maneuver through the difficulties of life without suffering from them—and you don't learn those skills simply by indulging in pleasures. In fact, the more you indulge in most pleasures, the weaker you become. When you get hooked on certain pleasures, you get really irritated when you can't have them. Those are the pleasures that are really bad for you.

Think about that experiment where they found the little pleasure center in the brains of little mice. They put an electrode right into it, and then a little plate on the mouse's head. The mouse could touch the plate against another plate and would get a little tiny charge, just enough to stimulate the little pleasure center. And they found that when they put mice in cages where they could do this., they would just sit there with the little plate against the bar, and they'd die. The pleasure was enough for them that they didn't care about eating or anything at all. They just wanted the pleasure.

This is what happens to our goodness if we just keep going for pleasures without any concern for what they're doing for the mind: It dies. So we have to remind ourselves that we're not just consumers of pleasures, here to get as much as we can. We're agents. We're acting in the world, acting inside the mind as well, and so the question is: What kind of actions are our pleasures and pains inducing in us? We have to learn how to respond well to both—how to respond to pain in a way that's good for the mind, and how to respond to pleasure in a way that's good for the mind.

Think about the qualities the Buddha himself developed on his path. One was, as he called it, lack of contentment with skillful qualities. In other words, he kept wanting to perfect his skills even more. If there was still the slightest bit of disturbance or disease in his mind, he wouldn't rest content. He'd just keep working. And what did he develop? What qualities did he employ as he kept working at the path? He listed three: heedfulness, ardency, and resolution.

Heedfulness is the proper attitude to have when you realize that your actions do make a difference, and they're going to determine whether you suffer or not, so

you've got to be very careful about what you do. This, of course, goes back to those issues of pleasure and pain. Which pleasures are okay? Which pleasures are heedful pleasures? In other words, you indulge in them, you enjoy them and they're actually good for the mind. Concentration is a good pleasure in that way.

Then there's ardency. You put your heart into trying to develop more and more skill.

Resolution is when you're strong in the face of difficulties.

The pleasure of concentration is one way of developing these qualities, but on its own it's not enough. After all, some people get into nice concentration and they just stay there. They get content. They say, "This is good enough for me." Now, that's their choice, of course. The Buddha's not up there giving orders to anybody, but he is saying that if you stay there with that pleasure, there are going to be dangers.

So you have to contemplate the dangers of even a nice state of concentration. You could simply sit here and get lazy, but then you carry that habit of laziness back into the world. This is why concentration has to be developed together with an inquisitive, curious mind—one that wants to know: What's better than this? What's more solid, what's more reliable than this? The voice of heedfulness is asking those questions. And then when you see that there is a certain laziness in your concentration, that's when you bring in the ardency.

It's good to rest here and get rested, but you've got to use your strength for something of more value. It's like just eating, eating, eating, but not using the strength that comes from eating. You've got to ask yourself: What more is there? What's better? As you keep at this in the face of difficulties, that's resolution.

So you have to ask yourself as you go through life: The pleasures that you're enjoying—are they helping make you more heedful, ardent, and resolute, or are they getting in the way? Are they making you apathetic, listless, and weak?

As living beings we're not just sitting here in the present moment. The present moment is going in a certain direction. So you have to look at the qualities you're developing in the present moment and ask yourself, "What direction are my actions in this present moment taking me?" The present moment is not a place where you sit. It's a place where you work. It's your path.

The Buddha saw that we're all on different paths. It's not the case that we suddenly decide we would like to have a path in life only when we come to the practice. We're already on a path of one kind or another, leading someplace. All too often, though, we have no idea where that path is leading, but the Buddha can describe the different paths and where they go. You can ask yourself, "Given the way I'm living my life, which path am I on? Am I on the path to a good destination or to a bad one?" If it's a bad one, you can turn around and go in a better direction. If you're on a good one, you have to stick with it—and bring along that inquisitive mind.

There was an ajaan who came to visit us here, and some people took him to a few of the national parks. And they said, every path he got onto he would say, "Let's see how far the path goes. What's around the next bend? What's around the next bend? Where does it end?" That's the kind of mind you need to have as you're meditating: What's around the next bend? You don't want to just rest satisfied where you are, because that's the path that slides down.

There's a hill in Lassen National Park that's covered with very fine little bits of lava. If you climb up the hill, as long as you're climbing, you can go up the hill. But if you stop to rest, you begin to realize that you're sliding down. So sometimes just to stay in place you have to keep walking. If you don't, you end up sliding all the way back down to the bottom of the hill.

That's the way it is with the practice. If you stand still too long, you start sliding down. Now, this doesn't mean you shouldn't be enjoying the concentration. You should. And you should have a sense of when it's right to simply rest in the concentration. But then you want to make sure to put it to good use, that you're not just feeding, feeding, feeding, and getting a fat mind. You're trying to feed the mind so that it's strong enough to do the work that needs to be done. Wherever there's still ignorance, there's going to be suffering, however subtle it may be.

So look at your pleasures, look at your pains, and ask yourself, "In indulging in these things, where am I going? Where are they taking me? Are they really my friends? Am I really a friend to myself?"

Some pains are actually your friends. Ajaan Suwat was talking once about how

when he had malaria he learned an awful lot about the mind. As he said, if malaria was a person whom he could thank, he would need to thank malaria for the lessons he learned.

So look at both your pleasures and your pains, and your relationship to them. Then focus on the pleasures and pains that are skillful, i.e., that lead you to act in skillful way. That's how you stay on the path and keep yourself from sliding back.