Happiness

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We all want happiness, but we don’t know what to do with it when we get it. We try to grab onto it, hold onto it, and it just slips through our fingers. And in the grabbing and the holding on, we create a fair amount of suffering. So it’s important that we learn how to deal with happiness, how to treat it in the right way, how to use it properly so it turns into more happiness. That’s what the Buddhist teachings on merit are all about. We don’t tend to think of merit too much when we’re meditating. Merit sounds like an affair of people who come up in the morning and bring donations and go back without meditating. But that’s not the case. The word merit covers all activities that lead to happiness, starting with generosity, virtue, and going into meditation. Even the attainment of stream entry, which is the first level of awakening, is said to be an extremely meritorious thing. It’s productive of a lot of happiness. So as we’re meditating, we’re trying to bring about happiness. A lot of the Buddhist teachings on happiness are counterintuitive. Happiness involves making sacrifices, giving things up, enduring pain many times. There’s a difference between happiness and just simple pleasures. Happiness goes deep. Pleasures are superficial. As we grasp after pleasures, it’s like trying to grasp after the reflections on water. As soon as you touch the water, the reflections change, which is why you can’t grasp them. But happiness gets down into the water. The images of the mind in a state of bliss, a state of rapture, a state of ease that comes with concentration, are images of total immersion, with you right at the middle, producing the happiness. It wells up from within. So think of those images as you’re meditating. Engage your actions against what the images imply. The first one the Buddha gives is of a battle between two bathmen working water through a ball of bath powder. In fact, in the old days, they didn’t use soap. They used bath powder, and they turned it into kind of a dough-like substance by kneading water through it and then scrubbing yourself with it. So think of making bread. You work the liquid in through the flour until it all becomes dough. In other words, once there’s a sense of ease in the body, you allow it to permeate throughout the body. Let it work through the body. Let it survey the body from the top of the head down to the toes and all around. And sometimes the pleasant feeling is a feeling of movement back and forth. But if you can also find a sense of ease that’s very still, that’s even better. Let that sense of stillness flow throughout the body. The second image is of a spring welling up from a lake, cool water coming in from the spring, filling the whole lake. As you settle down and the mind gets more centered in one spot in the body, there’s a sense that the bliss and the ease come from that spot and they spread out, spread out, spread out from there. And you don’t have to go out following them. You just stay at the center and allow the sense of ease to spread out to the body. The third image is of a bunch of lotuses in a lake. The waters of the lake now are still. And the lotuses are still there in the middle of this still lake, saturated with the water from their roots to the tips of the flowers. And there may be a little sense of an oxygen exchange happening at the surface of the body. But otherwise, the things in the body are pretty still. Your sense of what the breath is changes. It now feels more like a field that’s connected throughout the body, so you don’t have to pull in and push out, pull in, pull out. You don’t have to push out. Simply by connecting everything, the breath flows on its own. There’s still background energy, which is enough to keep everything going. The fourth image is of a person sitting surrounded by a white cloth. So there’s nothing in the body that’s not surrounded by white cloth. It’s all around. Now there’s a stillness and there’s a sense of mental clarity that comes as well. As things settle down and the sense of ease turns to simple equanimity. In other words, you’re taking these feelings of pleasure, feelings of ease that you can create in the body with the breath, and then you learn how to put them to use in a skillful way. So that when happiness comes, you know what to do with it. Instead of grasping at it and trying to clutch the reflection of the moon in the water, you allow the reflection to stay there. And you simply become one with the water. You allow yourself to be immersed in the water. There’s no need to clutch. There’s no need to hold on. The next step is simply to stay there. All too often, when there’s a sense of ease, a sense of stillness, it comes in the concentration. We sit with it for a little bit and say, “Okay, enough of that. What’s next?” Our main problem is just that particular thought. We’re learning not to identify with it. In fact, that’s a lot of what the function of this sense of stillness in the body is. When thoughts come and go, you learn not to identify with them because you know they’re going to destroy the stillness. And this is more valuable. It’s because you’ve got something so good here that you find it easier and easier to let go a lot of the different thoughts that used to take over the mind. You’ve got something better that those thoughts are going to destroy. And so even though the attachment to stillness here is precisely that, there’s an attachment, you’ve learned how to take that attachment and use it skillfully. This is a common theme throughout all the Buddhist teachings. You take your desires, you learn how to use your desires skillfully. You take your desire for pleasure, and you take it seriously. If