

Meditation and Pleasure

A lot of people seem to think that the goal of meditation is to achieve a “blissed out” state of consciousness. This belief is encountered both among meditators and non-meditators and may be partially responsible for the common misconception that meditation is a kind of self-indulgent, narcissistic withdrawal. So I’d like to take a moment to say something about the nature of pleasure, both as it relates to meditation specifically and to human life in general.

There is no question that meditation can produce very pleasant states and that as one’s meditation develops these pleasure states tend to become deeper and last longer. The sources of pleasure in meditation are several-fold. The settling of the body is pleasurable; peacefulness of the mind is pleasurable. Being truly focused and present can turn even the most banal experience into a rapture of fascination.

Furthermore, meditators sometimes experience “energy” flowing through the body. This may be experienced as warm and nectar-like or effervescent like champagne bubbles or undulatory like ripples in a pond. All around the world there are special terms for this experience of subjective flow. In East Asia it is called *ch’i* (*qi* or *ki*); in India, *prana*. Tribal peoples who tend to be very attuned to their bodies also have words for this phenomenon. For example, among the Lakota (Sioux) Indians of the American plains, it is called *ni* or inner breath. The *inipi* ceremony (called “sweat lodge” in English) is designed to activate the flow of *ni*.

It is entirely possible that these subjective experiences of “energy” are correlated with objective physiological events such as the production of endorphins which some researchers believe are responsible for runner’s high and the effects of acupuncture. Other pleasant experiences sometimes associated with meditation include interesting lights, colors and otherworldly sounds.

Mature meditators do not consider any of these pleasant experiences to be the goal of meditation. On the other hand pleasure should not be ignored, or suppressed, nor should its value go unrecognized.

For a spiritually mature person, the pleasures that arise as the result of meditation as well as the pleasures that occur in the course of day-to-day life represent a valuable opportunity, *an opportunity to experience something closely connected with pleasure but conceptually quite distinct*. That “something” is what, for lack of a better term, I call satisfaction or fulfillment. What then is the relationship between pleasure and satisfaction? Simply stated, satisfaction is what we experience whenever we have a *complete* experience of pleasure. But it’s important to understand clearly what is meant by “complete experience” and how great a challenge it is to experience even a simple pleasure completely. To begin with, the completeness of a pleasure experience does not depend on the type, intensity or duration of the pleasure experience itself. Rather it depends on one’s ability to experience each wave and wavelet of the pleasure with *continuous contact* and *zero interference*. Continuous contact means no distraction from the pleasure, including distraction into the thoughts that produce a sense of a self experiencing the pleasure. And zero interference means no push or pull, no tension, no holding around each wave and wavelet as it arises and passes.

The ability to experience pleasure completely entails a profound retraining of our relationship to pleasure because usually, by the time a wave of pleasure has reached consciousness, it has *already* been subject to subtle subconscious grasping in the pre-conscious processing levels of the nervous system. What most people call pleasure is in fact a mixture. It is pleasure mixed with conscious and subconscious tension and grasping. Therefore it is incomplete pleasure.

No matter how intense and engrossing the experience of incomplete pleasure may be, it cannot give lasting satisfaction or permanently transform consciousness. This is why people who practice a path of “spiritual ecstasy” can easily fool themselves. They may believe that spiritualizing pleasure involves experiencing a special kind of intensity of pleasure. How can you be sure you’re not fooling yourself? Well, one objective test for how one is progressing on the path of pleasure is to see if there are changes in ones relation to pain. Learning to experience paroxysmal pleasure as spirit implies the ability to experience paroxysmal pain as spirit, i.e., without suffering.

So when pleasure arises during meditation, the mature meditator attempts to experience it as pure pleasure, without subtle tension or craving. But pure pleasure is paradoxical. There is no holding, no grasping or congealing, so the pleasure is not frozen into an opaque objectified “thing.” It is deeply fulfilling and at the same time transparent and empty. The tantric tradition of Tibet has a marvelous expression for this. They speak of *dedong yerme* or “the oneness of bliss and void.” So, in complete pleasure there is neither an experiencing self nor an experienced pleasure as an object! There is only *earthshaking satisfaction*. This may sound strange but haven’t you at least occasionally experienced the earth shake, if only during a special moment with one you love?

So although pleasure as it is ordinarily understood is *not* a goal of mature meditation, *satisfaction or fulfillment most definitely is*. So when pleasant states arise in meditation, one attempts to experience them fully. This leads to an ability to experience the pleasures of ordinary life fully and therefore to continually elevate your “baseline of satisfaction” with life in general.