AN 4.163 — AN 4:163 Unattractiveness | Asubha Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Source revision: sha256:06db98f11dbe5b66e3b290b0f8bcaa44ec5f2fe3d1e1b74062fcf0baea044036

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Text

Unattractiveness

Asubha Sutta (AN 4:163)

“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 in food, percipient of distaste for every 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 one in training—strength of conviction, strength of a

sense of shame, strength of a sense of compunction, 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 immediacy1 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 in food, percipient of distaste for every 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 one in training—strength of conviction, strength of a sense of shame, strength of a sense of compunction, 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 jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: 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 jhāna, 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 elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.2 He dwells in dependence on these five strengths of one in training—strength of conviction, strength of a sense of shame, strength of a sense of compunction, 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.

"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 jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: 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 jhāna, 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 elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. He dwells in dependence on these five strengths of one in training—strength of conviction, strength of a sense of shame, strength of a sense of compunction, 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."

Notes

1. See AN 4:162, Note 1.

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

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 jhānas (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 jhāna in order to succeed.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: SN 8:4; SN 54:9; AN 10:29