

A Pleasure Without Stories

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Everything we do is for the sake of pleasure, physical or mental. So when we're meditating, we're doing it for pleasure, too. And it's good to think about what kind of pleasure we're working toward and why this is a worthwhile activity—why the Buddha says the pursuit of this pleasure, or the use of this pleasure, is part of a noble path, whereas a lot of other pleasures in the world are anything but noble.

We work with the breath, trying to find a comfortable breath, and then we learn how to use that sense of comfort, that sense of ease, and spread it around the body. We're working with pleasure here that's both mental and physical. The breath feels good when you allow it to find a good rhythm and when you allow it to spread around. And there's a mental pleasure that comes as well. The mind has a good place to stay. It feels at ease. It can rest. It can put down a lot of its guard, a lot of its tendency to be ready to jump off at any moment—because that's what it's learned from the pleasures of the world: You stay with them a little bit, and then you've got to jump off. But here you can relax into the pleasure. It's more reliable. That's one of the reasons why it's better.

At the same time, there's a lot less karma involved with it. Most of the pleasures of the world involve getting something from somebody else, either through honest or dishonest means. We're feeding off of that person, or those people, or that situation outside. There's karma there, and there's a kind of weakness there as well. You need to have things a certain way outside and if they're not that way, the mind gets really upset.

Whereas if you have this source of well-being inside, you're a lot more resilient. You can put up with whatever the situation is out there. It's like having your own private source of wealth. The economy may be going pretty badly, but you've got your internal source. As the Buddha said, if you have this source of inner pleasure, it can help wean you off of your need for sensual pleasures. It can wean you away from your clinging to sensuality.

The word "sensuality" here doesn't mean just sensual pleasures. It's actually more the mind's habit to make plans, make stories, around sensual pleasures. You plan for what you're going to eat. You plan for this relationship. You plan for this place to live. You plan for this house, this car, whatever, the things outside, the pleasures outside. And there's a lot of story-making around that. We're stuck on the stories, and the stories are intoxicating because we lose sight of the fact of what is the actual gratification there in that sensual pleasure, that nice touch, that nice sight, that nice sound. We tend to dress these things up in our minds to look a lot more gratifying than they really are.

And so there's a lot of subterfuge going on. There's a lot of makeup put on things. But then, of course, those things are going to change. Then we either go running after other things, or

else start getting really disappointed. Some things are really hard to replace. Certain relationships are very hard to replace. And what that means is the stories in which we used to find delight now turn on us.

One of the good things about the pleasure of inhabiting the body—what the Buddha calls the pleasure of form, i.e., how you feel the body from within, what we now call proprioception, your sense of the body as you feel it from inside—is that it's a pleasure that doesn't have many stories at all. How many stories can you make about the breath? Maybe a few stories about particular times when you used the breath energy and saw immediate benefits, as when you had an injury or an illness, but the stories are a very different kind of story. They're a lot less sticky than the stories that go with sensual pleasures. They're a lot less intoxicating. At the same time, the pleasure of the breath is not so much the pleasure in the stories, it's in the actual immediate experience of the breath right here.

So you can use this as part of your experience to take those other stories apart, the ones that either already have turned on you or have the potential to turn on you. You want to be able to get yourself out of them. Learning how to find a sense of pleasure with the breath really helps in this regard because you begin to see more clearly what's the pleasure in that story telling – all the plans that you make for future pleasures, all the stories you tell yourself about past pleasures. Where is the satisfaction? Where is the gratification? If that kind of pleasure and gratification is the only thing you have in life, you're not going to be willing to look at it too carefully. You won't want to touch it. But if you can step out—and the breath is one of the ways of stepping out of those things, because it gives you an alternative source for pleasure—then you begin to see what the sensual pleasure was; what the gratification was. And you can also begin to see that it's not worth it.

So when we're meditating, we're very much looking for pleasure. It's part of the path. You look at the Buddha's descriptions of right concentration: There's pleasure in rapture. There's pleasure in mental equanimity, physical pleasure. All the way up through the third jhana, there's got to be pleasure of some kind because the mind needs that. As the Buddha said, you can't tear yourself away from your attachment to sensuality unless you've got this sort of pleasure. And it's *paccattam*, as the Buddha said: It's something that's totally inward. It's part of your experience that you can't share with anyone else. How you feel your breath, nobody else can know. How much you suffer over your stories, you can tell other people, but they don't actually feel it directly. And the relief you feel when you've been able to pull yourself out is something you know, but it's not a story you can really tell to anybody.

So we're looking for a pleasure with fewer and fewer stories—a pleasure, ultimately, with no stories at all.

Sometimes you find that the pleasure of concentration doesn't give you enough grounding to pull yourself away from your storytelling mind. This is when it's good to think about the night of the Buddha's awakening. His first knowledge consisted of lots of stories—

stories of past lives. And one of the big features of each life was his experience of pleasure and pain, what he got to eat and then how he died—story after story, life after life. That was it, over and over again.

