Patterns to Happiness

July 31, 2006

For most of us, happiness is something that’s pretty much hit or miss. When it comes, you don’t know why it comes. When it goes, you don’t know why it goes. And for most of us, we think that’s the way it has to be. But that’s crazy making. They’ve done experiments with pigeons. You put them in a cage and they have two bars. And with one group of pigeons, if they press the right bar, they get food. If they press the left bar, they don’t get food. And the pigeons are pretty happy. In another cage, you’ve got pigeons. Sometimes they press the right bar and they get food, and sometimes they don’t. Sometimes they press the left bar and they get food, and sometimes they don’t. The pigeons in that cage are neurotic, very disturbed birds, because they can’t figure out what’s going on. We tend to think, “Well, maybe there’s somebody out there who likes us or doesn’t like us.” And it’s crazy making, trying to figure out what you can do to please this person, whoever it is, this being, whoever it is. As they said in the Anya one time, “God has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder.” Things can be really nice in one place and miserable in someplace else. Or, as you saw in a cartoon recently, God comes down and says, “Okay, America, I’m going to bless you like you’ve been asking me for so long.” And a person from Iraq comes in and says, “Would you please bless Iraq, too?” God says, “Well, I can’t do that. If you bless everybody, it’s like nobody gets blessed.” In other words, if you think there’s an intelligence out there behind all this, it’s pretty arbitrary. It’s capricious, crazy-making kind of thought. Unfortunately, that’s not the way it has to be. As Ajaan Fuang once said, “The whole purpose of what we’re doing here is to discover that there are basic principles to happiness.” It’s complex, but when you figure out the causes, you can tap into happiness when you need it. You can tap into a sense of inner pleasure whenever you need it. To understand the process, though, you have to be very observant. It helps to start out with a good, clear sense of cause and effect. This is when Ajaan Lee talks about jhana. There are basically three factors that are the causes. One is direct a thought. When you direct your thought, you direct your attention to a particular object. The second is evaluation. You evaluate the object to see what’s working in the sense that you want it to work. This is a sense of getting the mind to settle down. For instance, when you’re focused on the breath, you can play with the breath in different ways. Long in, long out, short in, short out. Long in, short out, short in, long out. Try to see what rhythm feels best for the body right now. You can focus in different spots in the body. Then you can explore the way the breath energy feels in the body. How does it feel when you breathe in? What kind of posture do you have? What happens if you change your posture? Try to sit with good posture and then notice how that might change the way you have to breathe. Or you can think of the breath energy going down the spine, not the legs. Or you can think of it coming up the spine to support the back when needed support. Or coming up from the soles of your feet, up through your legs, up through the back to support you up the back of the neck. There are lots of ways of playing around. Think of it like that. You’re playing. We’re not here doing drudgery work. We’re exploring. Try to bring a sense of interest, a sense of enjoyment, to the playing around. And see what works to get the mind to settle down. Once there’s a sense of ease in the breath, you can think of it spreading out. You might think of channels in the body. Some of them are open, some of them are not quite so open. You don’t have to force the breath through the body. Just think, you open up the channels and the breath will flow. You don’t make it flow. That’s the nature of the breath, is to flow. All you have to do is open up the channels. So try to get a sense of where the channels are blocked. What you need to do in changing your posture, changing the way you think of the breathing process, is to open up those channels and keep them open all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Until finally you see that there’s a sense of you’re being aware of the whole body. And the breath fills the whole body. That’s all you have to think about. Just whole body breath, whole body breath. All the way in, all the way out. Those are the causal factors. And the results can be pleasure and rapture. When you get the causes right, the results come. The problem is we tend to add too many factors in. It’s like getting a good recipe and trying to jazz it up. In ways that aren’t really appropriate. And then complaining that the recipe wasn’t good. We just follow the recipe. For instance, there are a lot of things we tend to add to the meditation. We bring a lot of attitudes about whether we deserve to be happy or not. Some people say, “I don’t deserve it.” When happiness comes or pleasure comes, we’re afraid of it. We tend to add a lot of things and have a controlling mindset when the rapture comes. Sometimes rapture can be really strong. And for people who like to control things, it’s threatening. So it’s not just a matter of getting the ingredients together. You