AN 4.163 — Asubha Sutta: Unattractiveness

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

"Monks, there are these four modes of practice. Which four? Painful practice with slow intuition, painful practice with quick intuition, pleasant practice with slow intuition, & pleasant practice with quick intuition.

"And which is painful practice with slow intuition? There is the case where a monk remains focused on unattractiveness with regard to the body, percipient of loathsomeness with regard to food, percipient of non-delight with regard to the entire world, (and) focused on inconstancy with regard to all fabrications. The perception of death is well established within him. He dwells in dependence on the five strengths of a learner — strength of conviction, strength of conscience, strength of concern, strength of persistence, & strength of discernment — but these five faculties of his — the faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment — appear weakly. Because of their weakness, he attains only slowly the immediacy [1] that leads to the ending of the effluents. This is called painful practice with slow intuition.

"And which is painful practice with quick intuition? There is the case where a monk remains focused on unattractiveness with regard to the body, percipient of loathsomeness with

regard to food, percipient of non-delight with regard to the entire world, (and) focused on inconstancy with regard to all fabrications. The perception of death is well established within him. He dwells in dependence on these five strengths of a learner — strength of conviction, strength of conscience, strength of concern, strength of persistence, & strength of discernment — and these five faculties of his — the faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment — appear intensely. Because of their intensity, he attains quickly the immediacy that leads to the ending of the effluents. This is called painful practice with quick intuition.

"And which is pleasant practice with slow intuition? There is the case where a monk — quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities — enters & remains in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhana: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation — internal assurance. With the fading of rapture he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhana, of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.' With the abandoning of pleasure & pain — as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress — he enters & remains in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. He dwells in dependence on these five strengths of a learner — strength of conviction, strength of conscience, strength of concern, strength of persistence, & strength of discernment — but these five faculties of his — the faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment — appear weakly. Because of their weakness, he attains only slowly the immediacy that leads to the ending of the effluents. This is called pleasant practice with slow intuition. [2]

"And which is pleasant practice with quick intuition? There is the case where a monk — quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities — enters & remains in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhana: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation — internal assurance. With the fading of rapture he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhana, of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.' With the abandoning of pleasure & pain — as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress — he enters & remains in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. He dwells in dependence on these five strengths of a learner — strength of conviction, strength of conscience, strength of concern, strength of persistence, & strength of discernment — and these five faculties of his — the faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment — appear intensely. Because of their intensity, he attains quickly the immediacy that leads to the ending of the effluents. This is called pleasant practice with quick intuition.

"These are the four modes of practice."

Note

1.

According to the Commentary, this means the concentration forming the Path. This is apparently a reference to this passage in Sn 2.1:

What the excellent Awakened One extolled as pure and called the concentration of unmediated knowing: No equal to that concentration can be found. This, too, is an exquisite treasure in the Dhamma. By this truth may there be well-being.

2.

Because the description of pleasant practice here contains the standard jhana formula, while the description of painful practice contains no mention of jhana, some writers have taken this as proof that there is an alternative path to awakening that does not involve the jhanas.

However, this reading ignores the description of how painful practice and pleasant practice can yield either slow or quick intuition. Intuition comes slowly when the five faculties are present in a weak form, and quickly when they are present in an intense form. Now, in both cases, the faculty of concentration — which is defined with the standard formula for the jhanas (SN 48.10) — has to be present for the ending of the effluents. Because this is true both for painful practice and for pleasant practice, both sorts of practice need jhana in order to succeed.

See also: AN 4.162; AN 4.164; AN 4.165.