

## Dharmic Pleasure

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**February 06, 2022**

**Keywords:** niramisa sukha, Dharmic pleasure, sensual pleasure, well-being, conditioning, absorption, mindfulness, peripheral attention, suttas, meditation

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The pleasure that comes from Dharma practice, and one of the principles that I am on offer, is the principle that sometimes what is unpleasant can be overcome by what is pleasant. Sometimes pain can be overcome by pleasure or dealt with through pleasure, but not just any pleasantness or any pleasure, but what can be called Dharmic pleasure. So what is that? There is a story in the suttas, teachings of the Buddha, about—it's possible it's the Buddha's cousin, who is a lay person, who comes to the Buddha, and he says, "Ah, I have this preoccupation that is getting in my way, and I can't really make progress in the Dharma or something. Cause this preoccupation." And the preoccupation is being overly attached to sensual pleasure.

A sense of sensual pleasure is an obstacle because I'm constantly thinking about it, or imagining it, or wanting it, or something concerned with it. And the Buddha says, "That's the way it is, that if you're, if you are preoccupied and caught up in sensual pleasure, it's really hard to make progress on the Dharma path." Back in ancient India, in Buddha's time, there were other religious traditions that saw that as well, that sensual pleasures of all kinds were an obstacle to some kind of spiritual progress, and they advocated asceticism, sometimes a radical denial of all pleasure and all that, sometimes actually an intentional taking on pain. There are some people who believe that you can only overcome pain with pain, so you get into it. But the Buddha agreed with the man: there can be an obstacle in preoccupation with sensual pleasure. And then, remarkably, the Buddha said that before he was enlightened, he also was preoccupied with sensual pleasures in a way that interfered with his practice, interfered with things.

So he knew intimately for himself how this can work. And then he says, the only way something like this, the way to overcome this preoccupation or concern, is through pleasure, is

through what I'm calling Dharmic pleasure. He doesn't use that term "Dharmic pleasure," but there is a kind of pleasure you can cultivate as an antidote to preoccupation with sensual pleasure. One way to see this is that there is another kind of pleasure, a feeling of wellness, of goodness, that is a reconditioning factor. We're very strongly influenced by the conditions in which we live, and we say that we can be conditioned by them, the lifelong kind of conditioning. People who live with constant threat growing up can be conditioned to be afraid and anxious, and wherever they go, they can have their eyes open looking for how to be safe because they feel that's what they've learned.

There are people who've been horribly wounded, scarred emotionally by what happens to them, and that creates a conditioning that creates a kind of influence that leaves a lasting impression and a lasting perspective in which to look out at the world, like the world is a dangerous place because people are threatening or something. And there's all the series of conditionings we have. Some people receive the conditioning that you're successful if you have a lot of pleasure, and so you should really, and you get rewarded for having sensual pleasure, and so you want to have lots of pleasure, as that's how you feel rewarded. You feel good and feel like everything's okay in the world, and that's been the conditioning that over and over again has been reinforced in different kinds of ways. These kinds of conditionings can lead to an intensity around the pursuit of sensual pleasure of all kinds. It certainly can be sexual; it can be the pleasure of alcohol and drugs.

It can be the pleasures of the intellect, pleasures of adventures, pleasures of a daredevil who just, you know, is engaged and fully absorbed in some kind of thing that brings their attention fully into the present moment and clears out everything else that feels so alive and so connected. Some people fear, you know, in doing things that are frightening, brings a kind of aliveness they don't have any other time in their life. And so they feel so good to have that aliveness. There was a time many years—I've told this story a few times. Many years ago, I saw a little documentary about a man who had spent his early part of his adult life spending a lot of time, like in the weekends, riding his motorcycle all over. That's how he cleared his mind and got ready for work and enjoyed just driving his big motorcycle around.

