

Mindfulness of Breathing (18) Allowing for Pleasure

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In the practice of mindfulness of breathing, there is the ideal of having continuity of attention with breathing. Sometimes this can be developed. That ability grows over time. It grows because we are developing more capacity for concentration and the commitment to stick with the object of concentration. It also grows as we begin to lessen the forces of distraction – the muscles in the mind that tend to be pulled into thoughts, desires, aversions, and distractions of all kinds. The energy for that begins to lessen. The more it lessens, the easier it is to stay with the breathing.

If you're really sensitive, you can feel the tension in the energy of distraction, of wandering off in thought. Or feel pressure, or something that feels a little disconnecting or alienating even. Even though some of the things we think about might be pleasant and enjoyable, there's something that can feel a little off.

As we begin practicing continuity or trying to be continuous with breathing, one of the functions of this is to help us notice how difficult it is to do – how much the mind wanders off in thought. Rather than being obsessed with this and feeling unsuccessful with staying focused, there's a phase of mindfulness practice where we take stock of what our mind is doing, what it's up to. We take stock of its tendency to be distracted, and learn what it feels like to be distracted. We are mindful of the experience of thinking a lot. We start seeing some of the common themes of what pulls us away.

One framework for understanding the common themes is a bit less specific – so that we don't get pulled into the details of our particular concerns. We see them as the Five Hindrances: "Oh, that's desire. That's ill will or some kind of aversion. Now the mind is lethargic, dull, and resistant. Now there's agitation in the mind – remorse, regrets, restlessness. There's doubt."

Rather than saying doubt or agitation *about something*, or desiring *something*, it's recognizing in a general way, "Oh, there's desire. There's aversion, lethargy, resistance, agitation, doubt." It's a way of creating a healthy distance where we're not so quickly and easily caught in that particular concern. Just enough to see, "There it is." Then to learn to recognize that, to relax, and to let go. Learn to believe that the hindrance is not where you need to be.

Don't get invested in it. Don't be seduced by it. But recognize, "Oh, there it is, my old friend." No need to be upset with yourself because you're doing this. Part of the benefit of recognizing it as a category – desire, aversion, etc. – is that it will be a bit easier to take it less personally. Not to be so wrapped up in the personal details of the particular hindrance you're distracted by.

The forces of the Five Hindrances are seen in Buddhism as being part of what humans do. We are born with them. They come along with being alive. But they don't have to stay there. We don't have to be their victims, or continue to be lost in them. We don't have to think they are a personal failing. Rather, they come with being human, and we learn to work with them.

As we settle down, we might clearly see the label: distraction or thinking. This may be enough to disconnect us from the specificity of thinking about the content – to wandering in thought. It's a way of beginning to lessen the pull or the energy that goes into thinking – quieting the energy, softening it – so we can stay with the breathing.

By becoming familiar with what it's like to have a distracted mind, there can be a greater appreciation of what it's like to have a non-distracted mind. One of the delights in meditation practice is when we feel like, "Oh, now we've settled in! I'm really here." There's a qualitatively different experience of really being here – clear, present, and awake. Our awareness that is clear, with very little tendency to wander off. It feels like, "Oh, this is a good place. I'm home now."

Everyone will experience this a little differently than the words I've used, but will feel the goodness of being present. This gives birth to a certain kind of pleasure, delight, or joy. The joy of the mind not under the control of distractions. We get to be ourselves. We've finally arrived – *here*. It's like we've gotten our mind back, as opposed to the mind constantly being lost and caught up in these other concerns.

To take some time to feel the pleasure, delight, or joy of being able to now stay with breathing in a more continuous way. To be there in a flow, free of distractions – free of the pull of all the thoughts that may not be so great to be in. It's better to be in the simplicity and the ease of staying here with breathing.

When we start doing this, we enter into a territory of meditation where we are getting close to feeling joy. The word in Pali is *pīṭi*. Sometimes it's translated into English as 'pleasure.' Feeling the pleasure of meditation. Some people like to translate it as 'joy': the joy of meditation. It's very physical, so that's why some translators like the word 'pleasure' for this.

