Happiness Inside

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The whole reason why we’re here is because we’re looking for happiness. And we want something better than ordinary happiness. Because we’ve looked around us and we’ve seen how it’s tied up in all kinds of unhappiness. Talk about the interconnectedness of the world. And a lot of times the happiness of one person is going to depend on the suffering or inconvenience of somebody else, especially if it’s the kind of happiness that depends on physical things. And if you reflect on that with any sensitivity at all, a strong sense of awe comes up. It’s the enormous amount of suffering that’s involved in this world for the type of happiness that most people look after. So the question arises, is there another kind of happiness? So we start looking inside. One of the reasons why we have that chant on the requisites, reflecting on clothing, food, shelter, and medicine, is to make a stop and think every day. Monks are supposed to reflect on these things while they’re using them. When you put on your robe, when you eat your food, when you use medicine, when you go into your house. Realizing the fact that you were born with this human body. It’s like being born with this big caping wound, this big hole that has to be looked after. The body just can’t live on its own without food, can’t live without shelter, without clothing, without medicine. It needs these things. And to be provided with these things, just think about where your food comes from. All the suffering that goes into the planting and the harvesting. Here we’re just talking about vegetarian food. The planting, the harvesting, the distribution, the buying and selling, the preparation. There’s a lot of suffering and stress in that causal chain. The same with clothing, the same with shelter, the same with medicine. No matter how circumspect you try to be and how you feed off the resources of the world, the fact that you’ve got a body means that you have to feed off of these things. So you don’t have to look into the issues of past lives and future lives. Just look at the present life and see all the stress and the instability that ordinary pleasure, that ordinary happiness depends on. Even if you do get the body functioning reasonably well, it’s still in a very unstable state. There can be injuries, there can be diseases. All kinds of things can go wrong, especially if you’ve built up your happiness around things that depend on the body. It means that that happiness is always setting you up for a fall. So we look inside. You might call the Buddha’s teaching the serious pursuit of true happiness, the happiness that doesn’t change into something else, and the happiness that doesn’t depend on stress and suffering, either for yourself or for other people. That’s what the Buddha was looking for. When you really think about it, that would be something we would all like to have. The question is, how single-mindedly are you going to pursue this? Because a lot of people pursue it a little way, and then they give up. Lead a nice moral life, have a little practice on the side. For some people, that seems to be enough. It’s up to each of us to ask ourselves, “Is that going to be enough for us, or are we going to want more?” In the meditation, your mind settles down, stays with the breath for a while, and there’s a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of wholeness, that comes into this. This is a very visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself. Realize that happiness isn’t something that just comes floating on. It’s something you have to work at, something you have to do, something you can’t be impatient about. If you’re impatient, then you spoil things. So it requires a lot of training, a lot of circumspection, a lot of restraint. But it can be done. And you find that even though the states of concentration you get into are not necessarily the ultimate in happiness, there’s a sense of well-being, there’s a sense of ease that’s independent of things outside. That, in and of itself, is a real treasure. So you work at that. But there’s something that’s always nagging in the back of your mind. Why do you have to work at these things? Why can’t they just sort of be there? That’s why the Buddha ultimately decided that the ease and the pleasure of concentration were not enough. They tell the story of how he started with his first teachers, and they taught him various fine states of concentration, states of nothingness, states of neither perception or non-perception. As far as they were concerned, that was it. That was the ultimate goal. And it took a lot of wisdom and discernment on his part to realize, “No, this can’t be it. There’s still some measure of suffering and stress involved in this. Is there something better?” And it was that determination to look for something better. If you think about it, the Buddha was extremely demanding. Nothing less than happiness totally pure. He wouldn’t settle for anything less. And when he found it and came back to teach people, he wanted them not to settle for anything less. He said, “Look, this is available. This is possible. It can be done.” So even though his teachings start out with the issue of suffering and stress, the first noble truth, the underlying thrust is one that’s based on a motivation of compassion and good will, both for yourself and for other people. And happiness does play a role in the Four Noble Truths. Look there under the Truth of the Path, under the heading of Right Concentration. First jhana, pleasure and rapture born of seclusion. Second jhana, pleasure and rapture born of concentration. Third rapture, physically touching ease with your body. It’s not that there’s no place for happiness. Just for the Buddha, the only happiness that really deserves that name is the happiness that comes through training the mind. So that’s what we’re working on right here. And the question of how far we’re going to pursue that, that’s really up to each of us. But if you’re really serious about your happiness, and if you’re not serious about your happiness, what are you serious about? If you’re really serious about your happiness, you want to pursue this as far as you can. See if what the Buddha said is really true. There have been lots of people over the centuries who’ve said, “Yup. What the Buddha said back 2,500 years ago is still true today, and it’s going to be true as long as there are people with minds to train.” So as long as there is a possibility, it makes a lot of sense to check it out. And even though it involves a lot of sacrifices, well, look at what you’re sacrificing. If you really take a good long look at things, don’t just look at things through half the story. That’s the problem with a lot of us. We look at a particular thing, only a part of the story. We don’t look at the whole story, the pleasures that come from things outside. The Buddha never denied that there is a pleasure there. There is a sense of satisfaction. There is a sense of attraction. But look at what it comes mixed up with. What other things do you have to buy as part of the package? And it’s our unwillingness to look at the other side of the package. That’s why we get so deluded about things, and why we cause ourselves so much suffering. So look at the whole story from beginning to end. Like when you’re reflecting on the requisites. Where does that food come from? What are the various stages it has to go through? And then you’ve eaten it. Okay, and then what happens next? And so on down the line. When you really start thinking about these things in large terms, over the long period of time, you begin to realize that the pleasure, the happiness, is not really worth all the suffering and stress that goes into it. A world of interconnectedness can’t really be a truly happy place. Just look at the weather. We’re having great weather here right now. But out in the Midwest, they’re having a horrible heatwave, the worst weather they’ve had in years. It’s all part of the same weather system. And that’s what interconnected systems are like. They never really find balance. There’s never really a sense of perfection in every part of the system. So as long as we’re looking for happiness, it’s dependent on those kinds of factors. We’re setting our sights too low. So the path is all mapped out. So the basic motivation is that desire for happiness, both for ourselves and for everybody else. But you realize that it entails an awful lot of circumspection, an awful lot of precision and skill in the way you live. Because this interconnected system we live in is a very complex and very tricky thing. As you master it, you find that it does come to those—and it has these spots where it opens up into something else. Happiness is not dependent on conditions. It’s not dependent on balancing all sorts of complex factors, all these feedback loops we’ve got here in our lives. It opens up to a pleasure that is absolute without cause. It doesn’t depend on anything at all. It’s just there. When you come to think about it, that’s the only happiness really worthy of the name. you

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