

## *Pleasures & Pains on the Middle Way*

*December 20, 2016*

Start with some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths—long in, long out—to alert yourself to the breath.

Then the next question is: Does it feel good? If it feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change the rhythm of your breathing. You can think of all kinds of variations: shorter, even deeper or more shallow; heavier, lighter; faster, slower. Experiment with different ways of breathing to see what feels best right now.

Gaining a sense of pleasure in the breath is an important principle in gaining concentration. The mind doesn't like to settle down with things that are unpleasant. If the breath is uncomfortable, it's going to run away. So you've got to bring it back and focus on finding a comfortable breath.

Once the breath *is* comfortable, start thinking of how that comfortable energy can spread through the body. When we talk about the breath, it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it's the flow of energy in the body as a whole: the energy in the nerves, the energy in the blood vessels and all the muscles. When you breathe in, do the different parts of the body feel nourished? Is there a sense of easy flow? Or is there a sense of blockage? If there's a tension someplace, that's going to be blocking things.

So just go through the body and see where you can iron out the tension, comb it out. It's like a tangle in your hair. If you don't feel anything in particular, just ask yourself: Where are things most tense? Relax, relax, as you maintain an erect posture. Check your spine. Does it seem to be in good alignment? If not, relax the muscles that seem to be pulling it out of alignment.

You're working with two kinds of pleasure. One is the physical pleasure of being with the breath—which the Buddha doesn't count as a sensual pleasure. It's called the pleasure of form: the way you feel the body from within. That's different from the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. The Buddha places it on a higher level because it doesn't really have to depend on things outside. And, as he says, it's a blameless pleasure, in the sense that you don't have to harm anybody to gain it. At the same time, it doesn't intoxicate the mind; it doesn't befuddle or cloud the mind. It actually makes the mind a lot clearer. So that's the physical pleasure of the breath.

Then there's the mental pleasure of working with the breath energies in the body and seeing that you can make changes in how the body feels from within. It's a way of helping the body along. If the breath energy flows well it's going to be conducive to your health. It feels good knowing that you can do this.

So here's something you can explore, something you can be curious about, learn about here in the present moment. It's not just in, out, in, out. The breath has lots of ins and outs in all different parts of the body. It can have a different effect on different organs in the body, and you can gain a sense of that from within.

When you have this combination of physical pleasure and mental pleasure, the mind is happy to settle down. You don't have to force it. It's like giving a child an interesting game to play, something that captures the child's imagination. You don't have to place the child under lock and key to keep it at home. The child will stay home happily, playing with the game.

Gaining this pleasure is an important part of the path. We hear about the middle way between devotion to sensual pleasure and devotion to self-torture. And it's easy to think about it as being someplace in the middle between pleasure and pain—an equanimous, neutral feeling—but that's not the case. The Buddha talks about it as an alternative pleasure. As he says, if there's no alternative pleasure to sensual pleasure, then the mind's going to go there. No matter how much it may understand the drawbacks of sensual pleasure, when it wants to avoid pain it'll go straight to the sensual pleasure unless it has an alternative. And here you are providing it with that alternative. And this is the alternative that's on the path. This is the middle way.

This, too, is a devotion to pleasure, but it has different consequences. Remember, we're on a path. We're going someplace, which means we have to think about where our actions will lead us. Acts of indulging in pleasure or in pain will have their consequences. Here we're working toward the ultimate *sukha*: That's the Pali word for pleasure, happiness, well-being, bliss. It covers that whole range of basically feeling good, having a sense of well-being. It's a deathless pleasure, something that will not change. Once you've found it, it's there. Actually, it's there already, it's just that you haven't found it yet.

As for other pleasures and pains, we have to rank them as to whether they're helpful on that path or not. The pleasure of concentration is one of the ones that's helpful. As for other pleasures and pains, it's going to be an individual matter.

There are some pleasures that the Buddha said are categorically not part of the path. One is the pleasure of wanting to think about sensual pleasures all the time—that's what "sensuality" means: It doesn't mean the sensual pleasures, it's our fascination with them, and this fascination is not part of the path. Our ability to think about or fantasize about food, whatever: We can think about things for long periods of time—the pleasures we get from sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. That's where our real attachment is, in the fantasizing. The things themselves, the people, whatever, that we get the pleasure out of: We're not nearly as attached to them as we are with the mind's fascination with thinking about the pleasures, planning for them. That kind of pleasure, the Buddha said, is off the path.

