

## At Ease in the World

For a good part of my life, I was riddled with stress, agitation, anxiety. I was tense. I was tight. In the 60s, when I was growing up, there was a popular term: “uptight.” In many ways that was a good description for how I was. Or as an acquaintance noted, I was “wrapped tight.”

I don’t know that I realized how tense I was – or that I realized the drawbacks in being stricken by such tension and tightness – until things began to change. I distinctly recall one day, after I’d been practicing mindfulness of breathing for some time, cultivating inner ease and pleasure in the manner we’ve described, when suddenly I realized that I was at ease. For the first time in my adult life, or for at least as long as I could remember, I was at ease in the world. It was a significant realization. I was at ease.

It wouldn’t be inaccurate, I don’t think, to say that most of us are afflicted with a degree of stress. We’re afflicted with the stress we engender in response to the basic facts of being in a human body, being subject to illness, aging, and death. We’re afflicted with the stress we create as we attempt to meet our basic human needs, earn a living, put food on the table, clothes on our body, a roof over our head; we’re plagued with the stress that comes as we make an ongoing effort to take care of ourselves and our family. We’re afflicted by the burdens we put on our own shoulders as we seek to acquire sense pleasure, money, possessions, power, recognition, status, praise. We’re afflicted by our desire and aversion, the suffering we register, as the Buddha liked to put it, in wanting what we don’t have and not wanting what we have. We’re afflicted by the exhaustive effort we make to maintain our self-image.

Our stress is cumulative. According to the law of karma, the painful effects of the stress we manufacture in any given moment in reaction to a particular life-situation are felt in the moment when we’re dealing with the life-situation, and they’re felt as we go forward, in the days, weeks, months, years to come. The bottom line is, in the course of our lives we accumulate a tremendous amount of stress.

The body is the receptacle of our stress. What does it mean to be afflicted? The body is afflicted. The body is riddled with dis-ease. The energy flowing through the body is uneven, rough, agitated. It doesn’t flow smoothly. It’s constricted, blocked. The sensations in the body are unpleasant. The body, simply, doesn’t feel good.

We attempt to mollify the stress, soothe the agitation in the body, by indulging in various external sense pleasures: food, television, the Internet, the smartphone. We drink alcohol, smoke pot, take other drugs in an effort to alleviate our stress, our seemingly perpetual dis-ease. But these solutions don’t provide a lasting, reliable solution. The relief offered by the external sense pleasures is short-lived, unreliable. It’s the kind of relief that needs to be continually replenished; and in that effort, we only increase our stress.

The practice of mindfulness of breathing offers a more effective solution to our dis-ease. As we follow the steps of breath meditation, as we learn to cultivate an easeful, pleasurable breath, as we learn to cultivate a pleasant abiding in the body, as we develop our skill so that we’re able to call up the qualities of ease and pleasure as we engage in the events of our lives, the stress in the body begins to diminish. More and more, we’re able to maintain an easefulness in our daily lives.

Much of the effort in teaching meditation in the west has been directed toward helping people alleviate their stress. And certainly, stress reduction is a worthy goal. But it’s important to know that

the Buddha's practice of breath meditation offers much more than stress reduction. In practicing mindfulness of breathing, we don't only reduce stress. We also cultivate beneficial states.

When we practice mindfulness in the manner the Buddha taught, we learn to establish ourselves in the present moment. And we learn to shape our experience of the present moment. We learn, in other words, to shape our experience of the body. We learn to cultivate an experience of the body that is easeful, pleasurable.

Gradually, as she practices breath meditation, as she learns to keep her mind on the breath in all postures, the dharma student comes to find that she's at ease in the world. As she goes through her days, maneuvers through life, her body is comfortable, easeful. She "carries" this easefulness with her, wherever she goes, whatever she's doing. Working, taking public transportation, engaging in the most common day-to-day experiences, and the most important life circumstances: loss of work, the breakup of a relationship, the death of a loved one, her own dying. Through it all, she remains at ease.

Now, for the most part, when she's in the world, her body feels good. She's not focused on the less-than-pleasant sensations; her mind inclines to the easeful, pleasurable qualities in her body. She feels good.

As we learn to cultivate skillful pleasure, we begin to appreciate the importance of the way the body feels.

If a friend asks how you're doing, and you respond, "I'm not doing so good," what does that mean? What does "I'm not doing so good" mean? We may think that when we say we're "not doing so good," that we're referring to some unpleasant situation in our life, perhaps a difficulty with a close relationship or a challenge we're having at work. But if we look closely at what's going on when we say that we're "not doing so good," we might very well see that what we're referring to is how the body feels in that moment. In other words, what's "not so good" is the way the body feels. The body is afflicted in some way. The body doesn't feel "so good."

More often than not, when we look at what's transpiring within the field of our experience when we're having a hard time, in pain, suffering, what we see is that there is some kind of dis-ease in body, and that our affliction, our suffering, in that moment is attributable to the way the body feels. We may find, if we're sensitive to the body, that there's dissonance in the body, perhaps a constriction in the chest, perhaps a jagged, discordant sensation in the belly, perhaps a tightness in the muscles in the arms and legs. And we may come to see that that's what's causing us to say, "I'm not doing so good."

