

Wise About Pleasure

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There was a group of ascetics at the time of the Buddha called the Niganthas, who believed that the only way to gain awakening was through pain. They would inflict pain on themselves, starving themselves, trying to lie down and not move at all. They were very critical of the Buddha because the Buddha seemed to be living in luxury.

But as he pointed out, it's not the case that simply enduring pain is going to make you awaken. If enduring the pain made you awaken, a lot of people in the hospital would be awakened right now. It's how you understand pleasure and how you understand pain: That's what makes a difference.

And as he pointed out, there are some sensual pleasures that are actually okay. You don't take on pain just for its own sake. If there's a pleasure that you indulge in and it doesn't have a bad impact on the mind, it doesn't give rise to unskillful qualities, then it's perfectly okay. As he said, he doesn't reject pleasure that's in accordance with the Dhamma. For example, there's the pleasure of living in a harmonious community, the pleasure of the wilderness. These pleasures are perfectly fine.

The Pali Canon is one of the first bodies of literature that actually contains wilderness poetry. Prior to that, there were poems about the beauties of nature, but it was always domesticated nature. Here they talk about the wilds and how refreshing it is to be there. It's a common practice among the forest monks that when you get stale in your meditation, go out into the wilds, get out into nature, walk around, open up your mind, air out your mind.

But what qualifies as innocent pleasures for any particular person is really going to vary. Not only with the individual, but also with time. So you have to be really honest with yourself. Watch yourself as you indulge in a pleasure and see what impact it has. That ability to watch yourself, to step back from yourself, is an important part of the practice. The Buddha said the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. You really commit to the practice. Then you reflect on the results you're getting.

And you have to be honest with yourself. If a certain pleasure does give rise to unskillful qualities, you've got to be willing to practice with pain. That can mean depriving yourself of the pleasure; it can mean sitting longer periods of time so that you actually have pain in the body and you learn how to analyze it, seeing it as something separate from your awareness, something separate from the body. It's

there, it's in the same place. It's like radio waves going through the air. The waves from all the different stations in San Diego, Los Angeles, Tijuana, Phoenix, are all going through the air right here. If you put a radio at any one place, you can pick up the different stations by tuning in. You don't have to move the radio to one spot to get Los Angeles, then another spot to get Tijuana. They all go through the same spot, but they're on different frequencies. In the same way, the pain and your body and your awareness maybe in the same spot, but they're different. You want to be able to learn to see that.

And you find out, as the Buddha said, that there are four different kinds of practice. There are the people for whom the practice is pleasant and slow, those for whom it's pleasant and fast, those for whom it's painful and slow, and those for whom it's painful and fast. You don't know ahead of time which group you're going to fall into. You can't just put in your order, saying, "So, I think pleasant but slow sounds nice. I don't want to be too unrealistic." You've got to look at what your habits are. As the Buddha said, the people for whom the practice will be painful are the ones who have really strong defilements. They're going to have to work hard to counteract them.

So you have to look at yourself to see what actually works in your case and what doesn't. Although for both the fast and the slow practices, the Buddha says there are five strengths you're going to need. So you work on those. After all, even with sensual pleasures that are innocent, you have to realize they have their limitations, and you don't want to get caught up in those limitations. You enjoy them as a way of giving yourself energy on the practice, energy along the path, realizing that there will be a time when you have to let even the innocent pleasures go because they're inconstant. You don't want to satisfy yourself with them. You may think that being reborn as a deva in Zion National Park might be a good thing, but the devas in Zion National Park have their own forms of suffering, their own forms of stress.

So you've got to keep those limitations in mind, which means that you've got to develop another type of pleasure that's actually part of the path itself. That's the pleasure of concentration. That's one of the strengths you need. Whether your path is painful or pleasant, it needs a certain amount of pleasure inside for it to survive, so that you don't get overwhelmed by the pain of a painful practice and you don't get complacent over the pleasure of a pleasant practice.

So keep in mind what the strengths are. There's conviction—conviction in the Buddha's awakening. What did he awaken to? There's one thing that tends to get overlooked: He really came to understand what death is all about. Death is followed by rebirth. Rebirth is determined by your actions. And the way the

causality of your actions works out is pretty complex. There are cases where you do good things in this lifetime and you go to a good place in the next. Other cases where you do good things in this lifetime and you go to a bad place. Conversely, there are times when you do bad things in this lifetime and you go to a bad place in the next, and others where you do bad things in this lifetime but go to a good place in the next.

In the cases where things switch, the Buddha says that either you had karma of the other kind prior to that, or after that, or at the moment of death. If you develop good views, right views, at the moment of death, then despite what bad things you've done in the past, you can go to a good place. If you already have lots of good things in your past, right view at the moment of death will strengthen that tendency. Wrong views at that point, though, will counteract a lot of the good karma you've done. You suddenly switch your mind, you decide you don't believe in the Buddha anymore, you decide what the Buddha said was a lot of lies: That wrong view will pull you down, even if you have good karma in this lifetime.