But then he and his wife had a baby, and he couldn't spend the weekend away on his motorcycle. So he had to find a quicker way to clear his mind and be ready to start fresh in everything. So he took up the sport of paragliding. It looked as if, kind of fuzzy kind, you can apparently—I don't know if that's the right word—but he could pack it into a backpack, and then early in the morning at dawn he would climb up in these skyscrapers that were being built in his city. They were still kind of open and everything, but he would sneak into the building, climb up

to the top, and then he would jump from the top into the street below, where there was no traffic yet, just as dawn was happening. He had a friend with a getaway car waiting down below to drive off, drive to Hikmov. And that's how he cleared his mind. That's how something good happened. He felt alive and good and present.

So there's all these ways in which we are pursuing some kind of feeling of being alive and good. That sometimes involves pursuit of pleasure or having, getting experience in life, good things. Sometimes those kinds of pursuits don't really fill us, don't really meet some deeper need that we have. In fact, we almost need to repeat the same pleasure in order to be distracted from some deeper wound, some deeper loneliness, some deeper angst, some deeper depression, some deeper something. So people then repeat the same thing. They are yearning for more and more and more. The Buddha said that, you know, that idea, that way doesn't work. But in order to not have this pursuit of sensual pleasure be an obstacle, you have to experience a non-sensual pleasure, a pleasure that's not of the physical senses, and a pleasure which—he used the word “unwholesome” when it's not unwholesome, unskillful.

What he used as an example for this was a certain kind of pleasure that comes from meditation practice, a certain kind of joy and well-being and happiness that can well up from the inside. This idea of welling up from the inside is a very different source for a sense of well-being than the sense of a pleasure or even well-being that can come from getting stimulated by good experiences from the outside in. So it might feel really good to have a really good meal, a tasty meal, your favorite meal, and there's nothing wrong with that. But if you're simply taking in the pleasure of it, then it's only of the senses. If the person who made the meal for you did it with a lot of love, and it touched something inside of you, like, “Why, this feels—I can feel the generosity and goodness of this person who's doing something,” that could touch something that's not of the senses, that might touch your heart in some way. That has a very different impact on us than the conditioning that comes from just a sense, just the pleasure of the food.

It's not the food that we're benefiting from most. It's rather the goodness of it. So a story I like to tell is my, you know, a lasting impression that's still with me. It probably was at a time I didn't know it was—it conditioned me. It had a lifelong influence on me. I was staying at my grandmother's house when I was maybe somewhere between seven and ten. Waking up in the morning, this beautiful light, and staying in bed with all wooden rooms in Norway, with the Norwegian comforter, and this bright Norwegian light coming in through the window, and just all cozy, reading Donald Duck magazines in Norwegian, and she would bring in a tray with toast, butter, and cheese on it, and that was nice. I would stay in bed eating the toast,

you know, reading the Donald Duck magazines. But somehow, not unsurprisingly to me at that time, I was taking in the goodness, the safety, the warmth, the love of that situation, of my grandmother, and I still carry with me that feeling, that memory of that goodness.

Certainly the toast with cheese was pleasant sensually, but it was some deeper feeling, the wellspring from inside. Something deeper was born, or was awakened, or was allowed that did something special. Just a simple thing she did. So to awaken this wellspring, something that can make goodness, a pleasure that can arise from the inside out, and not continually looking for it in the world, is the path of the Dharma. Certainly it could have been my lifelong pursuit to find someone who was just like my grandmother and make sure I got the right kind of comforter or the right wooden bed, and make sure that they brought the toast and butter in every morning at the right time of day when the light was shining through. Getting everything set up, and have someone who is just like my grandmother so that somehow—but that's just that. I think in a strict way, in Buddhism, just trying to get the world of the senses organized around you to try to replicate something.