Our tendency when we're struggling with a difficult life-situation may be to look for a way out of our difficulty by addressing the situation, trying to find a good way to handle the situation. And, of course, we should. If we're involved in a conflict with a friend, more often than not it's in our best interests to attempt to resolve the conflict. Our tendency, also, may be to try to come to terms with whatever we're going through by addressing our mental/emotional condition. If we're suffering anxiety in reaction to the conflict with our friend, we may seek help through psychotherapy. Or we may use the skills of mindfulness to investigate our anxiety, our painful mind state. Again, taking this sort of approach may be quite useful. The point we're making here, of course, is that as we go through our days, manage our work and relationships, meet the vicissitudes of life, we tend to pay little attention to the body. Specifically, the way the body feels. We don't consider any possible healing we might find through our relationship to the body.

On an unconscious – or barely conscious – level we're constantly motivated by the way the body feels. For that reason, when we're going through something difficult, we're constantly looking to assuage the way the body feels by taking in all manner of sense pleasure. When we're having difficulty

in a relationship with a friend, we find ourselves, as if by magic, going to the refrigerator again and again, looking for something to eat, in an effort to allay the dis-ease in the body.

But we don't understand the importance of the body; we don't understand the importance of the way the body feels. Accordingly, we don't consciously and skillfully address the dis-ease in the body. And, accordingly, we suffer.

The fact is, the way the body feels is important. It's critically important. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in his book *The Strange Order of Things*, speaks to the critical role that the "feelings" in the body play in our lives. "Feelings," Damasio, says, "are the very revelation to each individual mind of the status of life within the respective organism, a status expressed along a range that runs from positive to negative."<sup>12</sup>

When all is said and done, if we are going to find happiness in our lives, we have to learn to skillfully address the way the body feels. The human organism operates at its greatest level of efficiency when the body "feels good." As Damasio notes, the presence of ease and pleasure in the body is an indication that we're operating at an optimal level. So what it all means is, if we want to make the most of our human experience, we have to learn to skillfully cultivate ease and pleasure in the body. This, precisely, is what the Buddha came to understand as he sat under the rose-apple tree.

And, of course, if we're able to cultivate inner ease and pleasure, we'll be in a much better position to address our difficult life-situations; we'll be in a much better position to look closely at our various painful mental/emotional states.

As we make the effort to cultivate internal ease and pleasure, we are transformed; the body is transformed. As we develop the steps of mindfulness of breathing, the qualities of ease and pleasure permeate the body, absorb into the body, like rainwater seeping into the ground. In the process, the body changes. The energy in the body, what we've called breath energy, now flows smoothly. The body exists in a state of ease, tranquility, pleasure. There is, manifest in the body, a felt sense of well-being. We have a pleasant abiding.

As we continue to practice mindfulness of breathing, the qualities of inner ease and pleasure become stronger, more pervasive. At times, as we travel through the world, the body may feel as if it's suffused with a soft, gentle quality of pleasure. The body may feel as if it's covered with a warm, soft cloth. As the Buddha suggests, in his description of jhana, the practitioner may feel as if his body is, "covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend..." (MN 119).

At times, perhaps when we're walking along the street on a sun filled morning – or perhaps when we're in the most mundane situations, walking along an aisle in the supermarket or sitting on the bus – we may experience a quality of deep, strong pleasure. We may have an experience similar to the one the Buddha had, as a boy, when he was sitting under the rose-apple tree. Or we may feel something similar to what we ourselves felt long ago, on a summer day, when we were nine years old. The body may feel as if it's suffused with light. It may feel extraordinarily buoyant. We may feel a quality of bliss.

It's no small thing, the way the body is transformed, the way in which we're able to be at ease in the world. In fact, it's a profound change. It's life changing.

Most of us go through life in a tight, constricted fashion. Chasing after sense pleasure, afflicted by our incessant narratives, we move awkwardly, haltingly, stiffly, through life. We see this kind of constrictedness in the men and women making their way along the crowded streets in a city like New

York. In his book, *Pleasure*, Alexander Lowen, the founder of Bioenergetics, describes how most human beings, caught in the agitated currents of modern life, have lost their innate gracefulness:

In a human being the lack of physical grace is due to chronic muscular tensions that block the involuntary rhythmic movements of the body. Each tension pattern represents an emotional conflict that was resolved by the inhibition of certain impulses. This is no true resolution, for the suppressed impulses find their way to the surface in distorted forms. Muscular tension, inhibition, and distorted behavior are signs that the conflict is still active on the unconscious level. The person who suffers from such conflicts is neither graceful nor gracious. He is not mentally healthy, and in view of the physical stresses which muscular tensions create, he can not be considered physically healthy.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, Lowen says, when the body is at ease, when we reside in an inner abiding that is pleasurable, we move gracefully.

The excitement and the flow of feeling associated with pleasure are manifested physically as grace. Grace is beauty of motion and complements beauty of form in a healthy organism. Like beauty, it is a manifestation of pleasure. In a state of pleasure one moves gracefully. Pain has a disturbing effect on one's movements.<sup>14</sup>

As we learn to develop skillful pleasure, we come into alignment. We find an inner rhythm. We exist in state of harmony. As the Buddha says, we're in tune. As some contemporary psychologies put it, we're "in the flow."

Imbued with a quality of inner pleasure, we begin to realize our potential as human beings, as inhabitants of our human bodies. We discover our innate gracefulness; we connect to the gracefulness that, we could say, is our birthright. We move gracefully. We meet our days with a certain grace.

-from Skillful Pleasure

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