

## *The Pleasure Principle Made Noble*

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After the Buddha-to-be had practiced austerities and realized he'd come to a dead end, he cast around in his mind for other possible ways of finding an end to suffering. He remembered the time when he was young when he'd spontaneously entered the first jhāna, and he asked himself, *Could that be the way to awakening?* And something inside said, *Yes*.

But the big issue for him was that there was pleasure in that experience. It's interesting that the descriptions of the jhāna don't say that it's "endowed with pleasure," as you see in some translations. They just identify the jhāna as pleasure or equanimity, as the case may be. At any rate, he asked himself why he was afraid of that pleasure, and he realized there was nothing to be afraid of—it was blameless: both in that it didn't harm anybody and in that it didn't harm his own mind. In other words, there are some pleasures where the mind gets intoxicated and it doesn't see things clearly because of the pleasure. But this was not a pleasure like that. This was a pleasure that actually allowed you to see your mind more clearly. So he took that as his path.

Later on, when he was talking about the different factors of the path, he talked of right concentration as being the heart and the other factors as being supports. So this is the central factor, what we're doing right now: trying to get the mind into right concentration. Of course that involves right mindfulness, right effort, and all the other right factors of the path. But the pleasure of the path is central. It's what nourishes the path, keeps it going.

One of the images in the Canon is of a fortress where you've got a gatekeeper at the gate, and soldiers who are fighting, protecting the fortress. They need food, and concentration is their food. So this is what we're working on right now: food for the right mindfulness of the gatekeeper, and food for the soldiers of right effort, to keep these things going. Because all the other factors of the path, if they don't have concentration, get dry very fast.

Ajaan Fuang once made the comment that the rapture in the first and second jhanas is like a lubricant for the mind. The mind needs that lubricant, just as an engine needs a lubricant: If it's lacking in the lubricant and just keeps running, running, running, it's going to dry up and seize up, and that'll be the end of the engine. So we practice concentration to keep the path going, to keep it nourished, and then we're able to do things with the mind that otherwise would be hard to do.

Sense restraint being one of them. Now, there are two aspects to sense restraint. One is that there are certain things you don't look at, certain things you don't listen to. Ajaan Suwat made the comment one time that the eight precepts are basically training in sense restraint. In

terms of the body, there's no sex at all. You also don't lie on comfortable beds or sit on big comfortable chairs. In terms of your eyes, you don't watch shows. In terms of your ears, you don't listen to music. In terms of your nose, you don't wear perfumes and other scents. In terms of your tongue, you don't eat after noon.

So each of the five senses gets treated with one of those extra precepts there. They're cases where you actually deprive yourself of something, the aim being that if you stop looking for pleasure in these things, the mind is going to have to look for pleasure some place else, and that's what directs it to realizing that it really has to work on the concentration if it's going to find some pleasure and be able to maintain this path. So in that way, sense restraint puts you in a corner. It says, "Okay, you've got to get the mind to settle down and have a sense of well-being if you're going to find any happiness here at all." So that's one aspect. It actually is a kind of deprivation—you're saying No to certain things.

But then there's another aspect of sense restraint, which is to protect your concentration as you go through the day. You have to ask yourself when you're looking at something: Who's doing the looking? Are you doing the looking, or is greed doing the looking? Or anger? In other words, what has sparked your interest in looking at something, or in listening, or any of the other ways of engaging the senses? You're looking at where the impulse is coming from. Is it the kind of impulse you want to encourage?

This is especially important now that the Internet has taken over, and people have smart phones that are smarter than they are: They can get them to look at things and go from one window to the next window, to the next, and waste huge amounts of time searching for a little bit of pleasure, getting little bits of instant gratification. So when you turn on your computer, you have to ask yourself, "Why am I turning it on? Who's turning it on?" The same with all the other devices, in addition to just ordinary every day engagement of the senses.

The other question you have to ask is, "When I look or listen in these ways, what effect does it have on the mind?"

So you're looking at your sensory engagement as a causal process: Where's it coming from? Where's it going?