It is interesting that the Buddha, before he was enlightened, spent six or seven years as an ascetic – practicing self-mortification, certainly with a lot of pain and challenges. It's said that he did this so thoroughly that he came right up to the edge of dying. Emaciated, he stumbled around and fell. He realized that if he did one more step of this ascetic practice, he would actually die. He knew that would not be useful, so he ate some food, and got a little strength back. Then the Buddha reflected, and remembered a time when he was young, and felt a kind of meditative pleasure – meditative joy – that was not dependent on worldly sensual pleasures. It wasn't sex, food, massages, or wonderful activities. Rather, it was something that welled up from inside. The Buddha said:

I don't have to be afraid of this. I don't have to be afraid of this kind of pleasure.

Part of the strength of this statement is that ascetics in ancient India thought that sensual pleasure was a trap – a dead end – and not helpful for the process of liberation. So they tended to dismiss all pleasures. But the Buddha came to realize:

No. The problem is not with pleasures. The problem is with the attachments to them, the preoccupation with them. And there is a kind of pleasure we don't have to be afraid of.

One reason we don't have to be afraid of meditative pleasure is that we're not causing any harm in the world. We're not breaking precepts. We're not consuming things or using them up. There's a blameless pleasure that can well up from inside when we sit, and get focused and concentrated – here. As we do so, and feel the delight or pleasure of being really present, we can begin tuning in to what the Buddha called "blameless pleasure" – the simple delight of being present.

We can use the pleasure, joy, or sense of well-being that encourages us to stay with the breathing as a biofeedback system to stay in the present moment. After a while, there starts to be a feedback loop that builds up, where staying with the breath, massaging the breath, stroking the breath feels like it's gently and slowly reinforcing our clarity, pleasure, or joy. It feels good.

Some people talk about how something starts feeling beautiful in the body. A beautiful feeling begins to radiate and glow (I like the word 'glow') someplace in the body. But if we stop focusing on the breath, that glow and beauty recedes and disappears.

It's important and useful to start allowing ourselves to feel the pleasure of meditation when it's there. But do it carefully. Don't savor, indulge or linger in it. But do it as a way of continuing to open to the present moment.

Meditative pleasure is like the warmth of the sun, which allows the body to relax when it has been cold and tight. An opening, the receptivity of allowing the body to be there. Not saying, "Oh, this feels so good!" – and indulging in it. But allowing it to be there, and using it open, and in particular, to open even more to the breathing. To allow the breathing to have the continuity of your focus and settling in is very useful.

It's important to do this without denying or pushing away the many times we don't have pleasure. There may be pain and discomfort. There may be difficult emotions or states of mind. We don't want to deny or override that,

and do a spiritual bypass. But rather, there's a wonderful art of including both together. Once we get a sense of the well-being that can exist, it can coexist with some of the distress we have.

Some of life's challenges are increased by the way the mind fixates on them, the way we zero in on them, and take them as being the thing of the moment – the most important thing – and get caught by them. Breath meditation begins to soften that fixation around certain themes and ideas. They don't necessarily go away. As a fixation softens, we start feeling a wider context of our lives – the wider goodness and pleasure – a feeling of wholeness that holds the particular challenges we have.

So, there is pleasure and joy that we do not have to fear. As meditation deepens, from time to time we will feel this pleasure. It can be very subtle at first. The art of meditation is to allow ourselves to feel this pleasure as a way of supporting us to stay in the present moment.

It's like a cheerleader or support: "Stay there. Be with this." It's a lot easier for the mind to stay present with our experience if the mind feels that it's pleasant and enjoyable.

You might practice curiosity in your daily life and meditation. Maybe sit a little extra these days. Meditate extra, and be curious about feelings of well-being within. Investigate these good feelings: "Where are they? How are they? Where do I feel them? When do I feel pleasure and well-being not directly related to what's happening around me?"

It's so good to just be present, settled, and content. To be here for no good reason. Just sitting here, being here. If you're at all inclined to meditate more this week, it might give you more opportunities to explore this territory of pleasure.

Thank you, and I hope you enjoy yourself with all this.