

The Pleasure of the Middle Way

October 21, 2019

Focus on the breath. Experiment with the breath to see what kind of breathing is comfortable right now. Sometimes it's short breathing, sometimes it's long, deep, shallow, heavy, light. It's often good to begin with some long, deep in-and-out breaths just to emphasize the feeling of breathing in the body. And as long as long breathing feels good, you keep it up. If it starts feeling excessive, you can shorten it, make it more shallow. Adjust it until you find something that feels just right and then hold onto that until it doesn't feel just right anymore, and then you can change again.

We're trying to sensitize ourselves to an area of our awareness that all too often we ignore. We spend most of our time paying attention outside, and this area inside here gets squeezed out, left behind. Its potentials for giving us a sense of well-being don't get developed. So here's our chance to give it some time, give it some space. If you really pay attention here, if you're consistent in your awareness of the breath, smooth in your awareness of the breath, then the breath becomes smooth as well. It becomes more and more comfortable. And what starts out as just an ordinary feeling of being okay becomes more intensely pleasant.

You can let that feeling spread throughout the body. Think of it going down the breath channels: down the back, out the legs, in the arms, in the hands. All around the face and the head. In the torso. Let these areas have some space. Be very careful not to squeeze them. When the breath comes in, it's not so much that you're forcing air into a solid part of the body. You're allowing energy to flow into an energy field and out of an energy field. So it can flow naturally and easily.

That sense of ease gives rise to a sense of pleasure. This pleasure is not like ordinary sensory pleasures. Sensory pleasures are the pleasures that come in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body. The contact of touching things outside, that's the sensory pleasure that comes from the body. But the pleasure that comes from the breath is called a pleasure of form. It's on a higher level.

When the Buddha had been practicing austerities for six years and realized finally that that was not the way, he asked himself, "Is there another way to awakening? Could there be another way?" He cast around, and he remembered a time when he'd spontaneously entered deep concentration as a child. There was a sense of rapture, a sense of pleasure. And he asked himself, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure?" And he realized there was nothing to be afraid of. It was blameless: It didn't require that he take anything away from anyone else and it didn't intoxicate the mind in the way sensory pleasures can.

So he decided to explore further to see if that state of concentration could be the path. And the more he got to know the path, the more he realized that this was the solution to his problem.

When he gave his first sermon, he talked about how this path is a middle way between two extremes: indulgence in sensory pleasures on the one side, and self-torture on the other. Now, the fact that this is a middle path doesn't mean that it's a neutral feeling midway between pleasure and pain. It's a different kind of pleasure that gets you out of that continuum between sensory pleasure and pain.

As he noted, the reason we go for sensory pleasures is because of pain. We're trying to escape pain and we don't see any other escape. But there are lots of drawbacks to those pleasures. They can get us to do very foolish and unskillful things. They put us in a very precarious and unstable position because all too often they depend on other people who sometimes give them and sometimes don't. Also, if other people see that we have sensory pleasures and they get jealous, they'll want to take them away, even if it means harming us. When the mind begins to burn with sensual fever, it can do all kinds of unskillful things.

This doesn't mean that all sensory pleasures are bad. As the Buddha said, there are some sensory pleasures that are skillful across the board: the pleasures of going out into wild nature, the pleasures of having the body healthy, the pleasures of living in a harmonious community. These things are good. But there are some sensual pleasures that are bad across the board. Any sensual pleasure that requires that you break the precepts or aggravates greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind is a pleasure you've got to avoid.

Then there's a gray range in between. With certain pleasures, if some people enjoy them they don't have any bad effect on their minds, but if other people indulge them, they do develop bad effects in their minds. This is an area where you have to look at how your mind responds to a particular pleasure to decide whether it's something that you can continue enjoying or something that you've got to learn how to let go.

But most of us are caught in the back and forth between sensual pleasures and pain. Even when you see the drawbacks of sensual pleasures and you know that certain pleasures are unskillful, when there's enough pain it can force you to go running to anything as long as you don't see any other alternative.

Like the coyotes here in the monastery: When there are plenty of avocados, their fur is nice. They look fat. When the avocados have been picked and there's nothing much left, no persimmons, no food dropping out of the trees, then they'll run around and eat anything. If you look at their scat, sometimes you'll find pieces of plastic rope in it. When the pain of hunger is strong enough, people will do anything. That's the danger of sensuality. However, as

long as we don't have any alternative to sensual pleasures, that's what we're going to go for. As the Buddha said, even if you see the drawbacks you're still going to go for them unless you have an alternative.

Right concentration is what provides that alternative: this pleasure of form. This is how it's a middle pleasure in the sense that it doesn't get caught in those two extremes. But it's not out on the midpoint between pleasure and pain. Actually, the pleasure of concentration can be very intense. It can saturate the body, permeate the body, permeate your awareness. As long as you're mindful, keeping the breath in mind, this pleasure is okay.

The Buddha compares it to food. This is our nourishment on the path. As with any food, you have to be careful about how to consume it. If you just gobble it down, even good food can cause you problems. You get settled in here, the breath feels good, and you begin to forget about the breath and just go for the pleasure. That way, you end up in what's called delusion concentration. The mind is still and it's pleasant, but you're not really clear about where you are. You're in a half-awake, half-dreaming state. That's when you've been overwhelmed by the pleasure of the concentration. You've harmed yourself with good food. But as long as you have good manners in how you consume your food—in other words you allow the pleasure to do its work on the mind, because you don't go dropping the breath—then you're fine.

So this kind of pleasure is the heart of the middle way. If you learn how to give rise to it, learn how to maintain it, you're on the right path.