

"PLEASURE GETS A BAD RAP"

...or

"PLEASURE – the OVERLOOKED VEHICLE"

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Most people are motivated to check out meditation or delve into a regular practice by wanting to work skillfully with (or get some relief from) some unpleasant experience – like physical pain, negative emotions, spinning mind, lack of concentration, or unhealthy behaviors.

Rarely does someone come to one of my classes because they want to work more skillfully with pleasure.

My teacher, Shinzen Young, has developed a scientific approach to mindfulness that has proven to be particularly effective for those in pain – and in fact, a great many people at his retreats are there for those issues. In fact he wrote the book on it – “Break Through Pain” (and had a tape/CD series of the same name for years that’s been quite successful.)

Right after the book came out, a fellow facilitator and myself led the first “Break Through Pain” weekend workshop, and the strategies we had learned from Shinzen were extremely effective in dramatically lessening suffering (to the point of people being a bit giddy & the whole workshop took on a happy loving tone.)

But then I thought – *what about pleasure?* Sure, pain can motivate us to learn to let go of fixation & the grasping (or craving that the Buddha told us creates suffering.) But I think the subtle (and not so subtle) grasping we all do towards pleasant experience is much harder to identify & release – but thus can be all the more powerful to do so. And my experience & learning has come from through difficult challenges – as well as from changing my relationship to pleasurable experience.

MINDFUL PLEASURE WORKSHOPS

So, I started offering “Mindful Pleasure” workshops. These included helping people tune into pleasant experience that was present but not noticed because the unpleasant experience was ‘louder.’ I also tried to help sensitize them to creating and/or inviting pleasant experience (often in the form of relaxation, ease) in any situation.

I would work with all senses – I’d bring in my speakers and play all sorts of natural & man-made sounds (which always leads to many insights of how sounds stimulate, soothe, assault, and trigger emotional responses throughout the day – affecting our perception & behavior.)

I worked with the body & movement –tuning people into ordinary movements, which could yield unbelievable pleasure & satisfaction with enough mindfulness & sensory clarity.

I brought in food and we did some eating meditation – tuning into the senses of smell, taste, touch, sight and the complex chord of those with our thoughts & feelings adding to the experience.

I introduced restful states of visual, auditory & somatic experience – that can be found or created – i.e. little pockets of safety or soothing places to park that they hadn’t ever considered.

And we got a taste of how ‘letting go of’ and/or relaxing around these experiences created more satisfaction than when we’d cling to them.

Yes, pleasure can be a path to freedom. But the grasping around & through pleasure can be so darned hard to identify – and distinguish from the pleasure itself.

That’s where sensory clarity comes in. Sensory Clarity is what I try to introduce through a childlike fun fascination. Like “Whoa! Check this out!” And the more you explore or ‘check it out’ – the more you see, the more you develop the ability to ‘come in for a close up’ – to see more information of what’s *actually there*.

There is so much going on that we don't even think to look for. The analogy of wine tasters is often used – and I think because it's a good one. If I were to drink wine from a \$50 bottle and a \$500 bottle – they might not taste that different to me – but a wine connoisseur can just by the smell – and then taste – describe so many characteristics (like woody, astringent, clean, flowery, rounded, smoky) and clearly distinguish the qualities of each wine. And whenever I ask such a person how they can discriminate all those flavors in a tiny sip of wine – they always say the same thing; they “Drink a lot of wine.”

Well, the same holds true for sensory clarity. The more you look, the more you see. And at first, it's helpful to have someone guiding the tour – pointing out places to look, ways to cultivate experience, options of ease in the process.

So I have jokingly referred to myself as a “Pleasure Guide” (...and I'm sure you can guess why I don't do that any more) but my goal has been to help facilitate this process of recognizing, appreciating, and not holding onto pleasant experience.

DETECTING GRASPING with PLEASURE

But I am not only am interested in tuning people into pleasure that is present and/or can be cultivated – but in developing the sensory clarity (like the wine tasters) to be able to detect how *grasping can be woven into* the pleasant experience in a way that we often fail to identify.

Here's where I'll give a personal example. When I was an adolescent girl – and in fact this continued through my adult life as a woman – there was an excitement about getting dressed & ready to go out on a date or to a party. There was a thrill about getting the make-up & hair & clothing just so – and if I was running late (as is usually the case with me) that just made it even more exciting. My heart pounded, the anticipation was palpable, and I'd often think of that preparation time as the fun part – sometimes leaving 2 hours to get ready for a 3-hour event.

I know, some of you – especially men – may be saying, “What’s that about?!” (and/or you’ve recognized it in women you’ve had relationships with) – and I’m betting there are plenty of women who understand exactly what I’m saying. I’ve seen plenty of scenes of women sharing this experience.

Well, I’ve been on this (mindfulness) path for a while now and I guess there was a period of time (like maybe a year or two) where I hadn’t gone to anything that required dressing up in any kind of way, and then about a year ago – there was a big event that required much more effort in the appearance department than I’d given in a long while. I found myself having to select clothing, make-up, decide on hair –and spend *way more* time in front of a mirror than I had in weeks.

But it was different this time. I was able to very clearly identify – embedded within the excitement – woven into it – a fear/anxiety flavor (that connected to thoughts of social-based judgment) – which was not at all pleasant.... and was in fact driving this show. There was also a related tension – a grasping onto the ‘high’ of the getting ready.

I noted it all arise almost with surprise like “What is that?” –Surely this had always been going on but this was the first time it was so evident. It was as if noticing for the first time that there was gasoline drizzled into your favorite pudding. (Ok, that was a gross analogy, but you get how the gasoline isn’t helping, right?)

I recognized a familiar habit pattern but now it seemed so foreign. I had to pause as my circuitry needed to adapt and/or rewire to how I perceive & work now.... and, I opted to stay relaxed & present – or rather- go with my new habit – and the whole experience unfolded in stark contrast to the feminine ritual I’d spent a lifetime developing.

Instead of a heart-palpitating excitement, it was a deeply satisfying, relaxed meditation. At the end, instead of exhilaration – I felt peaceful fulfillment.... and yet I managed to still have on the make-up, clothes, etc. (and looked fine) – and was able to stay present & focused in driving, arriving at the event, in really seeing & receiving other people (vs. whatever I used to do – I imagine it

was probably focused on myself – no doubt to see how the package I’d put together was being received – yes, yes, the Ego's Night Out.)

And I will confess that a part of me missed the drama/excitement of it all – but that ‘missing’ arose and passed away – and I now have to smile & laugh a bit at my former habit, but not without compassion – as the ability to discern the suffering within the pleasure came from years of practice – of tasting a lot of ‘wine’ with mindful awareness.

SUMMARY:

PLEASURE CAN BE A GOOD WAY TO GO

So using mindfulness to explore pleasant experience for greater fulfillment is a noble quest. This may include noticing pleasant experience that was always present but not previously noticed, learning to cultivate pleasant experience, or relaxing around pleasant experience so that tension & driveness or grasping is not cultivated as well (– and/or noticing with compassion & kindness when it is — and relaxing around the experience as best you can. A little equanimity goes a long way.)

And as we develop sensory clarity & equanimity with our experience – the dividing lines between pleasant and unpleasant may become blurry – as our judgment of our experience softens – and our natural fascination with the ‘play of life’ leads to a soft, subtle, effortless joy.....which, ok, yes – is pleasant.