True Happiness

May, 2001

Every night we have the chant that starts, “May I be happy.” And it would seem to go without saying. Everybody wants to be happy. And yet, when you look at the way people live their lives, they don’t seem to pay much attention to what happiness is, what true happiness would be. And it’s because of this that they often get misled by all kinds of things out in the world. People who say that happiness comes from wealth, happiness comes from status, happiness comes from relationships, happiness comes from interconnectedness. All kinds of strange theories are floating around. And we don’t pay careful attention to this major issue in our lives. That’s one of the things that’s really ironic about human beings. To think we want most in life, and yet we don’t look at it systematically. And it turns out that to attain happiness, we first have to understand suffering, to understand what’s causing it. We look clearly at things in terms of cause and effect, what you’re doing, what comes as a result. This is why one of the central teachings of the Buddha is on karma, your actions. Just understanding what you’re doing, when you act, what are the consequences of your actions. Again, this is something that would seem to be something we would be very clear about, because it’s right in front of our noses, and yet we’re often looking further away. Things that are more abstract, things that are more inspiring, things that will carry us away from being responsible for our actions, and for really having a sense of what it is that a human being is capable of. How far can our actions take us to happiness? The Buddha discovered there are basically two kinds of actions. Actions that continue the round of rebirth in samsara. And within that class there are three subclasses. Things that lead to pleasure, actions that lead to pain, and actions that are a mixture of the two. But then there’s another class of action altogether, one that leads outside of samsara, leads to the end of action, as he said. And that’s what the path is. In other words, the Buddha discovered that through our own efforts the mind can open up to a place, the inside, something you could touch at the mind that opens up to the deathless, where there is no change at all. And it’s a totally different kind of happiness from the happiness of day-to-day life. In a lot of ways it’s hard even to talk about it, because, as the Buddha said, there’s nothing in day-to-day existence that can compare. Which is why he basically said, “Okay, do the practice. See where it leads.” And everybody who’s followed the practice to the end has come out and said, “The Buddha was right. Total happiness.” Total well-being. Total freedom. And that whatever effort that went into the practice, it was totally worth it. A lot of people don’t like to be told that there’s going to be effort or hardship in the path. And they think, “Oh, all those many lifetimes, who wants that? Let’s try to find something that’s quicker and easier.” But what is quicker and easier? Well, the kind of happiness we see all around us. You have to ask yourself, “Are we going to let ourselves be content with that? Is that all we want out of life? Just to be lulled into a sense of security? Well, this is as good as it gets, and so we should satisfy ourselves with it.” Is that the kind of person the Buddha was? You read his life story, when he became upset over seeing his first sick person, his first old person, his first dead person. He had a strong sense of samvega. And all his friends tried to try to talk him out of it. And they said, “Hey, this is as good as it gets. You’re rich, you’re young, you’re healthy, you’re happy.” All the good things in life. And the Buddha said, “If this is as good as it gets, it’s pretty miserable. Human life isn’t worth it.” That’s the kind of person the Buddha was. And he was willing to put his life on the line to see if there might possibly be a way that through human effort we can find a happiness that isn’t dependent on these things, like age, grow ill, and die. And we’re fortunate that he found it. And he was able to teach it to other people. So here’s this possibility that lies open before us, total happiness that human beings can attain. That may not be immediate. We may not be able to get it right away. But there will come a point in life when we follow the path that it will be there right in the present moment. And what’s the alternative? Well, just continuing going along the way we’ve been going for who knows how many lifetimes. People get discouraged about a many-lifetime path. But they forget about the many lifetimes they’ve been wandering aimlessly around. And there’s a lot more suffering there than there is on the path. And there’s no hope for any escape at all. At least the path is a way out. Because the happiness that the Buddha discovers when this nice woman comes along, is not dependent on conditions, like the image we had this afternoon of the flower that depends on garbage. This is totally independent. It doesn’t depend on anything at all. That’s the only kind of happiness that can be really secure. Because anything that’s dependent on conditions is going to change as those conditions change. And it’s the nature of conditions that they’ve got to change. There’s no two ways about it. So interconnectedness, interdependence, is not happiness at all. It’s not the solution to our problems. It’s actually the problem. The interconnectedness of all things, the fact that a slight change over here, a slight change over there, can have big repercussions on our state of being, right here, right now. So when you make up your mind to follow the path, and it is a path with a definite goal, the Buddha never said that the path is the goal. He has four noble truths, remember? The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering. The fourth noble truth is the path is the goal. They’re two different things. So we work on the path, and then when the goal comes in, you can put the path aside. And in the meantime, while you’re on the path, it’s not that it’s all going to be suffering and stress. He talks about virtue, concentration, discernment. These are all good things. On the one hand, you just feel good practicing them, the sort of practice that you can feel good about yourself and practicing them, and look at the way the world promises happiness in so many ways. Well, to get ahead, you’ve got to be able to get past this person and outwit that person and cheat this person. In other words, they basically say you’ve got to do things that you don’t feel right about doing. But the Buddha’s path is good in the middle, good in the middle, good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. They’re things that are good to do in and of themselves, and they lead to a sense of well-being. As you go along the path, that well-being gets stronger and stronger. It gives you more and more energy to follow the path and to finally get to the point where you don’t need the nourishment even of the path anymore. That’s when the mind is totally free, totally independent, totally beyond anything you can describe. This last part of the meditation, last week I was going over the index in the website Access to Insight, and noticed they didn’t have an entry on dispassion, viraga. That’s a really basic thing. After all, the Buddha said viraga is the highest of dharmas, dispassion, the point where the mind lets go of things, is no longer colored by things. So I searched around in the website to see what references there might be, and there are basically two. One where the Buddha says, “This is the highest of all dharmas,” and another set where he says, “The Arahant has gone beyond both passion and dispassion.” In other words, there comes a point where the person who has reached the end of the path is beyond all dharmas, has relinquished all dharmas, has put them all aside, conditioned and unconditioned. When you think about that, that’s where the mind begins to start short-circuiting. How can someone be beyond both passion and dispassion? Well, when you’re thinking in words and thinking in concepts, it’s impossible. But, as the Buddha said, the Arahant is like a bird flying through space. You just cannot trace his path or her path. It’s totally beyond conceiving. It’s that free, that state at the end of the path. You can talk about the path. You can talk about the goal and similes, but ultimately everything, language, just breaks down. It’s that radically free. Now, the possibility is there within each of us. We can aim for it or not, as we like. If you don’t aim for it, don’t think about the fact that this might be a long, multi-lifetime path that you’re following. Remember the alternative, many lifetimes of just wandering around aimlessly, not knowing where you’re going, having no real purpose. Is that how you want to live? The opportunity is here. The thing that we want most in life is available to us, true, unalloyed happiness. And it’s up to us to decide if we’re going to take on the challenge.

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