He was able to pull himself out of that by looking at the large picture.

We had that chant just now, “I’m owner of my actions, heir to my actions,” and then we have the chant, “All living beings are the owners of their actions.” The purpose of the first chant is to give rise to a sense of confidence. You think about aging, illness, and death, and what have you got in the face of all that? You’ve got your actions. That’s your way out. But when you think about all living beings are the owners of the actions, that reflection is paired with equanimity, because it puts your stories in a larger context.

You begin to see that the stories of your suffering and the stories of your happiness are not all that unusual, not all that out of the ordinary. And it’s chastening. You start putting things into perspective, seeing things from the point of view of karma. A relationship ends. Okay, you had some karma that was enabling you to stay together for a certain amount of time and then it stops. Relationships don’t work out. Okay, the karma to stay together was not there. We’re talking both about past and present karma. Thinking this way helps to depersonalize the pain—and there are so many ways that, when you depersonalize pain, you’ve taken a lot of the barb out of it.

It’s the same with nasty words. People speak in ways that are insolent. They speak in ways that are disrespectful. They speak in ways that are irritating. You just have to tell yourself, “That’s the way human speech is. It’s not all that out of the ordinary.” The Buddha even has you say, “an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear” and let it stop there. We don’t usually think in those terms. We usually think in terms of “the story.” “Why is that person saying that? Why do they think this? Why do they...” and it goes on and on and on. But if it’s just “an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear,” it’s very impersonal and it gets the “you” and the “they” out of it.

That’s the problems with all the stories that have to do with sensual pleasure. There’s a lot of “you” and “them” in there. You did this and then that person did that. And then you did this in response and then they did this for you or to you. Whereas if you’re right here with the breath, the sense of “you” changes. You’re just the observer and the breather, that’s all. The “you” in this case doesn’t totally go away, but it has a lot less of the sticky stuff that gets entangled in stories, all the spider webs that tie everything together in stories around sensuality and the pleasures you get and the disappointments that come when you lose those pleasures; and the desire to have some more.

Ajaan Fuang once said, “Think about the sensual pleasures that you want most in this lifetime. It’s a sign that you’ve had them before and you miss them. So just thinking about that for a little bit should be enough to get you disenchanted with them.” Most of us don’t think this all the way through. We think, “Well, maybe if I change it a little bit this way, the next time it

may last longer.” Or what we feel right now is the hunger for the lack and think, “Well, if we get that lack made up, okay, then we’ll be happy.” But it doesn’t stay and it’s not as satisfactory as we tend to dress it up to be.

Remember, we’re drunk on the stories. We’re intoxicated by the stories. So we’ve got to figure out some way to sober up and pull ourselves out. We can do this either through taking the larger view in terms of karma or through taking the immediate view in terms of the alternative source of well-being inside that you can tap on, if you’re willing to do it. It’s right there.

It’s a matter of developing the skill. It takes a while to get the hang of it. But it’s a skill worth developing. It requires that you invest your activity, your intelligence, your ingenuity in getting the mind quiet with the breath. Just sitting here observing things coming and going, coming and going, arising and passing away: That’s going to do it. It’s not going to do it because you watch things arise and pass away, and then part of the mind says, “Okay, where’s tonight’s snack?” If you pretend that that voice isn’t there, then you’ve got lots of hidden parts of your mind. We have to be open about the fact that we’re here for a sense of gratifying pleasure, but we want to use more discernment in how we look for our pleasure, our happiness, our sense of well-being.

The Buddha, after all those years of self torment, after realizing that self torment was not the way—he had been running away from pleasure of all kinds—asked himself, “Is there another way?” And he thought of a time when he was young and his mind became concentrated, almost spontaneously. He had gotten into a deep absorption, with a sense of pleasure and rapture. So he asked himself, “Could that be the way?” And something inside him said, “Yes.” He hadn’t tested it yet, but that inclination, that idea, the germ of the idea, was planted. But then there was the question, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure?” He realized there was nothing blameworthy about the pleasure of concentration: In other words, it didn’t create any bad karma with anyone else and it didn’t create any intoxication in his mind.

So look at the stories that have you intoxicated: The pleasure you get there is not a blameless pleasure. Look for pleasure that has fewer stories until you reach the point where you find the pleasure you can’t really tell to anybody else. You can’t even describe it to yourself. You can’t share it with anyone else because it’s totally *paccattam*, as the Buddha said. Or as Ajaan Lee once said, it’s good that nobody else can know about it, because things that other people know about aren’t safe.

But this doesn’t mean that other people don’t benefit. You’re now coming from a position where you don’t have to feed off them anymore. That means that you can help them in ways that are appropriate to their needs. They may not appreciate your sense of what their needs are, but once you see what their needs are, you provide for that. And because you’re more free, you have a wider range of ways of helping people than you had before.

So even though you can't tell anybody about the well-being you've found as the fruit of the path, still it's not a selfish activity. The Buddha said it's noble, both in its impact on your mind and in its impact on others.