Unparadoxical Happiness

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Psychologists studying happiness have found what they think is a paradox. People want to be happy. They want to maximize their happiness. And so it only makes sense that when you find yourself being happy about something, you want to look into it to figure out why. So you can learn how to maintain that happiness. And what they’ve found is that when people look at what exactly made them happy, it doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. As soon as the mystery around it gets dissolved, they see that there’s not much there. There are two ways you could look at this. One is a genuine paradox. We want to understand happiness, and yet the more we try to understand it, the less happiness we have. In which case, the message would be, “Don’t try to understand your happiness.” That’s one way of understanding it. In fact, that’s the way the psychologists understand it. The other way of understanding it, of course, is that you’re looking in the wrong place for happiness. And the reason that happiness doesn’t bear scrutiny is because it’s not really genuine happiness. That’s the Buddha’s understanding. He started out his teaching career talking about happiness, being committed to finding happiness and sensual pleasures. And he says, “When you really look at it, you realize that it’s not happiness. There’s stress. There’s pain there.” Because that happiness is dependent on conditions, which means, on the one hand, that it’s not going to last. Conditions change. And secondly, because it’s dependent on conditions, you have to put a lot of effort into it. And the longer you try to maintain that kind of happiness, the more stress you find yourself involved in. So the Buddha’s question was, “Is there a happiness that’s not dependent on conditions? Is there a happiness that’s deathless?” It was in quest of that happiness that he left home. Because he realized that staying at home, with all the responsibilities of a household life, he wouldn’t be able to find that kind of happiness. He wouldn’t have the time. He wouldn’t have the peace of mind to really look into himself. Particularly because there was nobody to show him the way. It’s a lot easier now, now that we have the path that’s set out for us. Because he actually did find that kind of happiness. “It’s not a feeling,” he said. “It’s simply the happiness that’s there and the unconditioned.” That’s what we’re practicing for. Part of our path includes a type of happiness that is conditioned, but it’s a lot less stressful than sensual passion. It’s the happiness, it’s the pleasure, the sense of ease that comes when the mind is concentrated, when it’s focused on one thing and can stay there. Because, as the Buddha said, there is no happiness other than peace. Whatever happiness we get from things outside comes because the mind is able to rest with them for a moment. But what always happens is that it gets forced to move on. It’s like a person loitering on a street who wants to stand in front of the Tiffany and see him. When they’re suspicious about us, they force him to move on. So you can’t stay with that kind of happiness. You keep getting pushed away. But the happiness that comes from a concentrated mind is something that doesn’t depend on anybody else. It doesn’t depend on outside conditions. In the beginning, it depends on outside conditions because you haven’t mastered the process enough. You have to go to a quiet place. You have to go with as few impingements on responsibilities as possible. So you can work directly on this skill, but as the skill becomes more and more second nature, you find that you can carry that sense of ease, that sense of well-being, that sense of fullness and refreshment into any situation. Then it goes deep down inside. As the Buddha said, once you gain a sense of ease from a concentrated mind, a sense of ease from, say, staying with the breath, you can allow it to permeate and suffuse the whole body. When you get really skilled at it, you can tap into that whenever you need it. This, the Buddha said, is not only a more independent kind of happiness, but it’s also blameless. You’re not taking anything away from anyone else at all. That old saw about the path of the arahant being selfish. What’s selfish about a happiness that doesn’t deprive anybody of anything? If you could go out and concentrate other people’s minds for them, that would be a noble activity. But you can’t. What you can do is gain a concentrated mind-state yourself and be an example to other people. People around you will pick up a sense of ease, a sense of peace, from the peace that you develop in your mind. The sense of happiness that comes is that you can stay longer and longer and longer in one place and realize that you don’t have to get pushed out. That no matter what happens, no matter how loud the noises around you, or how insistent outside stimuli may be, they don’t destroy the breath. They don’t destroy your ability to stay with the breath. This is the kind of happiness that comes with practice. So it’s worth working on. It’s a happiness that does withstand scrutiny. And even this is not the ultimate. This is not the happiness the Buddha went in quest of. He found teachers who taught him concentration all the way to the state of nothingness, the state of neither perception nor non-perception, and he realized that that wasn’t what he’d wanted. It was when he realized that you could use this kind of happiness, though, as part of the path. That’s when he finally realized that there is a happiness that is not constrained by space or time or anything at all. There’s no place there. There’s no time there. The happiness is totally independent of conditions. There’s nothing you have to do for it. You clear away the obstructions, and there it is. No matter how much you look at it, you can’t find anything lacking in that happiness. This is the one happiness that does withstand scrutiny, the one happiness that is worth understanding. So that paradox of the psychologist is not really a paradox at all. It’s simply an important lesson that the happiness of the world, the happiness of sensual pleasures, does not withstand scrutiny, which means you have to look someplace else. And the Buddha shows you where to look. And to see that happiness requires effort and takes time. But when you attain it, you find that it’s more than worth the effort that you put into it. As the John Lee once said, “The affairs of the world are hard because they require so much effort.” But Nirvana doesn’t require any effort at all. Once you get there, it’s there. Period. You don’t have to maintain it. There’s nothing you have to do for it at all. And John Monn even said that it lies beyond the vulnerable truths, because each of the vulnerable truths has a duty. Even the cessation of suffering is something you have to realize. Once it’s realized, there’s nothing more that needs to be done.

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