Counterintuitive Happiness

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The Buddha was a very demanding person. He decided that the only happiness he was going to accept was one that he could really depend on. You might say he was a real connoisseur of happiness, looking at all the different pleasures, all the different forms of well-being or ease or bliss. These are the various things, in other words, sukha and pali, and realizing that none of them were really worth it in and of themselves, all the effort that goes into attaining them, unless they could lead to something that was higher and better, a higher form of happiness, ultimately to one that wouldn’t change, one that was outside of time and space. That doesn’t mean you have to look outside for it. Actually, you look in and within. But that’s one of the great paradoxes. It’s by going within that you get outside of these dimensions. So in this way, the Buddha’s quest is the same as everybody else’s quest. We all want happiness. Everything we do is for the sake of well-being, for ease, for pleasure, on one level or another. So the Buddha made use of happiness to make use of this quest, made use of this desire in setting out his teaching. He had a difficult task. Once he had found the Daedalus, he couldn’t bring it out to show anybody else, to show how good it was. He had to find various ways of convincing them that it was a worthwhile project, that it was possible for people to attain the Daedalus. Part of this, of course, was helped by his own personal presence. On top of that, he had all these psychic powers. He could use them. But still, the important part was how he formulated the teaching and how he laid out the path. And he laid it out as a quest for happiness. The beginning of wisdom, he said, is that question, “What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That’s a question we can all resonate with. He says, “If you’re serious about this, I’ll show you how to get there, what to do.” Because he saw, to begin with, that the happiness that comes from doing things that you know are good, that are helpful, is a deeper and more long-lasting form of happiness than simply tasting sensual pleasures—nice sights, nice sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. These things come and go very quickly. And the actual happiness or sense of pleasure we take from these things is even shorter than the existence of the things themselves. Psychologists have done studies to show how people have a remarkable inability to gauge how much their actions are going to result in happiness, even things that they’ve done many times before. They work for something, blowing up in their minds their attitude of what the happiness is they’re going to get from it. Then once they’ve got it, it doesn’t take too long for them to get indifferent and to start hungering for something else. Then they go looking for the same sort of thing all over again, blowing up in their minds their anticipation of what kind of happiness it’s going to lead to. It’s precisely this habit that the Buddha wants us to cut through. That’s why he has so many descriptions of the negative side of sensual pleasures. He’s not denying that there’s a pleasure there. He admits that there is pleasure, but it’s a lot less than we normally think. He wants to point that out to us. A lot of people don’t like to hear this because they’re too wound up in going on the quest. They’ve got too much at stake, they think. It’s only when people begin to come to their senses and realize that this is a pretty futile occupation, a futile pastime, that anticipating happiness is going to be a lot less than you anticipate, and really in areas that you should know better. So he points out the drawbacks of sensual pleasures and points out the value of a sense of inner well-being that comes when you know you’ve done something right, when you’ve done something skillful. You can define happiness as the perfect fit between your desires and reality. All too often we approach that in an unskillful way, either trying to impose our desires on things in ways that they just can’t be. Trying to force them into behaving in ways that they can’t behave. Or else going to the other extreme and just saying, “Okay, I’m just going to totally accept things as they are.” And you end up accepting a lot of things you don’t really have to accept and you shouldn’t accept. It’s finding that middle ground. Knowing how things can be changed, what things should be changed, what things shouldn’t be changed. That takes a lot of skill, which is why the Buddha has us approach life as a skill, instead of coming into life with a lot of pre-programmed ideas or pre-programmed little wise statements that we carry around with us all the time. He says, “Actually look at what you’re doing. Look at the results. Learn from those things.” For example, while you’re meditating here, notice what way of focusing on the breath feels good. If it doesn’t feel good, you can try to change it. Either change your focus or change the breath. And how do you go about changing the breath in such a way that you’re not putting it into a straitjacket? That’s something you learn, again, by watching cause and effect right here, right now. And have the right attitude towards the skill. A lot of people get frustrated. They sit and meditate a little bit and nothing seems to be happening. They say, “Well, this must not be for me,” and they get up and go away. Remember, skills take time. They take patience. You have to develop the proper attitudes for keeping with something. Think of some skill you’ve developed in the past. It might be a sport, it might be cooking, it might be carpentry—anything that requires practice. And how did you get through it? What were the attitudes you had to develop? Well, bring those same attitudes to the practice. I once had a student who was having real problems with the issue of desire in his practice. One day he was just whining, whining, whining to get awakened. Another day he was not wanting to meditate at all. He was swinging back and forth. And so when he asked me about this, I asked him, “Well, think about a skill you’ve learned in the past that you desire a good result. You desire that the skill, but you can’t let that desire get in the way. If you don’t have the desire, you’re not going to work on the skill. When the desire gets in the way, all you can think about is the result. You don’t really get the causes right.” Well, he went back that night and thought about it for a while. He came back the next morning and said, “I don’t have any skills.” A few days later, for the