Finding Happiness

November 13, 2004

We start with those chants to provide a context for the meditation, especially the ones that we translate, the one on aging, illness, death, and separation, followed by the one on the wish for happiness. The first one reminds us of where we can and cannot look for true happiness. Anything that’s subject to aging, illness, and death is not going to provide a happiness that’s really secure. Any relationship that’s subject to suffering, and is there any relationship that isn’t, again, can’t provide a basis for really secure happiness. We have to depend on things like this for at least a modicum of happiness, but ultimately, it’s down. So there’s that fifth reflection on our actions. It’s through our actions that we can find happiness, in particular, learning how to be skillful in what we do. The basic training involves three things—virtue, concentration, discernment. Tonight we’re working on the concentration, but it’s good to think about the general context of the training. Virtue basically means that you make promises to yourself. There are certain types of actions that you know are harmful. You make a promise that you won’t do them, under any circumstances, so that you don’t lose perspective. It’s important to have promises like this so that you can look back on your actions and think, “It seems hard to do the right thing.” Not only that, sometimes it seems that it’s stupid to do the right thing, which you really want to do what seems right at the time as something else entirely. Killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, harsh speech, divisive speech, idle chatter, drowning your sorrows in drink or drugs, that kind of thing. But then afterwards, when you get out of the situation, you realize that that wasn’t the best alternative. It happens so many times. It’s important that you make these kinds of promises to yourself, that no matter how crazy it seems at the time, you’re not going to give in and break your basic principles. In holding to principles like that, you learn lots of important things. You learn to be mindful. You learn to be alert. And the result is a sense of self-respect, self-esteem. And also you find that your life is less cluttered with the results of unskillful actions, which makes it easier to meditate. If you’ve got regrets about past actions, they’re bound to come up as the mind begins to settle down. Often we can block them out of our consciousness by busying ourselves with this or that other thing. But when you’re sitting here and have nothing to do but be with your breath, things are going to bubble up, and it’s normal. So you try to live a life which minimizes the hurtful things that bubble up. So that’s the context. As for the discernment, that’s going to depend on our minds settling down. There are all kinds of discernment in the world. The Buddha basically talks about three kinds, three general categories. One is the discernment, or the understanding, that you gain from listening. Then there’s the understanding that comes from thinking. And finally, the understanding that comes from developing qualities in the mind. They’re all useful in the path, but the most important is that last one. You can read about mindfulness, you can think about mindfulness, but you don’t really know it. You’ve actually tried to develop it. And you begin to see exactly where you are mindless, or where your mindfulness develops gaps. So what we’re doing as we try to concentrate on the breath is to develop certain qualities of the mind. To begin with, there’s mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, like the breath, like you’re doing right now. Try to stay with the breath. Remind yourself each time you breathe in, stay right here with the sensation of the breath. Then alertness is actually watching the breath. Find a spot in the body where it’s easy to stay focused and notice how it’s feels as you breathe in, notice how it feels as you breathe out. If it feels tight or tense, and it often does when you’re trying to concentrate on something, you tend to tense up around it in order to keep it in your sights. Learn how to relax as much of that tension as you can and yet still not lose your focus. So that when the breath comes in, it feels good coming in. When it goes out, it feels good going out. You don’t have to pull it in or push it out. Just allow it to come in, go out on its own, and watch it. If it seems too long or too short, you can nudge it. If it’s too long, make it a little shorter. If it’s too short, make it a little longer. Sometimes you might want to breathe in more than you breathe out, or breathe out more than you breathe in. That’s up for you to decide, because nobody can force you to breathe in a certain way. Here’s a way of giving rise to pleasure in the body. It doesn’t cost any money. You don’t have to ask anybody for it. Just pay attention to how the breathing feels and see what kind of breathing feels really good. If you find that the breath is too light to focus on, you can use a meditation word along with it. One of the words we use is bhutto, which means “awake.” You can say it either in Pali or in English. One syllable with the in-breath, the other syllable with the out-breath. If you wander off, come back. Re-establish your mindfulness and alertness to the breath. Try to see if you can make it even more comfortable. The more carefully you can pay attention to the breathing, the more involved you get with it, and the less likely you are to wander off. In the beginning, it seems like trying to balance one ball bearing on top of another is very difficult. But as the breath gets more comfortable and you get more interested in the details of the breathing, both the mind and the breath begin to soften up. They actually penetrate one another, and then it gets easier and easier to stay. When you’ve got a comfortable sensation going with