you really are intent on having a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of happiness, watch carefully to see what creates it. Over the course of that, you find that you get more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing. You see more and more clearly the way the mind creates a lot of unnecessary suffering for itself, unnecessary stress. And you learn that you see the way to not create that stress, simply because you’re really attached to happiness. There’s a similar teaching for the precepts. Realizing that you wouldn’t like to be killed, you realize that other people wouldn’t like to be killed either. How can you do to them what you wouldn’t want done to you? So you take your desire for life, you take your desire for well-being, and you use it in such a way that it makes you a more and more harmless person. You don’t like to have anyone steal your things, commit adultery with people who are close to you, you don’t like having people lie to you or speak to you in harsh ways or divisive ways, or waste your time with idle chatter. So again, these are desires that you learn to take seriously and realize that the implications require that you not engage in that kind of behavior as well. And as we come to meditation, the same principle applies to you. You want happiness, you want ease. You’re willing to do what’s needed to create it and to learn the skill that’s going to maintain it. And in doing so, you learn an awful lot about the mind. You gain a lot of the insight that’s required to help you let go of all the unskillful patterns of thought that ordinarily would take over your mind, simply by recognizing ease when it comes and learning what to do with it. All too often we find it difficult to focus on ease. It’s a lot easier to focus on pain. It grabs your attention. Ease tends to be more gentle, less well-defined. You have to be very attentive, first to detect it, and then to notice how it comes and goes and what you can do to keep it there so you don’t go drifting off. So many of us like pleasure because it’s a state that seems to indicate, “Well, now we can be lazy, we can let down our guard.” And the Buddha says, “Don’t let down your guard. Always be heedful.” Because there’s more to life than simple ease that comes from breathing. There’s the greater bliss, the greater ease that comes from release. But the ease that comes from breathing is part of the path. So you work on this so that you can get to the more refined, higher, and more stable levels of pleasure. Once there’s a sense of ease, you really have to work to make sure that you don’t start drifting off to sleep. For many of us, that’s what we associate with a sense of ease and relaxation in the body. It’s time to go to sleep. The mind says, “Well, you have to learn to fight that.” And as you get more and more interested in what’s going on in the body in the present moment, that element of interest should be enough to help fight off the drowsiness. It’s one of the ways of fighting off drowsiness. Or you can use that sense of ease to contemplate the thoughts that normally would come in and grab the mind’s attention and pull it away. If one of them comes in, you can watch and see exactly where was the attractiveness, where was the attraction to that particular thought. This is another skill, because many times the thought comes and you find yourself gone. You got hooked. So you go back and reestablish your stance and wait for the next one. If you keep this up, the time will come when you begin to see the thoughts more and more clearly and understand where the attraction is, where the interest is, why the mind falls for these things, and what it can do not to fall for them. That’s the important principle of insight. Because seeing that if you fall for them, there’s going to be stress, there’s going to be suffering, even if it’s the slightest bit of stress. You don’t want it. This requires a reorganization of your values. For so many of us, a lot of our entertainment in life is following our thoughts, following the thoughts that come through our mind, following the words that come through the mind. But if you can see them simply as the arising and passing way of stress and really nothing much else of any worth or any value, there will be less and less and less power over the mind. These are a few of the ways in which we can learn to take our happiness, our sense of really put it to good use. Because we’re more observant, we take our desire for happiness more seriously. And we find that being attentive and being heedful really makes a difference. So it’s not just, as John Lee says, having a coconut and cracking it open and eating it and that’s it. You learn how to save some of your coconuts so you can plant them and they grow into more coconuts and then more. You take your profits and you reinvest them. That’s the principle of the practice. Because you realize that if you don’t, things will run out. It’s interesting to note that the Buddha’s last words were words on heedfulness. And the texts tell us that in the assembly of the monks who were there with him that night, the least advanced of them was a stream-enter, someone who had already attained first level of awakening. Even then, the Buddha said, “Be heedful.” His last words were words to the wise, but people were not quite wise enough yet. They had already attained a level of certainty in the practice, but even they were told to be heedful. So much more so. Those instructions apply to those of us who haven’t gotten there yet. So when a sense of well-being comes, don’t be heedless. Remember, there’s use for it. And pay attention in your practice for how to use it wisely.

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