Also any pleasures that could come from killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants: Those pleasures are off the path as well. But aside from that, if you find that there

are certain pleasures in life that, when you indulge in them, it doesn't have an effect on your meditation, doesn't have an effect on the path, those are okay.

The same goes with pain. Some pains are actually good to sit through so that you can learn lessons from them. And sometimes, to counteract unskillful mental states, you need to take what the Buddha calls painful meditation topics, like the contemplation of the foulness of the body or what happens to the body after death. These are things that are unpleasant to think about but they're useful. So that's a kind of pain to be encouraged.

Another pain the Buddha encourages is when you realize that there's work to be done in the mind. Awakening is possible, but you haven't gotten there yet. That's a painful thought because it means there's work you've got to do. The Buddha says to think about that, to encourage that thought. All too often you hear we shouldn't have any goals because if you have goals then you start feeling bad about yourself. That may work on a weekend meditation retreat when they're afraid that you're going to put too much pressure on yourself. But when you're thinking about training the mind as a lifetime process, you've got to have goals. And the tension of realizing, okay, there's a goal that you haven't yet attained: It's like the tension on the string of a bow—that tension is what allows the arrow to fly far.

So there are certain pains and certain pleasures that are actually useful on the path. They're judged as to the consequences they have when you indulge in them. As I said, in some cases there's a categorical yes and no for certain pleasures and pains. In other cases, though, it's going to be an individual matter.

It's when you learn how to see the effect that a pleasure or a pain is having on the mind: That's when you develop your own discernment. The Buddha has a lot of do's and don'ts, but then there are a lot of areas where he says you've got to explore on your own and look for yourself at what's happening in terms of cause and effect in your own life. Those are the areas where you start developing your own discernment.

So that's what the middle way means. It doesn't mean that you're in a neutral state all the time. It means that you're looking at your pleasures and pains to see how conducive they are on the path to the ultimate well-being.

It's like being an athlete in training. You want to win the game, and you know that certain foods will be bad for your body as you train, so you've got to avoid them no matter how much you may like them. There are certain pains that you have to take on in the course of training the body. Other pains, though, are going to harm the body. If you push the body too hard, it's going to get in the way. So you have to learn how to develop your own sense of *just right*—which pains are good, which pains are not; which pleasures are good, which pleasures are not—for the purpose of that goal.

It's the same here as you practice the Dhamma. Certain pleasures you've got to give up because they're going to get in the way. There may not be anything inherently bad in them, but you find that if you indulge in them, they induce unskillful states of mind. Other pleasures are

not harmful at all; other pleasures are actually helpful—like the pleasure of being here with the breath right now. Learn how to see it as a pleasure.

Years back, a woman brought a friend of hers to one of our afternoon meditations out under the trees. It was a lovely day: The sun was warm but not too warm, and there was a slight breeze. At the end of the hour, the friend opened her eyes and said she'd never suffered so much in her life. We can do this to ourselves. You can sit here and be miserable, feeling that you're undergoing sensory deprivation.

Or you can have the right attitude, seeing that here is your opportunity to learn something about the breath, to learn how to use this element or this property we have in the body to create a sense of genuine well-being right here. There are ways of breathing that are really blissful—rapturous even. This is something we can explore, that we can develop. And it's part of the pleasure that leads to a greater pleasure, the greater well-being of unbinding, the deathless.

So it's your choice as to what you're going to make of the potentials you have right here right now. Always keep in mind that what you do will have consequences. When you indulge in a pleasure or indulge in a pain, it'll have consequences. It's not just a floating event with no repercussions.

So have a clear sense of where you want to go, what's helping you along the way, and what's getting in the way. That's what it means to be on the middle way. It's a path that requires discernment. Extremes are easy—easy in the sense that they don't require much thought. But finding the point of *just right* requires discernment. And it's in developing your sensitivity to that point of *just right* in different circumstances that your discernment becomes sharp enough to see something that goes beyond.