But in Dharma practice, what we're doing is we're not looking in the external world for this, but we're looking to see, "How could we awaken something inside that becomes a reconditioning that dissipates any kind of attachment to comfort, sensual comfort, physical comfort, any kind of attachment to sensual or physical pleasure, any kind of attachment to physical or sensual stimulation of any kind at all, including intellectual stimulation?" The Buddha said, you can't really overcome this addiction or preoccupation with this kind of physical pleasure, sensual pleasure, without this Dharmic pleasure. One of the ways he talked about this Dharmic pleasure—or his language, he called it a pleasure not of the flesh, *niramisa sukha*. Not of the flesh meaning nothing physical was being stimulated. Have you had any experiences where there was enough sense of well-being, of safety, of quiet, of comfort or something, setting the environment just right, that you felt something not so much nourished from the outside, but allowed something inside to settle, to open, to be at ease, to feel safe, so that there was a wellspring within that began to flow and move through you?

It requires being in a different way than most people are. I think in ordinary life, maybe we're just keeping ourselves busy. We have a to-do list, and we're doing this and that, and we're trying to maybe just be busy or keep ourselves entertained. Probably, you know, some people have done what's called—a term I only learned a few years ago—binge watching. There's some kind of TV program that, just like there's all this series you can watch, like ten series, and in one day stay up all night. That might be physically pleasing. It's what Buddha would call a kind of pleasure of the senses, but it doesn't create the environment, the situation, the

context that awakens something from the inside out. Probably not.

So meditation for the Buddha was—he presented that as the means for this deeper healing, a pleasure that's possible to have. He didn't have Netflix. He didn't have all the things we have in the modern world that people use to try to assuage other feeling uncomfortable. The Buddha said, the Buddha did not teach that you overcome pain with pain. He taught you overcome pain with pleasure. He did not say, "You overcome pleasure with pain." He said, "You overcome pleasure with pleasure." Overcome here means overcoming our attachments or preoccupation or fixation. So whether the vexation has to do with things that are pleasant, or the vexation has to do with things that are unpleasant, both are healed through feeling this Dharmic well-being, this Dharmic pleasure.

The art of discovering a way of feeling a certain kind of inner pleasure or well-being, and letting that be the context in which you experience your life. I'll give you an example. For me, not dramatic, but maybe you can fill in in a way that's meaningful for you. Probably something like this happens to many of you. Sometimes I say, I've had a busy day doing a lot of things or something, or a lot of feeling, a lot of something going on, and I sit down to meditate, and I discover that my breathing is not relaxed. There's kind of contraction in the chest a little bit. If I sit and feel that, it actually feels unpleasant on the top of the inhale. But what I do is I relax a bit around it, and I feel—not dramatic—a very subtle sense of well-being or pleasure in the wider body, the global body part of it. It's a pleasure that comes from just the pleasure or the goodness of being conscious of things, just being aware of things. It feels good for me.

Then, as I stay focusing on my breathing, I just contentedly feel the discomfort of my breathing without making it a problem. I feel the discomfort in this wider field of pleasure, pleasantness, of goodness that's there. So I end up feeling very content, feeling the discomfort, because it's not the whole picture. I'm not fixated on it. Early in my meditation practice many years ago, I would have gotten so caught up and preoccupied, "Oh, I shouldn't be breathing that way. This is a problem. I'm a bad meditator. What do I have to do to stop having this discomfort? Not supposed to have it," and I got—I had tied myself in knots around these kinds of things, and because of this kind of negativity bias, perhaps, or this idea that, you know, deal with these problems, or supposed to be just everything supposed to be different. Now I just, "Oh, look at that. I guess the causes and conditions of the day, my breathing is a little bit uncomfortable, and that's okay," and I feel that discomfort in this wider feeling of pleasure. That has healed my tendency to be preoccupied by the shoulds, the judgments, the idea that I'm wrong. Something relaxes that way.