the breath, you can think of it as a fluid spreading throughout the whole body. Traditionally, they think of the breath not only as the in-and-out breathing, but also the energy flow throughout the whole body, and they’re connected. If you like, you can go through the body, section by section, noticing how it feels. Each section, as you breathe in, breathe out. If there’s any tension or tightness, you can relax it and then go on to the next. You can start at the back of the neck. You can start at the navel. You can start anywhere. Just work through the body, step by step. Some people start at the fingers and work up the arms, and start at the toes and work up through the whole body. Keep the section that you’re focused on as relaxed and as unobstructed as possible. This way, you’re developing not only mindfulness and alertness, but also a quality called ardency. You really stick with something. Give it your full attention. In other words, when you’re with the breath, be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. When you’ve noticed that you’ve slipped off the breath, come right back. Don’t wait to finish out whatever story it is that the mind is weaving for itself. Leave it unfinished. Come right back to the breath. You’re also developing other qualities as well. They say for the concentration to succeed, for you actually to gain a state of ease, a state of stability in the present moment, you need four qualities. The first is desire. You want to do it. Often we hear that desire is a bad thing in the meditation, but it’s bad only if it gets in the way. In other words, if your desire is focused on what you want, your preconceived notions of how you’d like it to go, you can’t see what you’re actually doing. You miss the results that you’re actually getting, and that way desire gets in the way. But if you realize that the concentration you want, the stillness you want, the peace you want, depend on very simple things. Be mindful. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, being alert to the breath. You don’t have to anticipate how it’s going to go. Just focus on being really ardently focused on the two qualities of the mind, and the results will come. So focus your desire not on the results, but on the causes that are going to get you there. It’s like traveling along a road. If you sit there dreaming about where you want to go, if you’re not paying attention, you can run into somebody. But if you focus attention on your driving, say the road is going to take you to Yosemite. You’re not focused on Yosemite, you’re focused on the road leading out of Guatemala and taking the route up through California. You focus on right where you are. And after a while, you find that right where you are is where you want to be. So focus your desire right here. The second quality is persistence. You stick with it over time. It’s like planting a tree. You plant the tree, water it once, and then forget about it. Come back in a month, the tree’s died. So you plant another tree. You water that for a little while, but then you forget about that. You do this for fifty years, and you have a whole pile of dead trees, little tiny dead trees. But if you take one tree and you’re consistent in watering it until its roots finally get established and it grows, then you’ve got a tree that actually can produce things for you, whether it’s flowers or fruit or shade. It’s the sticking with it that’s going to make a difference, particularly as you develop mindfulness and alertness, because the things you want to see are often the things that you normally don’t look at. Our mind tends to have a certain rhythm in its mindfulness. You stick with something for a while, and then you blur out. Then you come back, and then you blur out. Well, those periods of blurring out, usually periods when something very interesting is happening in the mind. It’s like the pauses between acts in a play. They put down the curtain so they can move the scenery around, and then they pull up the curtain again. If you really want to understand your mind, you want to see those periods when the scenery is being moved, the furniture is being moved. Yet we have a tendency to blank out. One of the purposes of meditation in developing mindfulness and alertness is to see more clearly into those periods when the mind normally blanks out, because that’s where a lot of the interesting artifice in the mind lies. When you can see through the artifice that it’s just that, a very artificial fabrication of things, you begin to realize more and more how much your experience of the world is really shaped by your intentions, by your own mind, by your own activity. You don’t see that when you’re missing the gaps, so it’s important that you develop persistence in the practice to see those gaps, understand them more clearly. You can even begin to see, even before the mind has slipped off, it begins to show warning signs that it’s about to slip off the breath. When you learn how to recognize them, you can keep it from slipping off. Just double your efforts at being mindful. Make the breath more comfortable. Spread that sense of comfort. Spread your sense of awareness so it fills the whole body. The more your awareness fills a large area in the present moment, the more difficult it is for it to go slipping off in other places. A third quality that’s needed in developing concentration is related to ardency. It’s called intentness, that you really are intent in what you’re doing. You pay careful attention. You try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing, even the very subtle sensations that go along with the breath in areas of the body that you might not have anticipated. Try to pay attention to those. When you breathe in, do you tense up different parts of the body? Do you tense up your neck? Do you tense up your shoulders, the backs of your hands? If you do notice yourself