

In the Midst of Things

When we're able to maintain a quality of inner pleasure, we're able to meet the challenges and difficulties of life more skillfully. We're able to handle things that may be difficult to handle. We're able to meet circumstances that may be potentially overwhelming without being overwhelmed.

The fact is, as human beings we'll experience various challenging situations. The Buddha asks us to reflect "frequently" that we're subject to sickness, aging, death, and separation. We'll be separated, the Buddha tells us, from "all that we find dear and appealing." As we go through the inevitable changes in life, we'll experience this sort of separation again and again; over time, we'll be separated in some way or another from our loved ones, our friends, our vocation, our material possessions, and so forth. All human beings, the Buddha emphasizes, are subject to sickness, aging, death, and separation; no one is exempt.

There are many difficult facets to a human life. But the dharma student, in learning to cultivate skillful internal pleasure, puts herself in a good position to meet the difficulties of life. As she encounters life's challenges, the dharma student is able, in the midst of things, to access internal pleasure. She's able to keep her mind on the easeful, pleasurable sensations in her body. She's able to reside in a pleasant abiding. Amidst the suffering and strife, she's able to find inner refuge.

It's extremely helpful to be able to have a pleasant abiding amidst the pain and trials of life. In fact, it's necessary. As we've said, as human beings we need pleasure. If we don't have

access to an amount of pleasure, our lives will be impossible, unbearable. If all we know is difficulty, suffering, pain, life will be intolerable.

As dharma students, established in the qualities of jhana, we come to see that, in the midst of things, we can find a place to reside, inside, that's comfortable, pleasant. When we're going through something difficult, we recognize that our difficulty, our pain, is not all of our experience. We realize that, in the field of our experience, there's room for both the difficult and pleasurable experiences; we realize that there's "room for both."

Our tendency, when we're going through difficulty, is to put all of our attention on our difficulty. Our tendency is to fixate. Our tendency, accordingly, is to perceive that our difficulty is the full extent of our experience. When we perceive that our difficulty, our suffering, comprises the entirety of our human experience, our suffering increases. It's almost always true that our suffering about our suffering is more difficult-to-bear than the original suffering, the loss of a job, the loss of a relationship, etc. But when we're able to separate from our pain, when we're able to establish a duality, to juxtapose the pain with pleasure, we begin to understand that our pain isn't the whole of our experience. When we abandon the perception that our life is made entirely of pain, our pain decreases, significantly. When we loosen our fixation, we begin to find freedom from our pain.

Of course, we're not always faced with significant difficulties; we're not always asked to confront sickness, aging, death, and separation. However, our normal day-to-day lives will, invariably, present us with certain "problems." Life, by its nature, often doesn't go the way we'd like it to go. The bus doesn't show up. Our partner says something we find disagreeable. Our

children act out. We make a mistake at work. The project we're working on hits a snag. It snows in April. It rains on the day we're planning to go to the park. And so on. The litany of things that can "go wrong" in any given day is endless. And these everyday problems and inconsistencies may be a source of suffering for us. We may have a habit of reacting unskillfully, with aversion, when things don't go according to plan. But when we're able to maintain a pleasant abiding in the body, our relationship to these sorts of problems changes. We realize that our experience isn't restricted to our problems, the less-than-pleasant events. We realize that instead of dwelling on our "problems" and "issues," we can dwell in a pleasurable inner abiding. We realize that, in fact, we have a choice.

The fact of choice is liberating. The ability to put the mind in a good place, a pleasurable abode, is life-altering. When we learn to develop skillful internal pleasure, our so-called problems lose their intensity. Our problems aren't so much of a problem. Our problems are still there. But we're alright. We feel good. There are some things, perhaps, that aren't so pleasant. But we can put our mind in a place that's pleasant.

Before she learns to develop skillful internal pleasure, the dharma student is in thrall to her problems; she doesn't have any option, it doesn't seem, except to subject herself to their unpleasantness. She doesn't have the ability to remove herself, in a skillful way, from the sphere of her problems. But when she learns to maintain inner ease and pleasure, she's no longer enslaved by her pain and dis-ease. She doesn't have to "sit there and take it." She has other choices. She can find a home, inside, that's easeful, pleasant, comfortable. Freed from her preoccupation with her difficulties, her world opens; her life isn't limited to her problems. And she's able to move ahead, toward a true happiness in her life.

It's generally when we become adolescents that we begin to struggle with the difficulties, the unavoidable challenges, the hardships of the world. We try out for the basketball team but we get cut. We ask a girl to go out on a date and she turns us down. We like a boy, he doesn't seem to like us. In school, we don't belong to the one of the popular social groups. We don't get the grades we'd hoped to get. It may be difficult for us – life is often difficult – but if we have a home to go to where we're loved and supported, if our parents are there for us, we manage to endure, and learn from our difficulties. We're able to move forward, successfully, in our lives. If, however, we don't have a home environment that's supportive, if we don't receive love and care from our parents, then, as we go forward, we're bound to struggle. Life, inevitably, will be a painful challenge. We'll have a hard time of it.

It's an analogy that may help us understand the benefits we receive from cultivating skillful internal pleasure. The breath, the pleasant abiding we develop in meditation practice, provides us, as adults, with a good home. A good home for the mind. Like the adolescent setting out into the world, if we have a pleasant abiding within, we'll be able to meet the challenging circumstances of our lives, we'll be able to move ahead, toward true happiness.

There is goodness in the world. But often times we don't realize that. Often times we can't see the goodness in the world. Most of us, much of the time, only see the challenges and difficulties and problems in life. We focus on what's painful. We focus on what's difficult, what's wrong. Remember Ajaan Lee's metaphor: we're like the person who only eats the bad parts of the mango.

And of course, the message the culture sends about the way things are is generally negative. The media focuses, relentlessly, on what's wrong in the world. The news programs, in broadcasts that pummel us twenty-four hours a day, deliver bad news, and very little else.

But the Buddha's teachings offer a path by which we might recognize the goodness in ourselves and in the world. As we practice mindfulness of breathing, as we follow the instructions for developing skillful internal pleasure, we begin to learn to separate from our painful experience, and, in turn, we begin to recognize that our experience includes something other than pain. We gain a wider view of things. As Thoreau put it: "the universe is wider than our view of it."

As we learn to reside in a pleasant abiding in the body, we begin to recognize that there is more to our human experience than difficulty and pain. It may be something that we once knew, perhaps when we were children; it may be something we've forgotten. But as we develop internal pleasure, we begin to remember that there is goodness in this life.