This idea of there's a Dharma pleasure, a pleasure not of the senses, not of the flesh. Something that kind of belongs more to the wellspring that we allow for, that we open up to, and then we allow ourselves to be conditioned by it. There's an art in allowing ourselves to be influenced by that. Perhaps in your daily life, there are moments, situations where you feel something like this but maybe you're not—you don't linger long enough in it. You have your to-do list, "I'll go to the next thing." You jump in your car and you're tense driving. But the fact that you just were in the park with a friend and going for a nice walk and feeling it peaceful, that's beside the point once you get in your car to go to the next important thing. But what about lingering or staying with these feelings? Some of these divine pleasures can—we benefit the most if we allow them to take them in. We let them, "Oh, this is good, in spite of the fact that I feel unhappy right today." There is also this goodness here.

If we get preoccupied with our unhappiness, we're going to be probably more likely influenced by the unhappiness in a negative way. But if we allow ourselves to be unhappy but feel it in a wider field of something that feels easeful or pleasant or open, then that can be an influence that heals some of the unhappiness. So what are some of the things that we can feel? Some of it is a global awareness of the body that's bigger than any particular place where we feel uncomfortable or feel pain in the body. It's not always available to us, but there might be some feeling of a subtle vibration or subtle energy flow or subtle tingling or subtle spaciousness. One of the things that's happened to me over the years of practice: I have lots of space in my body now. At least that's what it feels like to me. It feels like a very spacious, beautiful, big place there. I close my eyes and I was so surprised. Some years ago, I started going once a year to the Community College nearby that has an anatomy lab where they spend time with a cadaver that's all cut open. You can see the inside. I was so surprised—there's no space in there. It's just packed with organs and everything, like, "Wow!" But they don't have any space. I have lots of space. The space is not real space, but it's the space that, you know, just somehow I've experientially—I feel the space. I feel spacious, very inside and around, very spacious. That spaciousness feels nice.

When I was younger, I didn't think that space like that was something to focus on. Now I feel that it's kind of like you go into a big sacred space, and it's a space in the high ceilings and everything that somehow makes the place feel kind of sacred or quiet or peaceful. So to feel the spaciousness within, for me, is a positive conditioning force. Sometimes it's some of the things that we do that has a positive influence because of the goodness of doing it—being generous, not giving, but giving which is generous, or giving that has a feeling of love with it. Or honesty—not the honesty that's a duty, but the honesty that sets something free

inside. You're not hiding or contracted, something that de-contracts us. To feel that, feel the goodness of honesty, of truthfulness, the kindness, compassion, that kind of kindness and compassion—again, that's not a should, not a duty, not like, you know, "I'm supposed to, I'm a good Buddhist, I'm supposed to be this way, I'm going to kind of buckle down to be kind," but rather to discover how to open, allow for a softness, a tenderness where, of course, you want to be kind. Of course that's good.

All these things, learning how to do these things in a way—discovering your way, not someone else's way. We're doing life and going through life. You do things, you speak things, you act in ways that feels really good for you on the inside out. Some people, sometimes in Buddhism, they talk about actions which are beautiful, but I think the beauty is not the external grace in which you do things, but rather the feeling of beauty from the inside out as you do it. What does it take to do things in a beautiful way? I don't think you can do them in a hurry. I think hurry interferes with any of this deeper well-being that can recondition us and heal us and show us something different. So it requires something of us, and one of the things it requires is non-hurry, to feel, to be present.

One of the primary forms of Dharmic pleasure that the Buddha emphasized for this purpose, this reconditioning purpose, this way of overcoming preoccupation for sensual pleasure, was the kind of well-being that arises when our attention becomes unified, organized in a unified way to be fully engaged, absorbed in one thing. I say that very carefully, all these words, because I could have said when we just get concentrated on one thing, but to say "concentrated," some people then get fixated, this tight attention. They bear down. They narrow down to really stay and be present. That is not the unified, composed attention with which we get organized around being absorbed in one thing. Some of you may have felt a wonderful feeling of well-being, being absorbed in reading a good novel. Just feel so good, just to be left, you know, the world around you falls away. You get pulled into the novel. Some of you might have a craft you do where you could say, "I'm absorbed in the craft," but you're not fixating on any one part of the craft. It's the whole phenomena that feels good.

