

Lust

June 7, 2009

One of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing and to delight in letting go. The developing refers to developing skillful qualities of mind, developing the path. The letting go is the letting go of craving, ignorance, all the causes of suffering.

This is an important point to keep in mind, but we tend to forget it in different ways. One way of forgetting it is to delight in developing unskillful qualities. We like our greed. We like our lust. We like our anger. And so we nurture these things. We may not be consciously doing it as a practice, but it is a habit. It becomes a way of nurturing, of training the mind in that particular direction. But when we come to actually developing the factors of the path, somehow it seems awfully hard.

This is where we have to generate desire to abandon what's unskillful and develop what's skillful. Right effort is, in part, the ability to generate that desire. Try to think about the ways in which lust, aversion, and delusion are really not your friends. You might think of them as pets you keep around the house. But they're the kind of pets, like snakes and wildcats, that if you're not careful are going to turn around, bite you, and eat you up.

So it's important to think about the drawbacks of things like lust. It's something we like a lot, but look at where it leads you. Think of all the stupid things, all the harmful things you've done under the power of lust. Ask yourself: Do you really want that to take over your mind again? Is it really a friend? Is it really a nice, tame pet to have around the house? Or is it the kind that shits all over the place and attacks you when it's in a bad mood? Think of all the crazy things that other people do under the influence of lust. A large proportion of murders, they say, have happened between people who've had sex with each other. If having sex were such a good thing, why would they turn around and murder each other? Family court is the most vicious and violent of the different branches of the court system. All because of the power of lust.

Or just look at what lust does to the mind, right here, right now, when it starts flaring up. Think of how much you lie to yourself, how many areas of the mind get shut down as you focus on liking this, wanting that, and totally ignoring all the consequences. The narratives you build up in the mind are total fantasies. To be attractive, they rely on huge blind spots. Large parts of the mind simply get shut down. Your reality principle goes out the window. You might want to ask: "Why does the mind do this to itself?" It's something you really want to look into.

You can also think about the sensual pleasures you've had in the past: Where are they now? All you have left is the memory, and sometimes it includes the memory of the unskillful things you did around those pleasures.

But as the Buddha said, if you don't have the pleasure that comes from a well-concentrated mind, no matter how much you think about the drawbacks of sensuality, or the drawbacks of greed, aversion, and delusion, you can't let them go. You need another form of pleasure to replace the pleasure that comes with

sensuality. This is why we have to develop the factors of the path, primarily right mindfulness and right concentration.

So learn to look at the pleasures of mindfulness and concentration as your friends. They don't cause you to do anything unskillful. You sometimes hear about the dangers of concentration, but the dangers of concentration are nothing compared to the dangers of sensuality. People don't kill, steal, cheat, have illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants because of the jhana they've attained. On the contrary, when you have the pleasure of a well-concentrated mind, it's a lot easier to stop doing those unskillful things.

There are only a few passages in the Canon where the Buddha mentions the drawbacks of jhana, and they're pretty minor. You get so attached to that pleasure that you really don't want to start taking apart your sense of self, the way you create a sense of self around your desires. The Buddha says that this attachment is like grabbing hold of a sappy twig on a tree, and your hand sticks to the twig because of the sap. But that's an extremely minor drawback, and it's something that can be dealt with very easily. It's not nearly as dangerous as the drawbacks of sensuality, which the Buddha compares to a burning grass torch or a pit of glowing embers. Those drawbacks can pull you off the path entirely and throw you into hell right here and now.

So you want to work on developing a sense of pleasure in the form of the body as sensed from within, rather than in visualizing the attractive details of the human body's appearance. In other words, you take your sense the body as you inhabit it right here, right now. How do you relate to it? How can you find pleasure simply in sitting here and being aware of the fact that you're inhabiting this body?

This is where the breath comes in, because it's one of the few processes of the body that you can alter, that you can manipulate. It often takes a while to learn how to manipulate it skillfully, which is why we spend so much time practicing. Sometimes you find yourself manipulating the breath and it gets worse, which means you have to step back for a while and just learn to watch it, to learn more about it. Then, when you get a better sense of it, you can try playing with it again, sensing where the different blockages are in the body, and how, when you breathe in, you can get the breath energy to go all the way down.

Learn to think about a subtle breath energy that doesn't require that you push or pull on anything. As soon as you start breathing in, it immediately permeates and enlivens the whole nervous system. Try to get in touch with that level of breath energy and allow it to have a little more room, a little more ease in spreading through the body, so that breathing isn't a chore. It's nothing *you* have to do. The breath energy will do this on its own. You just have to allow it. Give it a little room, give it a little space. Open the mind to the possibility that this can happen and you'll find that it does. When the energy is flowing well in the body, it produces a greater sense of ease.

