

## The Most Favorable State

In this book we've stated, again and again, that the nature of the human mind is to incline to pleasure. But why is this so? The mind inclines to pleasure because the state of pleasure is the most favorable state. It's the state in which the human organism most effectively functions. When we have a pleasant abiding, in the moment, we're able to make the most of our lives.

Conversely, when the human organism is in pain, afflicted with disease and/or dis-ease, it's less capable. Pain is an indication of ill-health. It's an indication, as we've suggested, of both physical and mental ill-health. When it's not in a healthy condition, the organism isn't capable of functioning at an optimal level. When afflicted by painful states, the body and mind are limited in their ability to operate effectively. We're less able to meet the circumstances of our lives in an efficient, skillful, joyful manner. We're not able to live up to our human potential. We're not able to thrive.

When the body exists in a state of pleasure, we have the ability to thrive. Like plants in spring, touched by the sun, nourished by the rain, we're able to grow and flourish. When we're established in skillful internal pleasure, we're able to accomplish the tasks that, as dharma students, we're asked to accomplish. We're able to attend to the duties of the four noble truths. We're able to attain wisdom. But the cultivation of inner pleasure not only enables us to move forward in our dharma practice; it enables us to move forward in our lives. When we're able to abide in the qualities of ease and pleasure, we're able to utilize the internal resources of body and mind that are available to us as human beings. We're able to realize our potential. We're able to achieve a greater happiness.

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio uses the term "homeostasis" to signify the state in which the human organism is able to function most effectively. As Damasio explains, it's our feeling state – the feelings of pleasure and pain – that indicates whether or not we're in a state of homeostasis. When the human organism is in a state of homeostasis, it registers pleasure, ease. If the organism is in a compromised state, it registers pain, dis-ease.

Damasio says:

The "pleasant" and "unpleasant" designations correspond, in a principled manner, to whether the underlying "global" state of the body is generally conducive to the continuation of life and to survival, and to how strong or weak that life trend happens to be at a given moment. Malaise signifies that homeostasis is not right with the state of life regulation. Well-being signifies that homeostasis is within the effective range. In most circumstances, there is nothing arbitrary in the relationship between the quality of the experience and the physiological state of the body.<sup>15</sup>

The feeling tone of the body shows us whether or not we're in a conducive position. The feelings of pleasure and pain guide us, tell us whether we need to make adjustments; they point us toward the most favorable conditions. So, for instance, when we have thoughts of anger, the body responds with feelings of dis-ease, constriction. This dis-ease is the body's wisdom telling us we're going down the wrong path. The dis-ease we feel signifies that we're no longer in a state of homeostasis; we are no longer in a state that is conducive to our greatest welfare (and the welfare of others).

On the other hand, when we engender thoughts of lovingkindness, we feel an ease in the body, a smooth flow of energy. We feel pleasure. The arising of pleasure is an indication that we're going in the right direction. In this case, the body, in its wisdom, registers pleasure in an effort to support us as we seek to fulfill our basic human wish for true happiness. As Damasio notes: "Mental states

naturally feel like something because it is advantageous for organisms to have mental states qualified by feelings.”<sup>16</sup>

As Damasio explains, when the human organism is in a state of homeostasis – and, accordingly, a pleasurable state – it’s not only able to survive, to function in an effective manner; it’s able to evolve.

Homeostasis refers to the fundamental set of operations at the core of life, from the earliest and long-vanished point of its beginning in early biochemistry to the present. Homeostasis is the powerful, unthought, unspoken imperative, whose discharge implies, for every living organism, small or large, nothing less than enduring and prevailing. The part of the homeostatic imperative that concerns “enduring” is transparent: it produces survival and is taken for granted without any specific reference or reverence whenever the evolution of any organism or species is considered. The part of homeostasis that concerns “prevailing” is more subtle and rarely acknowledged. It ensures that *life is regulated within a range that is not just compatible with survival but also conducive to flourishing, to a projection of life into the future of an organism or a species.*<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the history of human beings, it has been the human organism’s ability to discern pleasure and, in turn, to choose pleasurable experience, that has allowed the species to survive. Furthermore, it has been the human being’s unique capacity to use its mind to create pleasurable states that has enabled humans, to use Damasio’s term, to prevail.

The evolution of the human organism is attributable to its ability to create. Specifically, to create pleasurable states. Early man discovered fire to keep him warm, to enable him to maintain a pleasurable abiding. In doing so, he furthered his evolution. He moved forward. He invented the wheel so that he wouldn’t have to lug heavy materials and trudge for miles on foot. Using his human mind, he created a more pleasurable existence, a more favorable existence, an existence in which he could thrive, prosper, grow, evolve.

The ability of human beings, in using the human mind, to develop pleasurable states, the most favorable states, is what has allowed humans to evolve. It’s why human beings, blessed with the human mind, have been able to evolve in ways that other animals can’t.

Our problem, as human beings, is that we don’t make an effort to train the mind. The human mind can accomplish extraordinary things; and the human mind, if untrained, can cause vast damage and suffering. The mind that has the ability to use fire, to keep us warm, to cook our food, is the same mind that can choose to set fire to the neighbor’s house or drop napalm on villages in Southeast Asia. What the Buddha realized was, our problem, our suffering, isn’t due to pleasure, but rather to having an unskillful relationship to pleasure. He realized that the answer to our problem wasn’t in denying ourselves pleasure. He understood, in fact, that the state of pleasure was the most favorable state, the state in which we could grow, evolve, awaken. He realized, eventually, that the path to happiness was through training the mind, through learning to develop a skillful relationship to pleasure, through learning to abandon the pursuit of unskillful external pleasure, and, by practicing breath meditation, to develop skillful pleasure. We learn to train the mind in this manner in the first steps of mindfulness of breathing: we learn to discern dis-ease and ease in the breath; and we learn to choose an easeful, pleasurable breath. We learn to cultivate skillful pleasure. We learn to cultivate the most favorable state, the state in which we can awaken.

