**Mindfulness of Breathing and Joie de Vivre**

Here are the relevant passages from the Anapanasati Sutta for this week’s consideration:

“He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to rapture.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to rapture.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.’ Translated by Thanissaro, downloaded from Access To Insight.

As the result of applied (vitakka) and sustained (vicara) attention to the breath sensations, a great deal of the available energy in the body/mind process is freed up because the energy isn’t channeled through the obsessive thinking and impulsive feelings represented by the hindrances. These thoughts and emotions generate metabolic stresses such as high blood pressure, muscle tension (headaches, backaches, stomach cramps, etc.). Prolonged focus on breath sensations reorganize the energy flows, reducing the physical stress, promoting mental tranquility and clarity. The resulting increases in energy flow manifest as piti, translated as rapture or bliss, accompanied by sukha, translated as happiness or pleasure.

Piti is also one of the 7 awakening factors: Mindfulness, investigation, energy/persistent effort, joy, tranquility, concentration and equanimity. The energy that is bound up in the hindrances in the untrained mind becomes activated, and this produces an exciting surge of energy that can manifest in multiple ways.

There’s a French term, joie de vivre, that I’ve appreciated for decades. It literally translates as the joy of being alive. In the Buddhist conceptual analysis of life, one of the 7 awakening factors is piti. When I first read of piti, it was associated with entering into the first jhana, a state of concentration. In the commentaries, mostly dominated by the Visuddhimagga, “In loose usage pìti (happiness) and sukha (pleasure or bliss) are almost synonyms. They become differentiated in the jhána formulas (see IV.100), and then technically pìti, as the active thrill of rapture, is classed under the formations aggregate and sukha under the feeling aggregate. The valuable word “happiness” was chosen for pìti rather than the possible alternatives of “joy” (needed for somanassa), “interest” (which is too flat), “rapture” (which is overcharged), or “zest.” [Downloaded from Visuddhimagga by Buddhaghosa](https://85afaada-a-62cb3a1a-s-sites.googlegroups.com/site/chewdhamma/PathofPurification2011.PDF?attachauth=ANoY7cqJIiGOpa86jgS7DMA9BhvY5x3S2DyWuV4NxBBme99ldQVfiIwSLKPy7cNzZxsBzKu4TG1l2N9wYOm8ExeKgmQ74e-z2Ys-r1MGD-And2FTSdLFpLQMbIwBqekzvFWCUcrRZfP6q1hdGWdbGv2GPUP-DNDfgdoBrXjZtYIOlAUboPtXASm104Jcb6dVZdNtoB78iTDZWqrZ1_S3u7QEs19svkmYKkzJtH30gh0liAhFSdlgqkg%3D&attredirects=0)

My first understanding of piti experientially was ecstatically pleasant, and I must admit, I spent a considerable amount of practice time trying to replicate it. More recently, my understanding of piti is not organized around such strongly attractive conditions. I understand the experience of piti as an enthusiastic interest in what is emerging into awareness, whether the feeling is pleasant or unpleasant.

There is a metaphor that is often used to illustrate the difference between rapture and pleasure: The scene is this: a person is lost in the desert, with great thirst and fatigue, accompanied by emotional exhaustion as a result of stress. Someone approaches this person with the information that a lush oasis is just over the next range of dunes. The feeling that arises with this awareness, motivating movement towards relief, restoring energy and hope is piti. Upon reaching the oasis successfully, eating the fruits there, drinking and bathing in the cool water, provide sukha, pleasure.

There are two conflicting opinions about what piti and sukha are experientially and their functions for the process of awakening. One is the Visuddhimagga view, and the other is the Pali Canon view. They are both related to the experience that is called jhana, usually translated as absorption. The stanzas from the Anapanasati Sutta quoted above are described in the Visuddhimagga as characteristic of the attainment of the first two jhanas, of which there are eight jhanas in total. The Visuddhimagga requires the mastery of at least the first four “jhanas of form” for the practice of vipassana, insight meditation. In the Pali Canon, the attainment of the jhanas is also required, but the content relevant to the details of the jhana are not mentioned.

The Visuddhimagga is a very thick book compiled around the 4th or 5th century of the Common Era (C.E., instead of A.D., anno domini). It is the authoritative text for Theravada Buddhism. In the copy that I have, the topic of the cultivation of concentration as jhana extends from page 80 to page 471! It defines jhana states in excruciating detail, and the experience of piti and sukha are achieved in what are called the first and second jhanas. The way the Visuddhimagga describes these states makes the experience of them truly rare and the result of arduous practice. I believe I experienced them about 20 years or so ago, and they were quite powerful. I later learned that the levels of piti and sukha I experienced were not “authorizeable” within the context of the Visuddhimagga.

Many modern commentators and authors dispute the Visuddhimagga view, suggesting that the experience of jhana is not so dramatic or unattainable, and that the experience of piti and sukha represent qualities of inner awareness in the service of furthering the cultivation of the seven awakening factors. Piti and sukha contribute to the degrees of heightened inner awareness that become more accessible as the result of the freed-up energy that occurs when the body/mind aren’t adversely affected by the hindrances.

There’s a quality of curiosity that develops with this level of practice, that contributes to the development of the 7 awakening factors. The freed-up energy channels through mindfulness, vitakka (directed awareness), vicara (sustained awareness), producing a relaxed, enthusiastic engagement regarding what is emerging into awareness. In the preceding sentence, the awakening factors of mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena, energy/effort, joy and tranquility were described!

This heightened level of practice leads to the next stanza, to be addressed in the next dhamma dialogue:

…He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.’ Translated by Thanissaro, downloaded from Access To Insight.