The Noble Path to Happiness

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The mind is bound to chatter, so for the during of the meditation, have it chatter about the breath. What should it say? It should say, “Focus on the breath. Be alert to the breath. Know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out.” Let it be comfortable. Don’t try to force the breath or to put yourself into a trance. What you’re trying to do is create a comfortable place for the mind to settle down in the present moment. If you force the breath too much, it’s not going to be a comfortable place to settle. It’s not going to stay very long. So try to be very sensitive to how the breathing feels. You’ll notice immediately that the breath is not necessarily just a sensation at the tip of the nose, with the air coming in and out of the nose. The whole body is involved in the breathing process. The lungs expand because the ribcage expands, because the nerves send the message for them to expand. And when you get really sensitive to the breathing, you’ll begin to see that it actually does go over the whole body. The whole nervous system can be involved in the breathing process. So relax your hands, relax your feet. Think of a wave of relaxation coming up from your toes, up your legs, up the torso, around the head, and then coming up from the fingers, the back of the hands, the arms, up to the shoulders, up the back of the neck. From that point on, it’s like a balancing act, trying to maintain that sense of ease around the breathing. Then the mind will start saying, “Well, what’s next?” And that’s when you have to tell it, “Well, this is what’s next. The next breath is what’s next.” You’re working on a skill. The Buddha never promised any instant magic bullets. What he did teach was a whole series of skills, learning how to relate to the present moment. And as you’ve probably learned, the more you learn, the better you’ll get at any skill. If you really get good at it, it’s going to take time. So try to bring all the proper attitudes you learned from developing skills. Think about some skill you’ve had, that you’ve worked on and you’ve learned to master to at least some extent—cooking or carpentry or sport or music. Remind yourself of the attitude you had to bring to it. On the one hand, having the desire to do it well, and then yet realizing that if all you do is sit around desiring, you’re never going to get anywhere. So learning how to balance the desire so it’s focused on what you’re doing right now. Learning how to do it attentively. And when things don’t go well, learning not to berate yourself, which is to remind yourself, “Next time we’ll do better.” And this is great with a breath because there’s always a next breath. As long as you’re alive, there’ll be another breath to come in. And you’ll be more attentive to, to be more sensitive to. And then, like, say, an artist in his studio who has lots of mistakes that he has to throw away. The past breaths where you weren’t all that attentive, you don’t have to throw them away. They’re gone. So keep focusing your attention right here, right here, right here. And be persistent. Just keep coming back, coming back, coming back. And if you notice that things aren’t going well, you can always adjust. You might start out by focusing on the tip of your nose, and after a while decide that you don’t like that spot. Well, you can move to any other part of the body where it feels comfortable. Stay focused, stay centered, where you feel like you really can settle in and feel at home. You might try focusing through the body in a systematic way to see where in the body it feels most interesting to stay. What qualities do you want to bring to the process? The desire to do it, persistence, being intent on what you’re doing, and then learning to analyze how cause and effect operate in this process, getting the mind to be centered, and then learning how to use that understanding of cause and effect to make changes. This is the beginning, both of discernment and of concentration. In the beginning, your main focus is on concentration, getting the mind to settle down. But the same process applies to developing discernment. After all, what is discernment? It’s seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. Sometimes we’re told it’s seeing things in terms of the three characteristics, but the Buddha never taught that term, “three characteristics.” Actually, the four noble truths are the context, in other words, the question of where there’s stress and suffering. What’s causing it? What can you do to put an end to it? This is always the Buddha’s concern. He wasn’t concerned about things in and of themselves. He was concerned about the problem of suffering, why it’s happening, what can be done to put an end to it. That’s the real problem in life. If you focus on trying to get to the true nature of things, you’ll find it’s pretty elusive, because things have lots of different aspects. There are many levels of truth about things, and it’s pretty arbitrary which level you’re going to focus on, unless you decide that the real problem is not so much the things in and of themselves, but the suffering that you create out of them. That means, instead of focusing on things, you focus on activities, what you’re doing, the results of what you’re doing. It requires some understanding of cause and effect. Of course, the best way to see cause and effect is to do something and see what results, and then change what you do and see what results then. You begin to gain a sense of what causes lead to what effects. When the Buddha talked about the essence of his awakening, the most succinct statement he made about his awakening was about the principle of cause and effect. When this is, that is. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. Two causal principles that intersect. One talks about cause and effect rising together and ceasing together in the present moment. The other has to do with cause and effect. That’s what alerts you immediately. Sometimes, if you want to see the relationship between what you’re doing and the suffering you’re causing, you can see it right immediately in the present moment. You stick your finger into a fire and it hurts immediately. Other things are going to take time, which means you have to be mindful for long periods of time, alert for long periods of time, to remember what you did, so you can see that, “Oh, I did this, and this is what resulted three or four or five days later.” There’s a famous story about Sariputta, who was the Buddha’s disciple, foremost in terms of discernment. When he first met one of the Buddha’s followers, he was inspired by the man. He followed him and then asked him, “What does your teacher teach?” The man, Venerable Assaji, who was one of the Buddha’s very first students, said, “Well, I’m still new in this teaching.” “All I can teach you is the gist.” Sariputta said, “That’s just what I want. It’s just the gist of the teaching.” And Assaji said, “I need the phenomena created by a cause arising because of a cause. That’s what the Buddha teaches. The phenomena, its cause, and its cessation. That was it. That’s all he said. That was enough for Sariputta to gain the first stage of awakening, looking at things in his own experience that were caused, and particularly seeing what things were worth ceasing, i.e., things that were causing suffering. So everything the Buddha teaches is about cause and effect. The discernment that leads to awakening is an insight into what you’re doing that’s causing suffering. You can see this in the very beginning of the meditation, when you’re breathing in certain ways that feel constricting, feel uncomfortable, and then you change the way you focus, you change the way you breathe. There’s a feeling of spaciousness and openness. That’s one level of suffering that you’re causing. And as the meditation goes on, you get more and more subtle insights into cause and effect. And it gets closer and closer to home in terms of the movements of the mind. You begin to see that there’s a certain craving arising for this or that, and there’s immediately suffering associated with the craving. You see there’s clinging, and the mind holds on to certain things, and there’s going to be suffering. So you learn how to let go. And you pursue this into more and more subtle levels of the mind. What you see as a result is what you did to cause suffering, when you finally get to the point where the mind isn’t doing anything to cause suffering at all, when it’s gone beyond anything that arises because of causes. When you come back from that experience, you’re not going to want to talk about the essence of things or things in and of themselves. You’re going to talk about what you learned about cause and effect. Because that’s what you actually saw. You did this, and this is what resulted. This is what, when the Buddha defines alertness as a quality you need in the meditation, it’s being alert to what you’re doing. Evaluation as a factor in the meditation is seeing what you’re doing and seeing what results, and then learning to adjust what you do so you can get better results. That’s the principle that applies all the way through. This is where the Buddha never talked about Buddha nature, saying,”What are human beings? Are we essentially good, essentially bad? Or what is the ultimate nature of things in and of themselves?” Those are questions he put aside. What you did notice is that we all desire happiness, and yet we do things that cause suffering. That’s the problem. This is why he teaches cause and effect, so we can begin to understand our actions and their results. That’s why he teaches meditation in the way he does. We focus on the activity of the body, here in this case the breathing, the activity of the mind in thinking about things and evaluating them, taking that activity and focusing it on the breath. Then there are other more subtle activities, like feelings and perceptions. There’s an element of intention even in those, he said. Learn to look and see how all these things are connected, because right here is where you’re going to find all the things you need to know about why you’re suffering and how you can stop it. The happiness we all want is something we can finally attain. He never said that the pursuit of happiness was a bad thing, that we’re wrong to want to be happy. He said it’s a perfectly fine thing, a perfectly noble thing, if you do it in a skillful way. That’s what he taught. The noble path to happiness.

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