also have to clear out whichever things are not ingredients. It’s like making a cake in a pan that yesterday you used to make pizza, and you didn’t take the ingredients for the pizza out. You end up with a very weird cake. Make sure your pan is clean. The mind is not like a pan. You can’t just look at it and see what’s there and clear it out. But notice when you run into these other things, just put them aside. Learn how to put them aside. It is a learning process, because many of these attitudes we carry around with us don’t just go away. If you find an attitude that gets in your way, reason with it. The first step, though, of course, is just to put it aside, if you can. Because there are attitudes you notice and say, “This is strange.” And seeing how strange the attitude is, that’s enough for you to get past it. Other times you really believe it, and it keeps coming back, coming back. That’s when you’ve got to argue with it. Ask yourself, “Why should I believe this?” A lot of us come to meditation with attitudes we’ve picked up from our upbringing, the culture we grew up with, the religion we grew up with, and it tends to get in the way. It’s all a question of deserving happiness or not deserving happiness. The Buddha never uses the word “deserve.” No matter how bad your past karma is, he never says that people deserve to suffer. When someone does a particular kind of action, that particular kind of action will lead to a certain kind of result. But that doesn’t mean that you deserve to suffer, say, if it’s a bad action. You can develop attitudes of limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, appreciation, equanimity, so that when the results of that bad action come, the results get minimized. Whereas in the case of Angulimala, he began an aura hunting. Even though he killed all those people, the karma he got was pretty minimal. He just got his head broken open a couple of times, which is very minor considering what he had done before. So the Buddha doesn’t live in a world where people deserve to suffer or deserve anything at all. It means we’re free to learn about the world so that we can tap into happiness when we need it. That’s a very liberating thought. Think about that again and again and again whenever you find this question of deserving or not deserving coming up, getting in the way of your meditation. So the meditation is a process both of getting the ingredients right, getting the causes right, and also clearing out any irrelevant ingredients, any irrelevant actions when you run across them. I remember my first year as a monk. I found it frustrating that people would settle down, and other times when they could not settle down at all. I found myself having to deal with old issues from high school and grade school, even sometimes. Old relationships, present frustrations. I had to try to push them out of the way, and I realized you couldn’t push them out of the way, so I had to deal with them. I had to reason through with them. Fortunately, being with Ajahn Phuong and having him in my mind gave me a different perspective on these things, and I was able to step out of them. But still, there was a sense I was wasting my time, until later I realized that if I hadn’t cleared out those things, I’d never be able to get the mind to settle down. Once I realized that that was part of the meditation, too, things went a lot more easily. So meditation is both putting together and clearing out. So you finally do get just the right ingredients in your cake pan. And you don’t have yesterday’s garbage, and you don’t have who knows what leftover from the days before. You’ve got just the ingredients you need, and when you’ve got just the ingredients you need and you put them together in the right way, you get your results. So meditation is not a crapshoot. It’s not hit or miss. It may seem hit or miss if you don’t look for cause and effect in the proper way. Or if you’re told that it’s hit or miss, it’s even worse, because you’ve stopped looking. There are patterns to the mind. They are complex. As the Buddha said, dependent co-arising is very complex. He warned Ananda when Ananda said that it was clear. He said, “No, don’t say that. It really is complex, but it is comprehensible. It does give you a roadmap, and there are points you can focus on.” In terms of intention and attention, or perception. That can help you make sense of this whole question of why is there sometimes happiness and why is there not? And what you can do to master the processes of cause and effect so you can tap into happiness, tap into a sense of rapture whenever you need it. So learn to look for patterns. Aristotle’s definition of intelligence was to see patterns where they hadn’t been pointed out to you before. So try to be intelligent in your meditation. Develop an intelligent heart, intelligent about this question of happiness and unhappiness. Think of the heart and mind as one. They work together. And when they work together, you try to figure out this issue of what makes you happy and what doesn’t, what provides pleasure and what doesn’t. You’ve got all your mental faculties working together in an appropriate way, in a useful way. And when you’ve got that, you’re sure to get results.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2006/060731%20Patterns%20to%20Happiness.mp3>