

Feelings Not of the Flesh

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When the Buddha talks about focusing on feelings as a frame of reference, he talks about two main kinds: what he calls feelings of the flesh and feelings not of the flesh. The distinction doesn't have to do with the difference between physical and mental feelings. Feelings of the flesh can be physical or mental. Feelings not of the flesh can be physical or mental. The difference lies in where they come from, the issues they're related to.

Feelings of the flesh refer to the sense of pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain you feel when you meet either with things that you like, in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations—those would be pleasures—or with things you don't like in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations—those would be pains—or the times when you're on an even keel, neither pleased nor displeased by the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations you encounter in the course of the day. These kinds of feelings can arise pretty willy-nilly depending on your mood, depending on your attitude, depending on the situation around you. They're the feelings you tend to encounter most often.

As for feelings not of the flesh, these have to do with the practice. And it's right here when you begin to realize that when the Buddha's talking about feelings, he's not talking about just whatever happens to come and go—because feelings not of the flesh have to be produced. You have to give rise to them. If you don't give rise to them, they don't happen. If you don't maintain them, they don't stay.

Pain not of the flesh, for instance, has to do with your desire to get the mind to be trained in concentration and to gain awakening. As the Buddha says, when you realize that you can't get the mind to stay equanimous in the face of negative things, you should regard it as an instance of bad fortune. "This doesn't bode well for me," you should say to yourself. "I can't bring my mind in line with the Buddha's teachings." The feeling that goes along with that thought is painful. It's not a physical feeling necessarily, but there is a mental pain that goes along with it: "Why can't I get my mind to settle down?"

The Buddha actually encourages that kind of thinking. All too often we hear that you shouldn't exert yourself too hard in the meditation, or "Don't set up any goals for yourself." Those are the kinds of instructions that can be appropriate for a weekend retreat when people tend to put themselves in a pressure cooker, thinking about the fact that they could have gone down to the beach instead for the weekend, but here they are on a meditation retreat. So they want something to show for it: stream entry at least. Of course, when you're in that frame of mind, you place impossible demands on yourself and make yourself miserable. So in cases like that, you should be encouraged to drop any idea of goals and just be with the present.

But when you're thinking of the practice as a lifetime endeavor, you've got to have goals and you've got to have a sense of where you want to go. And one way of motivating yourself is to remind yourself that you do want to get to the goal. Even though it's painful to realize you're not there yet, there's no way you'll work toward the goal without fostering that kind of pain—and then acting on it.

Another way of inducing pains not of the flesh is to ask, "When will I reach the awakening that those other noble ones have reached?" That's an instance of pain that's actually inspiring.

But you don't stop there. You use it as a motivation to develop pleasure not of the flesh, which the Buddha ranks on two levels. The first level is the level of pleasure that comes with the strong states of concentration, when the mind gets settled in with the breath. There's a sense of ease that comes with that, both physical and mental—sometimes even a sense of rapture, fullness, a very cool sense of well-being. This is something you have to work to give rise to. It doesn't just come willy-nilly. Moments of that kind of pleasure may happen randomly now and then, but as long as they're still just random, they can't serve as the path. You want to lock into them the same way a plane locks into a radar beam when it's

going to land in an airport. You lock in with the breath and just stay, right on target. There's a sense of pleasure and solidity that comes with that, and the Buddha advises that you settle in and indulge in that sense of pleasure.

Another thing you hear all too often is that you shouldn't let yourself get attached to concentration practice or attached to the pleasure of concentration. But actually that pleasure is something you should get attached to, again as motivation to develop it further. Eventually you can wean yourself away from that attachment, but in the beginning you need that kind of attachment to pry yourself away from attachments that are less skillful. You have to get skilled at giving rise to it so that you have something better to hold onto than the old, run-of-the-mill sensual pleasures that rule your life otherwise.

Right here is where you can see how pleasures and pains not of the flesh are not things you simply watch as they come or go willy-nilly. You give rise to them when necessary, because you've got to maintain this kind of pain to motivate yourself to give rise to this kind of pleasure. As with all skillful states: If they're not there, you try to give rise to them. When they are there, you try to develop them.

Ultimately, you want to develop them to a level the Buddha calls pleasure more not-of-the-flesh than not of the flesh. That's the pleasure that comes when you reflect on the fact that you've attained awakening. In other words, you've reached the goal, or at the very least, you've had your first genuine taste of the goal.

Similarly with equanimity: Equanimity not of the flesh is the equanimity that comes with the fourth jhana and then develops up through the higher formless states. This, too, is something you've got to induce. You don't just sit there and wait for it to hit you upside the head. You get the mind to settle in with the breath, and this breath gets more and more refined as the energy in the body gets more and more connected, to the point where the in-and-out breathing stops—not because you've stifled it, but because it's no longer needed. Sometimes when things settle in, everything seems automatic and simply connects, and the breath stops on its own. But if it doesn't, there are things you can work with to get the breath headed in that direction.

Think of all the energy channels in the body connecting up with one another so that they nourish one another. If one part of the body has a little bit of excess energy, you allow it to feed other parts of the body that seem to be lacking in energy. When all these multiple connections inside get opened up to the pores of the skin so that the energy suffuses everywhere in the body, that's when you can let the in-and-out breath grow more and more calm because you don't really need it that much. You ultimately get to the point where you don't need it at all. This is where the mind gets solid and really still. That's equanimity not of the flesh. And again, it has to be induced.

As for the second level of equanimity—more not-of-the-flesh than not of the flesh—that refers to the equanimity you feel after you've attained awakening. You reflect on the fact that your mind is now free from defilement. And there's a sense of great peace.

It's only on that level—the level more not-of-the-flesh than not of the flesh—that pleasure and equanimity don't have to be induced. But on the way there, feelings of pleasure and equanimity not of the flesh have to be induced and maintained as best you can.

But this fits in with everything else the Buddha says on mindfulness. When he talks about mindfulness as a governing principle, this is what he means. If anything unskillful arises in the mind, the duty of mindfulness is to try to figure out how to get rid of it. When something skillful has developed, you try to remember to keep it going and nurture it so that it develops further. That's how mindfulness governs the other factors of the path.

In other words, it looks at what's there in the mind and it remembers, from what you've done or heard in the past, what to do with that particular state of mind. If the mind doesn't want to settle down, what have you learned about dealing with an obstreperous mind?—either from what you've heard, or what you've read, or what you've done on your own in your practice. When things are going well, how do you remember to keep them well-balanced? That's a much more delicate proposition, because if you think too much about

keeping things balanced, they begin to get wobbly. But you can survey the situation when things seem to be going well and you try to develop a sense of how you can maintain them, to keep them going. Remember that this is what you want to do when things are going well. You remember to keep them going.

And try to detect any ways that you can make the concentration more solid, the sense of well-being more subtle. It's not just a matter of simply being with whatever happens to arise or whatever happens to pass away. There are certain things, skillful states of mind, that you want to make arise, and you want to prevent them from passing away. As for unskillful states of mind, you want to remember to try to prevent them from arising. If they are there, you try to remember how to get them to pass away as quickly as you can.

That's mindfulness as a governing principle. And when the Buddha lists feelings not of the flesh under feelings as a frame of reference, that's just an illustration of this very point—because these things don't just come or just go, and you're not here just to watch them come or go. You're here to induce them and to keep them going, to maintain them so that they develop and grow, so that ultimately you can free yourself from pains not of the flesh, and experience nothing but the pleasure and equanimity not of the flesh.

So remember that that's where we're headed.