

Skillful Pleasure

The Buddha, as he remembered that moment from childhood when he was sitting in the shade of the rose-apple tree, made a crucial distinction. He discerned that there were two types of pleasure: unskillful pleasure and skillful pleasure. It's essential that, as dharma students, we learn to develop this understanding. We've probably always lumped all pleasure into one category, but, like the Buddha, we have to learn to differentiate between unskillful and skillful pleasure.

The pursuit of unskillful pleasure brings about suffering; conversely, the cultivation of skillful pleasure leads to true happiness. Unskillful pleasure is the pleasure we acquire through external sense objects, the various forms of entertainment, food, sex, alcohol, drugs, etc. Skillful pleasure is the pleasure we find inside us, in the body. It's a pleasure that doesn't rely on external sense objects; it's a pleasure that doesn't depend on anything external to us. And it's a quality of pleasure that each of us, as a human being, has the ability to cultivate.

The "middle path" that the Buddha describes in his first sermon – "Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion" (SN 56.11) – is the path of skillful pleasure. The middle path is one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted concepts in the Buddha's teachings. It's been explained in many ways. Over the years, its original meaning has been all but lost. But what the Buddha was referring to, when he spoke about the importance of the middle path, is the path of skillful pleasure.

The middle path, or middle way, is the path we find between the path of unskillful external sense pleasure and the path of asceticism, denial of pleasure. As the Buddha explains:

"There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathagata — producing vision, producing knowledge — leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding."

(SN 56.11)

By taking the middle way, by cultivating skillful internal pleasure, we fulfill our basic need, as human beings, to experience pleasure. But more than that, we put ourselves in position – a position of inner health, strength, vibrancy – from which we're able to function at a high level. We're able, all told, to make the most of our lives.

The cultivation of inner pleasure enables us to develop strong concentration, the concentration that will enable us to develop insight, the insight that will allow us to find release from suffering, know true happiness.

As the above passage indicates, the path of skillful pleasure "leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding."

As we learn to cultivate skillful internal pleasure, we mitigate our dependency on external sense pleasure. We lessen our reliance on things that aren't reliable, things beyond our control. We lessen our reliance on things that are impermanent, inconstant, subject to birth and death; we lessen our reliance on sources of pleasure that have to be constantly replenished. We abandon the ongoing search, struggle, to fulfill our need for sense pleasure.

A helpful way to think about the way we relate to pleasure is through the analogy of "feeding." In taking in sense pleasure, we could say, we are engaging in a process of feeding. We're feeding on sense

pleasure. We feed on actual food: pizza, ice cream, hamburgers, french fries; and we feed on other “food sources,” like the Internet, Netflix, television, video games, etc. We feed on our thinking, much of it about sense pleasure; we feed on our stories, narratives. As we’ve explained, human beings need pleasure. We need to feed. We need “food” that provides pleasure. In following the Buddha’s middle path, we don’t starve ourselves. We don’t deny our basic human needs. We still feed. But we feed on skillful pleasure. We nourish ourselves with healthy, wholesome food.

Skillful internal pleasure is a reliable food source. Although it isn’t entirely reliable – the body, after all, is impermanent, conditioned – we find, as we develop our ability to cultivate inner pleasure, that it’s quite reliable; we find that it’s pretty much always available to us; it’s pretty much always there, inside us.

Another important factor that makes internal pleasure skillful is that, in feeding on it, we’re not engaging in a process of taking; we’re not taking anything from the environment; we’re not exhausting food sources that may be limited.

As we relinquish our dependency on external food sources, we shift away from the patterns of greed and conflict we’ve described; we shift away from the struggle for “food” that pits human beings against one another, that escalates to hatred, violence, and war.

When we feed on inner pleasure, we’re not harming anybody or anything. To the contrary. When we feed on skillful internal pleasure, we’re able to relate to others with kindness and generosity. We’re able to move toward a life of greater wisdom, love, compassion, peace.

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