NR Serious About Happiness

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We’re here because we take our happiness seriously. When you think about it, everything we do is for the sake of happiness, the sake of pleasure, the sense of ease, well-being. Every intentional action heads in that direction. The big irony in life, of course, is that true happiness is so rare, that often the things we do to become happy actually end up causing suffering, sorrow, regret. So the question is, how can we act in a way that really does lead to true happiness? This is the reason for the Buddha’s quest. He started out as a prince. He had everything that a prince could wish for, in terms of wealth and sensual pleasures, love of his family. But he realized that these things were going to change, and the happiness he gained from these things could turn on him when his family died, when he grew old or sick, when he started to lose his power or his wealth. And that possibility really hit him. What would he do then? That’s why he decided he had to find a happiness that would be immune to aging, illness, death. But to find that kind of happiness, he realized he was going to have to train his mind. That’s why he went off into the wilderness, and that’s why we’re meditating. As the Buddha reported after him, he finally found the way to true happiness. It’s all a question of training the mind, learning how to develop the right qualities of the mind, so that ultimately he can become happy. He could see through to something that wasn’t touched by aging, illness and death at all, a sense of well-being that was totally unconditional. If you’re really serious about happiness, that’s the kind of happiness you want, because it’s a happiness that changes. When it changes, it doesn’t change into happiness, it changes into sorrow, disappointment, regret. And if you spend your life trying to be happy, trying to search for that kind of happiness, it’s a life spent searching for disappointment and regret. So you have to ask yourself, what kind of happiness do you want? And are you willing to do the work? Because it does require taking your happiness seriously, which may seem paradoxical, but “serious” here doesn’t mean grim. It means that you’re willing to give your happiness the time and care and energy that it deserves. So we practice, hour after hour, day after day, trying to get the mind to settle down, to be mindful, alert. So it can develop a sense of ease and well-being here in the present moment. Now, that sense of ease and well-being does depend on conditions, but it’s the ease and well-being that gives us energy on the path, and it gives us an alternative, because if our happiness depends on sight, and sounds, and smells, and tastes, and tactile sensations being a certain way, that’s the only happiness we know. And of course, we’re going to go after those things. We’re going to say, “No matter what the drawbacks or the disappointments are involved, at least it’s better than nothing.” But the Buddha points out, the alternative is not nothing. Here is the alternative. You can sit here and breathe. The mind can develop a sense of stillness and well-being. That comes simply from staying with a breath. And getting attached to this kind of happiness is a lot better than being attached to our normal sources of happiness. Sometimes we see that immediately, sometimes it takes a while to think about and compare, because the mind likes to gather up all kinds of happiness. We want our cake. We want to keep our cake and eat it, too. And as a result, we tend to get complacent, which is why the Buddha has us think so much about suffering and stress, why we have that chant on the unattractiveness of the body, why we contemplate death. As a reminder, is our happiness resilient enough so that it can take these things? Can you be happy still in the face of change? Can you be happy in the face of aging, illness, and death? Do you really want to go for a happiness that depends on something else? Unreliable is the body. All the things that we tend to think of as the negative side of the Buddhist teachings, they’re there as a test. On the one hand, they remind us to be heedful, that these things are lying in wait. Is your happiness strong enough to withstand? If not, you’ve got more work to do. So these contemplations may sound negative, but they’re there for a positive purpose. You contemplate the drawbacks of sensual pleasures because you want to find a pleasure that’s not afflicted with those drawbacks. You contemplate death because you want to find the deathless, a happiness you really can depend on. So the Buddha doesn’t dwell on the negative side of things just to be a spoilsport, but he’s setting up these tests in the same way you would set up a test for any skill. You want to play the piano. Can you play this piece? Can you play that piece? The teacher will give you some pieces to test you. Then you have to perform in public. The purpose of this is to develop your concentration, to develop your artistry. Years back when I was teaching in Thailand, teaching English at the university in Chiang Mai, they had me teach courses in literature. So for one of the courses I had them read, we had some stories from James Joyce’s “The Dubliners” and D.H. Lawrence’s “Sons and Lovers” and then Ford Medic’s “The Good Soldier.” “The Good Soldier” was a fiendish book in the sense that the narrative was all mixed up. The narrative was switching back and forth. The whole purpose of the book was because you wanted to learn about the narrative. Why was he switching back and forth from past to future, and then future back to the past? Why