Noble Happiness

October 7, 2006

We start the evening meditation with chants of goodwill, because that’s the underlying motive for our practice—the desire for happiness, the desire for true happiness, both for ourselves and for others. We’re looking for happiness where our true happiness and the happiness of other people is in concert, it’s in harmony. It’s all too often out in the world that one person’s happiness means somebody else’s misery. When the Buddha taught causality, he started with this issue of feeding. We feed off of one another physically, emotionally, and it can be a real burden. What we’re looking for is a happiness that doesn’t need to feed. So we have to look within. It’s the nature of the body. It has got to feed. And as for the mind, it has a question. Does it have to feed, or can it be independent? So we look inside to see. We start out with something really basic. You focus on the breath. Notice when the breath is coming in. Notice when it’s coming out. Think about the breath. Keep the breath in mind. That’s mindfulness. Then be alert to how the breath feels. Notice when it’s comfortable. Notice when it’s not. When it’s not comfortable, you can change. This is a very immediate, visceral way of showing goodwill for yourself. Find that you can develop a sense of ease in the body simply by the way you breathe. It doesn’t cost any money and doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. The body is breathing anyhow, so watch it. Learn to be a connoisseur of your breathing. When you find you can develop a sense of well-being inside just by the way you breathe, it takes a lot of weight off of your other relationships. When you’re feeding on this person or feeding on that thing for your happiness, and that’s all you’ve got, you’re going to get pretty desperate about it. You clutch at these things and you don’t want them to change. Or if they’re going to change, you want them to change in the way you’ve decided they should change. But they often don’t. But when you have an alternative source of happiness, a sense of well-being, just feeling comfortable in your own skin by the way you breathe, then as you relate to other things, it’s with a lot less desperation, a lot less clinging. That takes a big break. Sometimes we’re accused, as meditators, of being selfish, of only looking out for our own good. But the fact that you can find a source of happiness inside means you’re going to be a lot less burdensome to other people. And that’s a gift right there. The Buddha’s basic insight to happiness is that when happiness is true, then working for your own happiness is also working for the happiness of others. And working for their true happiness is working for yours. The image he gives of two acrobats, one standing on the shoulders of the other, each of them has to look out after his or her own sense of balance. As you maintain your balance, you help other people. You don’t throw them off balance. So as you sit here meditating, keep this in mind, that this is a gift. It’s a gift to yourself. It’s a gift to other people. It’s exploring that realm of happiness that doesn’t have any disadvantages. Ajaan Mann used to say that the happiness that doesn’t have any disadvantages, that’s the true happiness. The happiness that doesn’t impose anything on anyone else, that doesn’t harm anybody else. As you explore this happiness and learn to depend on it more and more, it’s an act of compassion. It’s an act of wisdom, because this kind of happiness lasts. If your happiness depends on the misery of other people, they’re going to try to put it to an end. Or if it depends on anything physical or material, anything social, those things all have to end, too. But happiness that comes from within doesn’t have to end. And that, he says, searching for that kind of happiness, that’s an act of wisdom. And as you begin to notice how your thoughts, words, and deeds affect yourself and affect other people, then you make up your mind that you’re going to act only on the things that really do cause happiness. You’re going to try to avoid anything you notice that causes harm. That, he says, is how you develop pure wisdom. Purity in your thoughts and your words and your deeds. So all the qualities of a Buddha come from here. They come from this quest for happiness, the quest for true happiness—wisdom, compassion, purity. This, the Buddha said, is a noble search. For most of us, the quest for happiness is anything but noble. Grabbing at something, grabbing at this, grabbing at that, snatching away from other people—that’s why most people search for happiness. It’s just like animals. But as the Buddha noticed, if you gain a sense of a happiness that comes from within that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else, that changes the whole equation. The search for that happiness develops all the good qualities you want in the mind. This is why he called it the path to the happiness, a noble path. Because the happiness itself is noble, the search for that happiness is a noble search. It’s a search that gives dignity to your life, that gives meaning. This is why meditation is the culmination of two other practices—the practice of generosity, and the practice of virtue. The practice of meditation is both virtuous and generous. So meditate with confidence. As you notice the mind slipping off the breath and you bring it back, have a sense that what you’re doing is something very important, something very noble. It may not seem like much right now, but as you develop your skills in mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, you’ll find that they lead to a really special kind of happiness. This is why we bow down to the Buddha, because he teaches us that there is this potential. He teaches us to respect within ourselves things that really are worthy of respect. And as we develop them, we can see that they generally are noble. So keep these thoughts in mind as you practice. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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