You might be idly thinking about things, but your mind hasn't stopped thinking. But everything is organized around the craft. Or playing a musical instrument, or doing art, or going for a walk, sometimes in a natural setting. In meditation, that's the kind of absorption that is possible that the Buddha was emphasizing, that gives birth to a deeper sense of well-being, of joy, of happiness, of delight, and that we're allowed to feel pleasure, Dharmic pleasure. We're allowed to feel good. In fact, to be fixated on what's uncomfortable, what's difficult emotionally, physically, in the world—the fixation is a bad influence on us. The fixation is

stressful. We don't have to ignore the difficulties we have, but we can hold them in a different context than one that we hold by being fixated on it.

So using meditation to begin relaxing the fixations, softening the way we get preoccupied by things, opening up the developing of soft, receptive, floating awareness. Awareness, because it's not fixated, can start becoming aware of the peripheral context of our situation. By "the literal context," what I mean is, if we're involved with our breathing, for example, that's the primary center of our attention. Meditating, we're not only taking in the breathing, hanging on for dear life, but where also the personal attention takes in the goodness, the subtle, very subtle perhaps pleasure, well-being of the situation we're in. Maybe physically to feel where does feel good, and there's often more goodness, more pleasure than most people take advantage of.

Here is an example that I find kind of fascinating. If I feel tense in my body, it feels uncomfortable. I can relax attention and then notice that it's tense somewhere else, and if to deal with that or something else is a problem. But what happened was I ignored the fact that, as I released attention, there was a feeling of subtle pleasure, relief in my shoulders as I relaxed. So what should I focus on? The attention, the painful tension that I'm glad went away, or the pleasure that replaced it? The same relaxation happens. But if I keep focusing on what's negative, or can I focus on the positive side of it? So there's many situations where I've learned to relax, for example, and feel the goodness of the relaxation that I wouldn't have done early in my life, because I'm just going barreling ahead with one preoccupation, concern after the other. Check that off. Relax the shoulders. What's next? What's the next thing to worry about?

Again, the reason not hurrying and taking the time, and chances are there's more non-sensual pleasure, Dharmic pleasure, that's available in a given time than you allow, than you recognize. I've sat at meetings and been impatient, and the impatience didn't go away. But by somehow settling into my body, I could feel there was, wider in my body, there was, in fact, a sense of feeling a little bit alive, nicely vital, relaxing. That created a different context for feeling the impatience. Earlier in my life I would have just been caught by the impatience. Now I know better. Now I think, "Oh, I'm impatient. What else is going on here? And can I feel that larger context of just the pleasure of just being alive right now, and now breathe with the impatience? Now be with it." So not fixated on—it's being held in a wider context. I call this the peripheral attention. To float the attention between the central focus and the peripheral, to be focused on the central focus, what needs attention, but to hold that with the wonderful attention of what feels good, what feels pleasant, that supports its ability to



get absorbed, composed, gathered around, unified about something.

Then, lo and behold, there's this kind of staying very, very still and quiet, and absorbed in something like the breathing, or other things can start producing this deeper wellsprings. I keep using the word "wellsprings" because the Buddha, in talking about this kind of absorption, uses the metaphor, analogy of an underground spring, underwater spring in a lake, a wellspring of water that flows into the lake from below. I think he uses that metaphor purposely, because that's how it can feel inside of us, that this wellspring within us flows from some place within and flows outward and through the body. This vibration, this energy, this tingling, this warmth, this glow, whatever it might—not know how the right term for you is. So to allow ourselves, give time to feel, make room for some other way of feeling. Take the time and room to feel Dharmic pleasure. In this way, pleasure overcomes attachment to pleasure. Isn't that convenient?