tensing up, try breathing in without tensing up. See what that does to your sensation of breathing. The fourth quality of the four that’s needed for concentration, sometimes translated as discrimination, sometimes as ingenuity, is discrimination in the good sense of noticing what’s working and what’s not working. Remember, we’re working on a skill, and it doesn’t improve just on its own. It improves by your noticing what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. If they don’t measure up to what you want, try to figure out some other approach. This is where the ingenuity comes in. If focusing on the breath that your nose gives you headaches, well, try focusing on another spot. If the breath starts getting too weak so you can’t follow it, try spreading your awareness throughout the whole body. Be aware of the whole body. That gives a grounding to your concentration. If you find yourself slipping off when a little bit of pleasure arises, you slip off of the pleasure and lose your focus, well, remind yourself not to get fooled by the pleasure. It’s not that you don’t want the pleasure. You want the pleasure as a means to encourage you to make the mind like being here in the present moment. It’s simply that you realize the pleasure is a result of what you’re doing. If you stop what you’re doing to enjoy the result, you’re like peasants. You get a job and they get a little bit of money, then they quit the job to spend the money. Then they end up back where they were before, sometimes worse off, and they have to find another job. They never get good jobs because they’re not responsible. They don’t understand the basic principle. You work and you get your wages, and the more consistently you work, the more consistent the wages, the more you get. It’s a basic common sense principle. But a lot of people, when they meditate, throw their common sense to the wind. So it’s good to realize there are causes and there are effects. This is something you do. The success of the meditation depends on the qualities of mind you bring to the meditation. Someone once said that enlightenment is an accident and meditation makes you more accident-prone. That’s not the case at all. You’re working on a skill. The more carefully you pay attention to it, it’s not going to come accidentally. It’s going to come because you’ve been working on the skill and finally things come together. It seems accidental sometimes because you can’t anticipate when things all come together right. But when real awakening comes and you look back on how you’ve been practicing, you begin to realize which things you’ve been doing were the path, and you realize, above all else, that you did. Without your practice of meditation, the accident couldn’t have happened. So it’s not an accident. So approach the meditation as you would any kind of skill. You work at it and look at the results of what you’ve done. And if you don’t like the results, you try something else. Try something else. You can work with the breath in all kinds of ways. There’s a whole range of ways you can relate to the breath. You’ve got a whole hour here to explore what kind of breathing will feel good for the hour. Sometimes a particular kind of breathing will feel good for five minutes and then it’s no longer interesting. That’s when you want to try something else. Change the way you breathe. Change the place you focus. If you find yourself struggling to breathe, maybe it’s because you’ve got the wrong idea about the mechanics of the breathing. Just think of it that way. You don’t have to make the body breathe. The breath will come in and out on its own. All you have to do is tend to it, train it in the direction you want it to go. In this way, you develop not only concentration but all the other qualities of mind that are needed for giving rise to discernment, particularly to see the way in which you give rise to unnecessary suffering, both for yourself and for the people around you, through your own lack of attention, your own lack of understanding. That’s the discernment that makes a difference. As the Buddha pointed out, there are all kinds of discernment, all kinds of knowledge in the world, but the really useful kind of discernment is the discernment that puts an end to suffering. It’s a discernment that serves the purposes or serves the goals of goodwill. We want happiness, both for ourselves and for the people around us. And yet we do things that harm ourselves and harm the people around us. Why? Because we’re not paying careful attention to what we’re doing. Everybody wants happiness. You would think that that would be an object of a lot of interest, how to bring about true happiness. Yet people live their lives as if they didn’t really care or as if they didn’t really have time to be bothered by figuring out what’s really true happiness. They snatch what they can. They see somebody else with a big car, and they like the big car. They see somebody else with a good relationship, they want a good relationship, whatever, without stopping to ask, “Is this really worth all the effort?” Sometimes the things in daily life are worth the effort, sometimes they’re not, and particularly if they cause unnecessary stress and suffering or take a lot of effort and don’t provide any really gratifying results. So it’s all pretty commonsensical, and yet we rarely use common sense in the most important area of our lives to figure out how we’re going to give rise to a happiness that’s worth the effort involved. So this is what meditation is all about, training the mind, developing the qualities of the mind that will yield in that happiness. So even though it may seem like a small thing, focusing on the breath, you’re developing lots of good qualities that you can use in whatever way you choose to pursue the goal of a happiness that doesn’t have any drawbacks.

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