And if you find that looking in certain ways is bad for your concentration or eats away at any sense of well-being inside, you've got to look or listen in a different way. In some cases, this means not looking or listening at all to certain things. In other cases, it means looking at things from a different angle. As Ajaan Lee says, "You have to be a person with two eyes." If you see something that gives rise to desire, look at the other side that's not so desirable.

Freud has a weird way of looking at things. He says our basic desire is for sex. If that desire gets frustrated, we go looking for other things. Actually, the basic desire is the desire for pleasure, and the Buddha takes advantage of that in his path: You've got the pleasure of jhana, and from that vantage point, you look at the pleasures that come from the senses and sensual

enjoyment and sexual activity and you realize that they're not really all that pleasant. They have their bad side as well.

The mind wants pleasure more than it wants anything else. This is why even our drive for survival is dependent on finding pleasure in life. When people find no more pleasure in life at all, they want to die. That shows where our real drive is: It's for pleasure.

So you sublimate the drive. You actually become more discerning in how you're going to look for pleasure. So much of what we do in our lives is driven by the desire for pleasure, and yet we very rarely sit down and think it through: what really is pleasant for us, what really does give satisfaction.

You have to learn how to see the desire for pleasure as basic, but then you want to look for a pleasure that really is pleasure all the way through, that has no drawbacks either now or on into the future. That means you have to focus on the pleasures of the path.

So when you're looking at things and you find that their pleasant side is going to pull you away from the path, you've got to look for their bad side as well. Or if there are things that get you angry, you have to look for their good side, too. Or if you find there are people who make you angry and they have no good side at all, as the Buddha said, you have to have pity on them.

You have to think of the Buddha's image of the world after he gained awakening: Everybody is on fire. If you think about it, we go for a pleasure and it goes away as it's coming. And as soon as we focus on something, as the Buddha said, you try to base your happiness on something and it's already become otherwise than what it was. It slips away, slips away. Time just keeps going so fast, and there's no way you can call it back, no way you can stop it. It's like we're on fire.

So when you see somebody that you really don't like, remember: That person is on fire, as the Buddha said. They're suffering. So if it's hard to find a good side to their character or good side to their behavior, at the very least remind yourself that they're suffering, so you can manage a little bit of sympathy for them. In that way, you rise up above the common back and forth of liking people who do nice things to you and disliking people who do bad things to you.

Or in the Buddha's analysis: There's what he calls love that comes from love, love that comes from hate, hate that comes from love, and hate that comes from hate. You love somebody, and someone else does something nice to that person, you're going to love the second person. You love somebody, and somebody does something nasty to that person, you're going to hate the second person. There's somebody you hate, and somebody else does nasty things to them, you're going to love that person. There's somebody you hate, somebody does nice things to that person, you're going to hate the second person.

It's all really very arbitrary and very unreliable. When this point hits home, you develop an attitude of true compassion, where you can rise up above those back and forth exchanges that go up and down with hate and love. This way, sense restraint raises us up above our ordinary

concerns, our ordinary likes and dislikes, reminding us that true happiness is not going to be found out there in the five senses—it's going to be found inside, first through developing the sixth sense— i.e., the sense of the mind—and then finding something that goes beyond the senses altogether.

So the practice of sense restraint does require depriving yourself of some things, but it's for the purpose of channeling your desire for happiness in the right direction. Then it becomes a matter of *how* you look, *how* you listen, and so forth: which impulses of the mind to look and listen are ones that really should be followed and which ones should not.

And you provide the antidote: If you find that lust is doing the looking, you do contemplation of the body. If anger is doing the looking, you develop goodwill. It's by bringing yourself into balance like this that you can begin to rise above your ordinary grubbing around, looking for whatever pleasure comes your way and taking your desire for pleasure and making something higher out of it, something noble.

As the Buddha said, if you look for happiness in things that are going to pass away, subject to aging, illness, and death, then it's an ignoble search. But if you look for happiness in things that don't age, grow ill, or die, that search, even though it's motivated by the desire for pleasure, is noble. So the pleasure principle can be noble—if you develop it in the right direction.