

An Ennobling Pleasure

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By all accounts, when Prince Siddhartha was still living in the palace, he was thoroughly addicted to sensual pleasure. When he saw the drawbacks of that pleasure, he did what most addicts do: He went in the opposite direction, self-torture, self-torment. But then he realized that that didn't lead anywhere either.

Fortunately for us, he wasn't like most addicts who stick with the back-and-forth between indulgence and self-torture. He reflected, "Maybe there's a pleasure that's blameless." So the problem was not with the pleasure *per se*, it was with the way he had been going about trying to find it: a way that would harm yourself or harm other people and also intoxicate the mind—in other words, blur your vision so that you really couldn't see things for what they were.

His discovery was that there is a pleasure that's blameless, a pleasure—to put it in other terms—that's responsible. A way of looking for pleasure that's responsible: That was the solution.

It's a problem for most of us: As we look for pleasures, we're not very responsible about it. We just take what we like. And unfortunately, we live in a culture that encourages that. Whatever pleasure you want, it's for sale. And it's gotten so that there are more and more strokes for different folks.

And we get used to being indulged in this way. Not only do we indulge in our pleasures, but other people indulge us in our pleasures. We never really grow up. We never stop to think about the consequences.

When you come to meditation, it's largely because you've noticed that there are consequences to the way you normally look for pleasure. That's the beginning of maturity. It's the beginning of being responsible.

So we come here freely admitting that we are looking for pleasure, we're looking for ease, well-being. And there's no harm in really indulging in pleasure. It's not the case that jhana is another one of those forbidden pleasures.

It's really ironic. There's a tendency in a lot of places that, with the first mention of the word *jhāna*, you're warned off it: "The Buddha taught this type of concentration, but it's really dangerous and it's better if you not go there." Yet that's not how he taught at all. You *need* this pleasure.

If you're going to wean yourself away from other more irresponsible pleasures, you've got to have the sense of well-being that comes from right concentration. And when the texts describe the mind as it's entering into right concentration, they say that you settle down and you *indulge* in your stillness. In other words,

you learn to enjoy it. You look for the potential of well-being, the happiness that comes simply by sitting here breathing. You learn how to sensitize yourself to that.

Ajaan Fuang once noted that although the commentaries will tell you that breath meditation is suitable for all people, it really requires a lot of refinement. You have to learn how to sensitize yourself to the pleasure that can be had simply by sitting here breathing. If you're not observant, you'll miss it. And the breath will just be in, out, in, out, and it'll offer nothing else to you.

So it is an acquired taste, but it's a naturally acquired taste. In other words, it doesn't require a lot of money; it doesn't require a lot of education. What it requires is a lot of your own plain powers of observation, noticing how the breath feels as you breathe in, how it feels as you breathe out. What are the varieties in the way that it feels? When you decide to change the way you breathe, do you make things worse? If so, how can you make things better? This requires that you be really observant.

This is how you develop this blameless source of happiness. Because no one is fighting you for this particular bit of happiness. Unlike a lot of the pleasures of the world where if you gain something somebody else has lost it, the fact that you're sitting here breathing and being happy by breathing, feeling a sense of ease, satisfaction, gratification, fullness—nobody else loses. In fact, other people will begin to benefit as well. They're less subject to your greed, anger, and delusion. As you find more and more of your needs for happiness satisfied here, you're going to impose yourself less and less on other people.

Now, the Buddha does mention the dangers in getting stuck on jhana. He says it's not the danger in doing the jhana, doing the right concentration, simply that when you get into concentration and then refuse to use it as a basis for further insight: That's the danger.

He says it's like grabbing hold of a stick and you get a little bit of resin on your hand: You get stuck to the stick. But it's not that you're going to be permanently stuck or that jhana is in and of itself dangerous or such a seductive pleasure that you'll never come out. It's just that there is a tendency: Once you've gotten here, it feels really good, and you may decide that you don't want to go any further.

But if we were to talk in terms of dangers, that's a really minor danger. Think of the dangers that come from being stuck on sensual pleasures. People kill over sensual pleasures. They lie. They cheat. All the horrible and cruel things that people do to one another in the world come primarily from being stuck on sensual pleasure, stuck on your sensual desires. So if you were to compare these two types of pleasure, the drawbacks of jhana or the dangers of jhana are really, really minor.

The truth of the matter is that the pleasure of jhana is actually conducive to insight. As you're getting more and more sensitive to the breath, you're developing the mind's powers to be more and more sensitive to its own movements, which is where the real issues are. How the mind creates a sense of becoming this or being that, taking on a sense of identity, assembling a sense of the world, what we mean by the word *becoming*: The practice of concentration really sensitizes you to how it's done.

Being aware in the present moment is a constructed phenomenon. A moment of awareness is not the deathless. There's a lot of confusion around this issue. It's especially compounded in Thai when sankharas are equated with thoughts, and some schools of practice will tell you that mindfulness, when there are no wandering thoughts, is free from sankharas.

That's not the case. Mindfulness itself is a type of sankhara, a type of fabrication. Your attention to the present moment is a type of fabrication. Your decision to watch the present moment: That's a fabrication as well. But as you get the mind into this fabrication, one, you're putting yourself in a better position to observe the grosser kinds of fabrication; and two, as your sensitivity improves, you can start taking this kind of fabrication apart as well.

So it's not a dangerous pleasure, the pleasure that comes from right concentration. It's actually a helpful one. It helps wean you off of sensual desires and sensual pleasures so that you're not craving them all the time. You've got an alternative type of pleasure to focus on.

As the Buddha once said, no matter how much you may understand and mentally assent to the fact that there are dangers in sensuality, if you don't have access to this alternative pleasure, you're not going to give up your sensual desires. You've *got* to have this alternative to fall back on, to give you the strength, to give you the nourishment you need in order to wean yourself off of those other pleasures.

At the same time, as you sensitize yourself to the potential for pleasure here just breathing in, breathing out, you're getting closer and closer to the mind. You're getting more and more sensitive; your powers of sensitivity are heightened so that they're equal to the task of seeing deeper inside.

This is how your pursuit of pleasure becomes a mature activity. You've learned how to be mature about how you find pleasure in life, you've learned how to be responsible about how you find pleasure in life, you've learned to be wise about how you try to find pleasure in life. And that's a lot of what it means to be mature, responsible, and wise.

Because that's basically what all our activities are aimed at: finding happiness,

finding well-being, pleasure, ease. We're simply learning how to do it in a way that really gives results: long-term results, harmless results, because harmless pleasure is the only kind of pleasure that could be long-term.

So always remain alert to the fact that there's a lot of pleasure to be found simply in the act of being still, watching the breath. And it's a pleasure that's perfectly fine to pursue. It's a noble pursuit. As the Buddha said, this is noble right concentration. The path of sensual pursuits, he said, is ignoble. The path of self-torment or self-torture is also ignoble. This kind of pleasure, though, is noble.

And it's also ennobling, because it can take you even further to a type of pleasure that has no drawbacks at all whatsoever. It doesn't depend on any conditions at all whatsoever. So it's taking you in the right direction, which is so different from the pleasures of the world. For that reason, it's something really to treasure. And the opportunity to pursue this pleasure is probably our most valuable opportunity in life.