

Changing the Pleasure Equation

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Ajaan Fuang once received a letter from a meditator in Singapore saying that his practice was to go through life seeing how things were inconstant, stressful, and not-self. And Ajaan Fuang told me to write back saying, “The problem isn’t with things out there. Turn around and look at the mind that’s making these comments.”

In other words, the fact that things change is not a big deal. The problem is that the mind is looking for happiness in things that change, looking for its happiness in things that are stressful, for happiness in things that are not-self. It’s that search for happiness: That’s the thing we have to examine.

On the one hand, the search for true happiness is not to be criticized. It’s a good thing. After all, it’s because we’re looking for true happiness that we see how ordinary happiness is not enough and how we have to investigate our ordinary desires, the ones that pull us away from a true happiness in the direction of something that’s going to let us down. Those desires are where the problem is.

It’s not that these desires believe that things don’t change. We know that things change and we know that there’s stress in the world and there are a lot of things out there that are not ours or not us. Yet our equation is that some things are worth the effort. Even though they’re impermanent, the effort that goes into at least having a taste of them gets paid off by the pleasure. That’s what we think. As the Buddha once said, it’s because there’s pleasure in the five aggregates that we fall for them. It’s not necessarily the case that we think that they’re permanent or that they’re substantial or that they really belong to us, but there’s pleasure there, and that’s what we go for.

As in any case, there’s an equation that goes on in the mind, some calculation, “If I put in x amount of effort, is it worth the pleasure that comes out of it?” That calculation is what we have to look at. All too often, our equation is skewed. It’s like those billboards they used to have on the way into Las Vegas: casinos bragging of their 95% payback rate or 98% payback rate, basically telling you that if you give them a dollar, they’ll give you 98 cents back. Yet people don’t see that. All they can think about is maybe there’s that chance that they can beat the system, “Let someone else be the sucker who gets the 50 cents back, I want to get \$1.50 back on my dollar”—that kind of thinking.

This is why we bring the mind to concentration, so that we can have a more objective way of looking at the equation. When the mind can settle down with the breath, try to get engaged with this investigation of the present moment: What is this breath energy in the body? What can it be used for? It can be used for a lot of things. It can help with pain management. It can soothe you when you’re feeling disturbed or irritated. It can provide you with a comfortable

home when you're feeling alienated from the world around you. And it can provide the mind with a better place to feed.

That's the Buddha's primary image for the activity of the mind: When we take on the identity of a being, we have to feed. That's the first thing he teaches in the series of ten questions that novices were supposed to learn: What is One? And the answer is not, "All beings are One," or anything metaphysical. It's "All beings subsist on food." Everybody's got to eat. This is not just a matter of physical food, it includes mental food as well. We feed on our emotions; we feed on other people's emotions. We feed on status, power, recognition, whatever. It's because we're hungry that we don't see things clearly. Our vision is skewed by our hunger.

This is why the Buddha has us feed on a nice state of concentration. You get your sense of well-being from within, and it's a lot more under your control, something you can tap into at any time. When you get used to being nourished in this way, you look at the nourishment that you used to seek in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas, and you begin to see that in a lot of cases it's just not worth the effort. The pleasure you get may be there but it's not nearly the same as the pleasure you get from concentration. It's not nearly as satisfying. It involves a lot more unpleasantness, either in terms of the effort that's got to be put in or sometimes in terms of the things you've got to do in order to gain those pleasures—not quite upright, not quite honest—and you're better off without them.

In other words, bringing the mind into concentration changes the equations. You're in a better position to see what's worth the effort and what's not. In this way, when you see that something is inconstant—if it's something you used to feed on but now you see it's not worth it anymore—the realization of inconstancy goes right to the heart. You see the stress and that it's really not worth it.

And as for the teaching on not-self: Notice that the Buddha never has you conclude from inconstancy that there's no self. If something is inconstant, then it's stressful. If it's stressful, he doesn't have you conclude that there is no self. He has you conclude that it's not worth calling it yourself or trying to claim it as you or yours. That's all he's asking you to conclude from this analysis. In other words, is this something you want to latch onto? Is this something you want to take in? You begin to realize, "No, it's not worth it. I've got something better. I can change the equation."

This is why it's so important to develop powers of concentration. Even stream-enterers have to work on their concentration, because they still haven't seen deeply enough as to what's really worth the effort and what's not. The concentration, though, *is* worth the effort. All the elements of the path are worth the effort, because the happiness they lead you to is something that passes all those tests. Is it constant? Yes. Is it stressful? No. And at that point you don't even need a sense of self, because it's just *there*.

Our sense of self has its uses, you know. This is another one of the strange things you hear sometimes around what they call the three characteristics: If people only realized that the idea of a self doesn't make any sense or it's a flawed concept, we're told, then they would just let it go. Well, people don't hang onto things unless those things serve a purpose of some kind. And it turns out your sense of self has a very long list of uses.

As the Buddha said, you use your self as a governing principle to keep you on the path. You ask yourself: "What kind of happiness do you want? Do you want to go back to the old happiness you had before? The old pleasures you had before? Or do you want something more noble?" There's a sense of self implied there, the self whose happiness you care about. Or there's what they call the conceit: "Other people can do this, why can't I?" There's a sense of self there as well. It's responsible, it's competent, and it's confident. That kind of self you need as you're on the path. You don't let that go until you've on the verge of total awakening.

So you have to realize that a sense of self does have its purposes, it does have its uses. This is why when you tell people that things are inconstant, stressful and not-self, they don't go "Bingo!" and hit *nibbāna*. You look at your feeding habits: What are you feeding on right now? You want to develop a perspective on the ways you've been feeding to see that they're not worth it anymore. Now, if you're hungry, you're just going to keep on wanting to feed regardless. That's why we have the practice of concentration to feed the mind better food so that it's not hungry all the time.

Then you keep analyzing, looking at your actions. To what extent are you doing things that are stressful, that are unnecessary, and are not worth it? You look all around yourself and you sort out your old habits, relationships, pastimes, hobbies, whatever. You begin to see a lot of these things just aren't worth the effort put into them. And whether it's because they're inconstant or stressful or whatever: That's not the issue. The issue lies in seeing that they're nothing you want to feed on anymore. It's this quality of *nibbida*, losing your sense of taste for things of lesser value: That's the important thing. Whatever the perception is that induces it, that's what we're looking for. But it really hits home only if it's some area where you've been feeding.

You can look at the inconstancy of trees, and it just goes right past you. You can say, "Ah, yes. Human history is inconstant. All kinds of things are inconstant." Well, that's just the way things are and it's no great news. But if it's something you've been feeding on, and you can see that it's not worth it anymore: That's when these perceptions have done their job. They're looking not at the fact that things out there are inconstant, but at the fact that you've been devoting yourself to something that's not worth it. That's when you let go.

So you've got to keep these teachings in perspective. Remember that the mind is not passive. We're not here watching TV shows and deciding whether we like them or not. We're constantly feeding, we're constantly looking: Where's the next place to feed? What are we going to feed on next? How are we going to prepare it?

The purpose of the concentration is to take some of the edge off of those questions so that you can look from a larger perspective, step back a bit and look at your feeding habits and realize that there's better food for the mind.

As you keep on feeding it good food, it finally gets strong enough that it can stand on its own. It doesn't need to feed anymore. That's when the mind lets go of everything—and yet it's not poor. As Ajaan Lee once said, the Buddha doesn't have us let go like paupers. We let go like rich people. There's so much good in the mind, and it's so reliable, that it doesn't need to carry anything around.