Cost of Happiness, The

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Psychologists who’ve studied the way people look for happiness report that most people will pursue a particular type of happiness until they see that the costs are too great, and then they’ll stop. In other words, too many difficulties, too many drawbacks, too many side effects. The problem is that some people are very, very insensitive to the costs of the way they search for happiness. The obvious cases are people like drug addicts, people who commit crime. They get very insensitive to the costs of the way they’re looking for happiness, and so they keep on creating more and more suffering instead of the happiness they want, and they can’t seem to get out of that. It’s a vicious cycle. And from the Buddha’s point of view, this is a problem with all of us. They talk about how after his awakening, he surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha, and he saw everybody on fire with greed, anger, delusion, passion, aversion, and delusion. And what were those people doing? They were searching for happiness. And yet the way they were searching for happiness was setting them on fire. And so this is why, in his very first sermon, this was the first issue he addressed, the very first teaching, these two extremes to be avoided, sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Then he proposed the third way of looking for happiness, the Eightfold Path, which is what we’re trying to do here right now. He started out his whole teaching career with this big question. How do you search for happiness? Look at the way you search for happiness and see if it’s really satisfactory. See if the drawbacks outweigh the happiness you’re looking for. As he said at another time, this is a basic question you want to ask. It’s the beginning of wisdom, this question. What will I do for my long-term welfare and happiness? It’s not like you’ve suddenly decided you’re going to look for happiness. Everybody’s looking for happiness all the time. Simply you realize that, one, it depends on what you do, and two, you want a happiness that’s long-term, conjoined with your welfare, your true well-being. So a lot of the Buddha’s teachings are to make us more sensitive to the costs of the way we look for happiness, so we can look for it in a more skillful way. This relates to his very last teaching as well, his advice to be heedful as you perfect your search for happiness. We have to look very, very carefully at what you’re doing. This is why we develop mindfulness and concentration, to sensitize the mind to the costs of its search for happiness, the particular way you’re looking for it. The Buddha’s not saying not to search for happiness. He says look for it, but try to do it in a heedful, careful, attentive way, a sensitive way, so you can really sense the costs. For the mind to be sensitive, it has to be very still and solid, because otherwise you can’t detect the movements of the mind. This is really clear when you sit down to meditate for the first time, and you’re with the breath for a couple of breaths, and all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else, and you have no idea how you got there. It sees periods of blanking out. That’s where the mind is insensitive. It’s not seeing what’s going on. So this is one of the most important aspects of the meditation, to make those periods of blanking out shorter and shorter. You finally get to the point that you don’t blank out. If the mind’s going to move, you see it move. You’re in a position to decide whether it’s a good place to move or not. And you can sense how much stress or suffering is caused by those movements. If you don’t have this continuity in your gaze, you can’t see these things. As a result, you miss the costs of the way you’re looking for happiness. So this is why the secret skills you develop in meditation are so important, and why they’re skills you want to take into your daily life. It’s not that you’re searching for happiness only now, while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. Everything you do through the course of the day is essentially this search. You’re constantly making choices about what to think about, what to say, what to do. Some of the choices are very conscious choices, and others are a little bit more buried. The results of those choices are sometimes clear and sometimes buried. And if they’re buried, you don’t know what they are. You don’t sense them. So this is a lot of wisdom right here, a lot of heedfulness right here. It’s learning to be more sensitive to the costs of the way you’re looking for happiness. When you realize that you have a choice, you don’t have to look in ways that are causing harm, causing stress. That’s when you become more skillful. The whole trick lies in seeing these things. This is why the Buddha placed so much emphasis on seeing stress, seeing inconstancy, the disturbances in the mind. He says, “No matter what comes up in your meditation, no matter how peaceful everything may seem, always keep your eye out for that question, ‘Is there still stress in here? Is there still change in here?’ If you see it, don’t ignore it. Otherwise, you’ll fall into that old trap of getting only halfway along the path and suddenly deciding,”This is a good place to lie down.” You’re going to get run over. Some of the passages in the Canon of the Buddha talk about very refined states of concentration, the themeless concentration of awareness, where the awareness is centered but there’s no specific object there, or the totality of non-dual consciousness. It all sounds pretty good, but if you get there, you have to look. To what extent is this still fabricated? How are you going to see the process of fabrication? Well, is there any change? Is there any stress? If it is, then it’s something that’s not worthy of your attachment. You might want to stay there for a while to get settled and still so you can look and see. He’s not telling you to dwell. He’s not telling you to drop states of concentration as soon as they come up. He’s actually encouraging you to develop them. But that’s for the purpose of getting more and more sensitive. The more still you are, the more refined your focus, the more refined your solidity, the more refined the movements you can see. But always look for that. That’s your guarantee. That’s your protection against mistaking some halfway point on the path for the goal. So it’s in this way that the Buddha’s first teaching and his last teaching connect with what you’re doing right now. You’re looking into the way you search for happiness and you’re very heedful about it. Try to make your focus as steady and imperturbable as possible. Keep your eye out for ways that you can make it more imperturbable, steadier, more solid. In this way, you finally reach a happiness that has no cost, no drawbacks. backs at all.

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