The Buddha was very specific about, in the context of ancient India, that we don't use pain to overcome pleasure. We don't use pain to overcome pain. But for him, we use pleasure to overcome the preoccupation both with pain and pleasure. So how might this work for you? I suspect that probably, for many of you, I probably didn't speak about this very well in a way that was specific enough for you. But I hope what I did was at least turn the mirror back to yourself, and to see, you know, what—some way that you know, in your terms and your experience, what I've been talking about, something useful for you to take more time with, and make room for, and not be in a hurry for, and not be tricked by the mind's preoccupations and the mind's to-do list and the mind's previous conditioning that maybe gets you kind of constantly on the treadmill of doing things which actually continue being a poor influence on you. But being in shifting gears to allow a healthy, appropriate new influence, new conditioning that allows you then to take in and benefit from the deeper and deeper way that mindfulness can make it gather you together to be really present for your experience. So just there's more and more nurturing, there's more and more healing, more and more goodness and pleasure in the practice. So I hope this is something that you can identify in yourself and find useful. Thank you for being here today, and we have a couple of minutes. Would anyone like to ask any questions about this, or clarifications, or anything else here behind you?

Bill, and I'll try if he'll. But those of you online, I'll try to look at the chat and see if you have a question. But this question may be somewhat unclear even to myself. What are the grey areas between Dharmic pleasure and sensual pleasure where you can't tell the difference? Which one are you now engaged in? Yes, aware. That is the grey area where we can't tell the difference between Dharmic pleasure and sensual pleasure. Sometimes they come together.

That's part of the reason why it's not so clear. So it takes some time to be able to allow for both to be there. Now, to assume that it should only be one or the other. There's nothing inherently wrong with sensual pleasure, and so we are—so in Buddhism, we're not dismissing sensual pleasure offhand. It's the attachment to it. So as we feel that, dismissing it or feeling that sensual pleasure is wrong doesn't allow us to see how they operate. They can operate together. Can both be there.

Thank you very much, Gil. I remember a quote that I think is from the verses of the elder nuns. I'm not sure, but part of your talk reminded me of: "I take delight in attention to all suffering states. I take delight in attention to all suffering states." That's how I remember it. That's a great one. Yeah, that's a good, fantastic. I think it's a common assumption by people that if you're suffering, that's suffering by itself, that's all that's going on because of this bit negativity. But because of the preoccupation with it, because the ways in which our thinking gets so pulled into that world that we're just thinking about it all the time. But to learn to not be caught in thoughts, to learn how to open up attention into a wider field. It's just the idea of discovering the preciousness of being conscious, of being mindful, being aware, and how awareness of something can feel pleasant, enjoyable, or just a rightness to it. There's freedom in the awareness of it.

So it's possible to be aware of suffering states and actually feel joy, like when I talked about feeling my discomfort with my breathing. Sometimes when I kind of turn towards it with the spacious mind and body, and it's just my ability to do that, I sometimes get a little smile, "Oh, look at that. It's not good to be mindful." Whereas in the past I wouldn't have noticed that, so I suspect something like that. So as I say it again, "I take delight in attention toward all suffering states." Yes, that's a lot better than the alternative. Anything else? Are one as here online? Are you speaking about leaning into the pain, leaning into the pain?

Well, I do know that might be fun, that with the right kind of mindfulness and attention, that could be fun, but not—but so I wouldn't rule it out. But I'm not really encouraging people to lean into the pain. But if you have pain to begin with, you want to be wise about it and want to have lots of options and be able to find your way with it. One of the ways to find your way with it is to hold the pain in a wider field of pleasure, well-being, or freedom of attention, or something. Just hold it in awareness without being caught by it. One of the things that does is allows us to see the pain more clearly so we can be wiser about what to do with it. There's lots of options. So it might be that we should take an aspirin. It might be that we should ignore it. It might be that we should, you know, really bring careful attention to really feel it closely and intimately. There's so many choices, you know? But you first have to stop long

enough to check it out. So anyway, that's my response to that question.

So okay, so maybe that's enough. You know, I kind of feel like I just gave you a hot potato, he, he, and now you have it to practice. He, dear, no, I'll play. You get drastically warmed by it in a nice way. Thank you very much.