As dharma students we learn, through mental training, to cultivate skillful internal pleasure. In doing so we put ourselves in the most favorable position. We put ourselves in a position in which we can know a greater happiness in this life.

The human mind inclines to pleasure because the state of pleasure is the state in which the human organism thrives. It is the most favorable state.

When we learn to cultivate skillful pleasure, we put ourselves in a position to realize our full potential as human beings.

When we manifest a state of inner pleasure, the breath flows smoothly, easily, throughout the entirety of the body. The body feels light; there's a quality of well-being. We move through the world with a certain grace.

When we feel good, when ease and pleasure exist in the body, we're able to have gratitude for our human experience. We're able to recognize our goodness and the goodness in the world. We're able to appreciate life. We're able to know the joy of living.

The body in a state of skillful pleasure is in a state of health. We are strong, healthy, capable of physical labor, capable of mental labor.

When we're connected to a quality of inner pleasure, we're able to use the mind with much greater effectiveness. When there's dis-ease in the body, there's invariably dis-ease in the mind – the body conditions the mind – and our capacity to use the mind is hindered. Our potential for intellectual activity and growth is limited.

When the body is at ease, imbued with pleasure, we're able to concentrate. We're able to pay attention. We're able to focus.

When we're established in a state of pleasure, we're able to function at an optimal level. To quote Walt Whitman, we find an “unfailing sufficiency.” Nowadays, scientists and the like refer to notion of the “flow state,” in speaking to the condition in which we function in a fully engaged and highly focused manner. When we're in a so-called flow state, according to the standard description, the body is pervaded with ease, pleasure. This, of course, is because there must be a quality of pleasure in the body if we're going to enter a flow state. The mind inclines to pleasure because this is the most favorable state; it's the state in which we'll be able to get “in the zone.” It's said that we come into the flow state when we become “fully immersed” in an activity. But as the Buddha realized, in order to fully immerse ourselves in any activity – if it's meditation, writing, bowling, or gardening – there needs to be, in the body, a quality of pleasure.

Creativity flourishes when the body is at ease, suffused with pleasure. Alexander Lowen, in his book *Pleasure*, says, “Pleasure is the creative force in life.”<sup>18</sup>

Says Lowen:

If the bodily pleasure of an individual is destroyed, he becomes an angry, frustrated, and hateful person. His thinking becomes distorted, and his creative potential is lost.<sup>19</sup>

As we know, true creativity, true art, comes from some place other than the thinking mind. It comes from a deeper place. It comes from a place, deeper, in the body. It comes from the heart. When the body is established in a state of inner pleasure, we're able to remain “in the body.” And, thusly, we're able to connect to this deeper region. We're able to access our creativity.

We could say, applying another simple calculus, that the extent to which we're able to abide in internal pleasure is the extent to which we'll be able to release our creativity.

Emerson, in his essay “Poetry and Imagination,” noted: “The writer, like the priest, must be exempted from secular labor. His work needs frolic health; he must be at the top of his condition.”

In today's world, dominated by science and technology, we find ourselves further and further from the body; as a result, activities like painting and writing derive largely from the thinking mind; they're driven, more and more, by desire and aversion. Much of what passes for art is the expression of an effort to achieve notoriety, acclaim, financial benefit. We find ourselves in a world in which examples

of true art are increasingly less apparent. But the practice of mindfulness of breathing and the development of skillful pleasure offers a way back to the body, a path to our innate ability to be creative.

The cultivation of inner pleasure enables us, as we've shown, to interact more skillfully with others. As we probably know, when the body is afflicted, when the inclination of our awareness is toward pain and dis-ease, it's difficult to have skillful interactions with others. It's difficult to relate to others in a wholehearted manner. We may have known people who were elderly and suffering an illness – perhaps an aging parent – who displayed previously unseen negativity and bitterness. As Lowen notes in the above passage, when the body is devoid of pleasure we're apt to become “an angry, frustrated, and hateful person.” But when we feel good, when there's a quality of pleasure in the body, we have skillful, wholehearted relationships with others. We're fully present with others. We're at ease. We maintain a light touch; we have a sense of humor. We enjoy our interactions with others; we maintain a joyful attitude. We relate to others from the heart, with kindness, compassion, love.

In fact, in developing skillful internal pleasure, we're doing something that will benefit the people in our lives. When we take care of ourselves, we're able to take care of others. This is a basic law in the Buddha's scheme of things. “When watching after oneself,” the Buddha says, “one watches after others.” It may seem a selfish endeavor, to cultivate skillful pleasure – the voices in the mind and the voices of the naysayers may be telling us this – but the truth is, it's an act of kindness toward others.

When we're able to remain in the most favorable state – the state of inner pleasure – we're able to make the most of our innate capacity to make a connection with other human beings. We're able to have intimate relationships with others. We're able to connect to the heart; we're able to relate to others straight from the heart. We're able to love.

-from Skillful Pleasure

Copyright © 2020 Peter Doobinin