So what he saw is that you've got to be really careful about the state of your mind and you've got to develop good habits. That's what conviction is all about. You have conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, and you have virtues that are pleasing to the noble ones. After all, if you really have conviction, you have to act on it. It has to show up in your actions. That's the first strength.

The second strength is persistence. Once you determine that you've got to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones, you actually do it. When unskillful qualities haven't arisen yet, you do your best to prevent them. This is a part of the path that tends to get overlooked. We spend so much time thinking about the present moment, focusing on the present moment, but there are times when we have to prepare for the future.

Say, you're going into a difficult situation and you know that your buttons are going to get pushed, or there are dangers you have to face. It's good to think beforehand about how to face those situations in the most skillful way. If you know that you've got a situation like that coming up, you can devote some of your meditation time to thinking it through.

But then if unskillful qualities do come up, you want to figure out how to let go of them as quickly as possible. If there are skillful qualities that haven't arisen yet, you try to give rise to them, and when they're there, you try to maintain them.

Now, notice that the Buddha doesn't talk about getting in touch with your true feelings about something or what's truly going on in your mind, because as he says, everything going on in your mind is a fabrication. Something put together. And just because you put things together consistently in a bad way in the past

doesn't mean that that's the real you. You can change. If you couldn't change, the Buddha wouldn't have bothered to teach.

So rather than think about what you really feel about something, ask, "What should I feel about this? What should I think about this? What way will lead to true welfare and happiness?" Think about the results of your actions.

To do that, you've got to be mindful. That's the third strength—mindful in such a way that you're going to give rise more and more to concentration, because this is where you get the strength to keep going. Of the various factors of the path, concentration is the one that the Buddha compares most consistently with food. You breathe in a way, focus on the breath in a way, that gives rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of pleasure, even a sense of fullness and refreshment.

The potential for that refreshment is there in the breath right now, so ask yourself, what kind of breathing would feel good right now? Try not to pre-determine what you think it should be. Ask yourself: How would this way of breathing feel? How would that way of breathing feel? Try them out. Notice, watch, observe, experiment. And as you're adjusting the breath, try not to put any pressure on it, because if you apply pressure to the breath, then no matter what kind of breathing you're engaged in, it's not going to feel comfortable. It's more a question of *allowing* the breath to feel good, allowing the body to breathe in a way that feels refreshing.

Finally, there's the strength of discernment that comes as the mind settles down and you start seeing things more clearly. In particular, you see what you're doing that's leading to suffering, what you're doing that's leading away. You try to raise your standards. This, for a lot of us, is a big problem. We get comfortable with the path. Our meditation is fine. Feels good settling in. And we're satisfied to stay there. This is where you have to remind yourself that the principles of inconstancy, stress, and not-self apply not only to sensual pleasures outside, but also to the pleasures of the path.

Think about the Buddha's analogy of a raft. You're going to take the raft across the river, and then you decide, when you're halfway across the river, that you like being on the river. So you decide to just float along. Well, the river has waterfalls; it has whirlpools. The Buddha said it has crocodiles. So there are dangers in the river. So do your best to realize that being on the raft may be a nice place to be, but you'll be a lot better when you get over to the other shore.

So the Buddha was not down on pleasure, it's simply that he was a real connoisseur. He said, "Why settle for second best when there's best? And it's available."

Now, we may decide that it seems awfully far away, and that we're going to starve in the meantime unless we get the pleasures we want. But that's taking the wrong attitude toward your pleasures. You can ask yourself, "Which pleasures are conducive to getting to the ultimate, and which ones are going to get in the way?" You focus on encouraging the ones that are conducive, letting go of the ones that'll get in the way. That's the real sign of wisdom. After all, the quest for wisdom begins with that question, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"

This applies to how you deal with pleasures, how you deal with pains: pleasures of the senses and pleasures of the practice; pains of the senses, pains of the practice. So you want to be wise about pleasure, wise about your feelings. That way, you find that the path is not more than you can manage. It's not asking you to be superhuman, it's not making inhuman demands on you, just that you have to learn how to be discerning in how you approach the whole question of pleasure and pain.

Remember here, pleasure is not an end in and of itself. Nibbana is an end in and of itself. There's a nice passage where a nun is being asked by her former husband, what is virtue for? It's for getting the mind into concentration. What is concentration for? It's for developing discernment. What is discernment for? He keeps pursuing the questions. Finally, they get to nibbana. He asks, "What is nibbana for?" She says, "You've taken this line of questioning too far. Nibbana isn't for anything. It's where you've arrived." There's nothing else in the world that can qualify in that way.

So look at your pleasures and pains as means. Some of them lead to that goal, and others just kind of flail around and, as one of my students once said, bumble around in samsara. So when you think about indulging in a pleasure, ask yourself, "Where is this going to take me?" If you adopt that perspective on the question of pleasure and pain, you're going to head in the right direction.