evening job, I asked him to saw a piece of wood, and it was true. He didn’t have any skills. He couldn’t even saw a piece of wood. When I called this to his attention, he said, “You mean there’s a skill to this? This is the problem with living in a country where everything is instant and automatic. But think about some skills you’ve mastered in the past, and then bring that same attitude to the meditation. If things are not working, don’t beat yourself over the head, saying that you’re never going to get it. It doesn’t reflect on you. It’s just normal for people to make mistakes as they get started. Even well along the way, it’s very easy for mistakes to get made. So simply note the fact that there’s a mistake and figure out,”How else can I do this? There must be some other way.” Learn how to use your own ingenuity in changing your focus, changing the pressure of your focus, changing the place of your focus. See if that helps. Changing your perception of the breath. When you think of the breath coming in, what sort of things have to be done for the breath to come in? Are those perceptions accurate? Could you breathe in some other way? Do you have to pull the breath in? Do you have to push it out? Will it come in on its own if you don’t pull? And when it comes in, where does it come in? Exactly what is the breath? Is it just the air coming in and out of the lungs? Is it the energy flow in the body? Is it both? How many levels of energy flow are there? There are lots of things to explore right here. One of the most important things that you can gain from reading books is giving you other ideas of how to approach something when your meditation is not working. Open up other attitudes, avenues of thought. And with time, you begin to find that middle ground where you can educate your desires, learn how to work with reality, play with reality, so that you can finally get that perfect fit where the desires and the reality fit together like a hand in a glove. Because happiness is what Buddhism is all about. Nirvana, the ultimate happiness, that’s where it all aims. And although it’s to be expected, it’s not that there’s going to be suffering and pain and sometimes discouragement in the practice. It’s not all that way. Sometimes it can be very pleasant, very blissful. Because what the Buddha has us do is be serious about our pursuit of happiness. Not in the sense of being grim, but really look at what you’re doing, looking at the results you’re getting. Are they satisfactory? If not, what else can you do? What changes can you make? It’s a very commonsensical approach, but most of us, when we come to religious or meditative affairs, tend to abandon our common sense. So keep your mind to yourself. You’re working at a skill. The pleasure comes partly in the doing, partly in the results that come from the doing. Like we were talking today about the concept of merit. Many of us think that merit has very little to do with meditation, but it’s very much interconnected. Three big ways of making merit are generosity, virtue, and meditation. And they’re all interrelated. The practice of generosity, either giving things, giving your time, giving your energy, teaches you how much a sense of well-being can come into the mind simply by the act of giving, letting go of something, doing something that you know is going to help other people. Because what it does is it creates a more spacious mind. You’re not constantly focused on just hoarding, hoarding, hoarding things, which gets more and more narrow all the time. You realize that you’ve got the energy, you’ve got the resources, you can give. That puts you in a sense of wealth, gives you in a position of wealth, and also teaches you that the good things in life come from giving. It’s an important attitude to bring to the meditation. Too many people come here thinking, “What can I get out of this meditation?” But if you’re used to giving, you say, “What do I give here?” You give your time, you give your energy, you give your ingenuity, and then the getting will come on its own. Virtue is also intimately connected with the meditation. When you don’t harm other people, don’t harm yourself, then when you sit down to meditate, you’re not bringing in a lot of regrets. All too often, if you have done things that you regret, then when you sit down, the mind begins to quiet down. There it is, your memory of what you did, and it gets in the way of the meditation. If you try to deny that you did something wrong with that, it becomes a little lie inside the mind. The meditation doesn’t go very well at all when there are lies in the mind. But when you can sit down and look back on your actions, there’s nothing you regret, nothing you have to lie to yourself about. Regret is like an open wound. Lies or inner denial, it’s like scar tissue over the wound. Either way, it’s not a comfortable place to sit down to get the mind to settle in. At the same time, you see the benefits that come from restraint. Certain things you could do, but you don’t do because they’re beneath your principles. So when you come to the meditation with us, you get training in both giving and in restraint. It gets a lot easier. You can give time to the meditation. You can give your energy. It’s part of the same momentum. And you find it easier to restrain your mind. There are lots of things you could think about during this hour that nobody would know. But you realize that wouldn’t do anything for you. It’s much better to focus in on the breath, work on your meditation, so you learn to restrain your thoughts. Again, you’ve had practice in restraint, practice in giving. You’ve seen the sense of well-being that comes both from generosity and restraint. All this is pretty counterintuitive. We think that happiness comes in getting, happiness comes in doing whatever you want. But as you gain training, you realize that that’s too simplistic. That’s an attitude. There will be a gaining of the happiness. There will be a freedom that comes with happiness, but it comes first with the giving and the restraint. When you do these things skillfully, the unexpected results come. And as the Buddha found when he approached the whole issue of happiness very skillfully, things opened up in his mind that he didn’t anticipate. So remember, this is a quest for happiness we’re involved in. It’s a serious quest, but at the same time, it is for happiness, so it’s not grim. As you work on it, there’s a deeper and deeper and deeper sense of well-being that touches parts of the heart that simple pleasures would never be able to reach.

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