Another way of doing this is to think of relaxing the different muscles, starting with the muscles of the fingers and the hands, then going up the arms. You can visualize the bones and say, wherever there's any tension, "That's not a bone tension, it's muscle tension. The bones hold no tension at all." Allow the muscles around those particular bones to relax. Then visualize the bones up through the arms, up to the shoulders, then start again at the feet, go up the legs, through the pelvis, up the backbone, up the neck, the skull of the head. Wherever

you sense any tension or tightness, allow it to relax. And the energy in the body will flow a lot more smoothly and easily.

This way, as you develop the factors of right concentration, you make it easier to let go of your other attachments. You've got something better to hold on to. This is also why it's important to understand that the practice is not just one of letting go. There has to be the developing as well. Ajaan Fuang once noted this. He said, "Sometimes you hear that it's all about letting go. But no, you have to develop. If you don't develop skillful qualities in the mind, you can't really let go of the unskillful ones."

So it's not just a matter of watching, watching, watching, and letting the defilements just slough off. Some defilements might slough off simply through watching, but not all of them will. There are some—and these are the really important, tenacious ones—where you have to, as the Buddha says, exert a fabrication against them. In other words, you have to do something intentional in order to get past them. Like working with the breath: That's bodily fabrication. The way you breathe can help weaken a lot of the defilements, so at the very least they don't control your sense of the body. That way you can see exactly what they're doing exclusively in the mind. They're a lot easier to deal with when they're not in charge of your breath, not in charge of the way the blood is flowing in the body, not in charge of the different physical processes in the body. For instance, when anger arises, if you can breathe calmly during the anger, and the anger hasn't hijacked your body, then it's a lot easier to deal with the anger directly in the mind.

Another way of exerting a fabrication is exerting verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. This can either be directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating the breath, or thinking about the defilement simply as an event in the mind, and analyzing it, noticing what stress it creates in which parts of the body, and how it clouds the mind. In other words, instead of looking at the object of your lust or the object of the anger, just look at the fact of the lust, the fact of the anger as it's happening in the mind: to see what it's doing, to keep yourself from siding with it. You're stepping back from it a bit. You're evaluating: Do you really want to go along with it? Is this really your friend?

A third type of fabrication is mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. Again, this can relate to the breath. You create a sense of ease and wellbeing in the body; that feeling makes it a lot easier to let go of the need for immediate gratification through your defilement. You can say, "Look, I've got this pleasure here. Why not focus on the pleasure that's already here, rather than on the false pleasure you're dreaming about?" As you relax your hands and relax your feet, you open up a lot of other channels in the body. You gain a sense of wellbeing right here, right now, that doesn't depend on expressing anger or following your lust. At the same time, you change the perception around the defilement, to see that if you perceive lust or anger as your friend you're going to go running along with it every time it comes for a visit. Learn to look at it in a different way: "Here it comes, a cloud to obscure the mind." Or as Ajaan Lee says, "Here come some crooks and thieves and con-men. They want you see things in their way, and act under their sway, but then when the police come to catch you, they go running off. You're the one who's left, bearing all the responsibility for what you did."

So you want to use these three forms of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—when you find that simply watching a defilement is not enough, simply

being equanimous is not enough, to get past the defilement. Because after all, equanimity and mindfulness are fabrications too. They're very subtle fabrications, equanimity in particular. There's a belief—you hear it sometimes—that mindfulness and equanimity are unfabricated. But that's not the case. They're part of the path. They're something you do, something you work on developing. And at an advanced stage in the practice, you do let them go.

As Ajaan Mun said, there comes a point in the practice where all four noble truths become one. What he means is they all have the same duty. In the beginning you have to comprehend stress, let go of the cause, develop the path, so you can realize the cessation of stress. That's four duties. But then there's a point, though, when you have to let go of all four truths. As Ajaan Mun said, nibbana lies outside the four truths. Each of the four truths has a duty, but there's no duty for nibbana. There's nothing you do with nibbana. At that point you let everything go. But if you haven't reached that point, the four noble truths still have their duties. You still have to do these things. You still have to learn how to delight in letting go and delight in developing.

So there's work to be done, but it's good work. Without this work, you stay stuck in your old ways, suffering in the same old way over and over and over again. As the Buddha says, the amount of suffering remaining for someone who hasn't seen the Dhamma is like all the water in the oceans of the earth, whereas the amount of suffering remaining for someone who has seen the Dhamma, has touched the deathless, is like the water you can hold in your hand.

That's a good perception to hold in mind. Even though the practice is difficult, realize it's a lot less difficult than not practicing. And if you can train the mind to delight in developing the path, you're well on your way.