couldn’t he tell the story straight? He had something to hide. So to make things easier for the students, I put out a timeline so they could be clear about which events happened when. Even then, though, they were getting confused. One day one of the students raised her hand and said, “Why do you give us such difficult books to read?” I said, “Well, if I don’t give you difficult books, what are you going to learn?” You could almost see the light bulb go off over her head. “Oh, there are things to learn here.” When you set the bar high, you find that you can jump over it, which you never would have done if the bar was low all the time. She went on from being a C student to an A student. So this is why we have this regular feature in the chanting. The chanting is about aging, illness, death, and separation, the unattractiveness of the body, how the world is swept away, it does not endure, there is no shelter, there is no one in charge. It has nothing of its own when it has to pass on, leaving everything behind. It’s insufficient, insatiable, enslaved to create. It all sounds pretty negative, but it’s there as a test to put the bar high. Is your happiness able to withstand these things? Are you prepared to face them? If not, you’ve got work to do. And the Dhamma promises that it is possible to find a happiness that does not have to leap over the bar. It can face up with difficult circumstances in life. Over in Thailand, the monks go off in the forest and live a very frugal, very simple life. And that’s just in the monasteries. You go out into the wilderness, you’re facing dangers, illnesses, animals. All of this is to throw you back on yourself. Is your mind capable of finding the resources inside so it doesn’t lose heart in the face of these dangers? Sometimes when you’re sick out there, there’s no doctor, there’s no medicine. Your only way of treating yourself is to work with the breath, work with the mind. One time I went off in the forest and had a heart attack. There was no medicine. It was three days’ journey on foot to the nearest road. He realized if he was going to get out of there, he had to pull himself together. So he used the breath energy in his body. And it wasn’t just the breath energy, it was the strength of his mind, the good qualities of the mind. It overcame the weaknesses in the body. When you’ve learned to depend on the mind in that way, you’ve found that you’ve discovered a lot of good inner resources that you might not have discovered at all if you’d lived in a very comfortable place. Some people have to put themselves to hardships before they’re willing to develop these qualities of the mind, depend on these qualities of the mind. But the purpose is not to have hardship for hardship’s sake. It’s hardship for the sake of finding something really valuable inside. So as I was saying, as you practice the Dhamma, you’re taking your happiness seriously. You want a happiness that lasts, that really is worth all the effort that goes into it. So when the Buddha is talking about aging, illness, and death, he’s not being pessimistic. He’s actually like a doctor. He says, “Look, here’s this disease, here’s this problem. There’s a cure.” The doctors who don’t have cures for certain diseases don’t like to talk about those diseases. It’s the doctors who have the cure, they’re willing to talk about them. Not because they like to dwell on the negative but because they’ve got something really positive. So if you’re taking your happiness seriously, this is where you want to look, into the qualities of your mind. Of course, the question always arises, if you’re not taking your happiness seriously, what are you taking seriously? Do you think that this would be an issue that every body would take seriously? But you look at the world, and people are content to just do what everybody else does. They see somebody else has this, somebody else has that, and it looks good. And they don’t look carefully enough to see, is that person really happy? Is it possible for that happiness to last? Especially in a culture like ours, which is devoted to making us become cynical about the possibility of real happiness. They say, “The thing about real happiness is just buy our car, buy our house, buy our computer,” whatever. If people really took their happiness seriously, the economy would collapse. It’s collapsing even though they don’t take it seriously. So you’ve got to question a lot of the things you’ve picked up from the media, from the ideas that are floating around in our culture, that question the possibility of happiness. They tell you, “Don’t respect your desire for happiness. Respect our goods.” But the Buddha said something else, “You want true happiness? Okay. Respect that desire. Nurture it. Take it seriously. Because genuine happiness is possible.” It requires training the mind, which requires energy, time, and there’ll be frustrations along the way. It’s not an easy path, but it’s a good path. And it’s not like the alternative doesn’t require energy and difficulty. But the difficulty here has a purpose, and it goes to the point, ultimately, where there is no difficulty anymore. As the John Lewin says, “Nirvana, when you’ve found it, is actually easy. You don’t have to look after it. The things of the world are hard because you constantly have to tend to them if you want to maintain them, keep them with you. The happiness of the unconditioned is just that, it’s unconditioned. Once you’ve uncovered it, there’s nothing more you have to do. If you’re really serious about your happiness, that’s the kind of happiness you want.

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