Trust Your Desire for Happiness

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There are many reasons why we focus on the breath. One of them is that when you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. You can’t watch a future breath. You can’t watch a past breath. That sensation of the present moment is what keeps you anchored, keeps you confident that you are here in the present moment. The mind does have this tendency to wander off to the past, wander off to the future, without being conscious of what it’s doing. The wandering is not bad. You have to think about the past, you have to think about the future at times. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be able to make sense of anything. But it’s important that you know when you’re wandering and which direction you’re going, and to know when you’re not wandering, so that you can watch the processes of what’s happening right here, right now. Because those processes follow certain patterns. As the Buddha pointed out, it’s knowing these patterns that’s really crucial to understanding what you can trust and what you can’t trust. In other words, if there’s a dishonest intention, you’ll see it only in the present moment, while it’s happening. You’ll be able to recognize it as dishonest only then. Because after it’s happened, it’s very easy to cover things up and pretend that what happened didn’t really happen. So as Ajaan Fu once said, “If you doubt other things, at least don’t doubt the fact that you’ve got a breath coming in and going out right now.” Then it’s important to stay here, so you can see the actions of the mind as they’re actually happening. And with experience, you’ll begin to recognize what kind of intention is leading in a skillful direction and which one is not. Discernment is not necessarily automatic, but if you keep asking yourself this question, at this long enough, you begin to gain experience. That’s where a lot of the insight comes. It’s learning to see connections. If you simply see events without noticing their results, you don’t have any real insight. Or if you see the results of your actions but don’t have a clear idea of where or which actions they came from, you don’t have any insight. That kind of insight isn’t all that helpful either. You want to see connections. So you stay right here. It may seem tedious at times, just coming back, coming back, coming back to the present moment, but it’s a lot less tedious than going through aeons and aeons of suffering because you haven’t done the work, because you haven’t really looked into the process. After all, everything we do is for the sake of happiness. That much we know. So let’s take that desire and put it to good use. Take your happiness seriously. This doesn’t mean being grim about it, but it does mean really looking carefully at what you’re doing and the results you get. If you want to wait until you know everything about cause and effect and your intentions and the way to true happiness before you give anything a try, it’s like waiting until science comes with a final verdict on food, which kinds of foods really are good for you and which ones are not. You’d starve to death if you waited for that. There’s someone who’s once proposed that we let science try to prove whether meditation really works or not. That way, the Buddhist teachings wouldn’t be simply a religion anymore and be a science. Well, you look at science, and how many things has science really given a final verdict on that you can really trust that hasn’t been called into question? You look at simply food science. Some reports tell you vitamin E is good for you. Some reports tell you that it’s bad. And then other reports come back and say it’s good in some cases. And so on down the line. If you waited for a final verdict, for final surety, you’d die first. You’ve got to eat. So you do your best, what seems reasonable, and you look at your own reaction to certain foods. How do you react to vitamin E? In some cases, you can’t really tell. It’s hard to run a proper experiment. But in some cases, you do know. You eat this particular kind of food, and you get sick. You eat that particular kind of food, or you mix these two kinds of food together, and it seems to help you. Bit by bit by bit, you get a sense of what diet is good for you and what diet is not. Even before you’ve come to absolute knowledge, you take some working hypotheses and you adjust them as you go along. It’s the same with the practice. You have to try things out, because you’re not going to wait until you reach true happiness, until the final verdict comes in. You’ve got to act. You’ve got to make decisions. So you start with the working hypotheses that seem to be most conducive. One is the belief that you really do have choices. If you didn’t believe you had choices, there’d be no point in practicing, no point in putting out an effort, because things would just happen automatically. But you look around yourself and you see the people who let things happen automatically, without putting forth any effort, don’t seem to do very well. So you assume that you have choices, and where the choices are being made, they’re being made right here. So you’ve got to watch carefully right here, so you understand what those choices are, and you begin to see which directions they go. As I said, real assurance, real certainty, comes only with your first taste of awakening. Up to that point, you’re just working on what seems reasonable. There’s always been an element of doubt, but don’t allow that doubt to debilitate you. Just tell yourself, “This seems reasonable. This seems wise. Let’s follow it to see how far it really goes.” Because when the Buddha says to test his teachings, it doesn’t mean test them for an hour or so, or test them for the length of a retreat. You have to test these things over long periods of time, and really test them, not just going through the motions. It requires a certain amount of conviction, conviction even before you’re sure. What drives you is the suffering that exists in your life, and you need to find a way out. The Buddha never forced you. He never said you have to believe him. But he did advise you to look at your life. If there’s suffering, then you might want to try this path, because it explains why there’s suffering and gives you some guidelines on what you might do in order to put an end to that suffering. Some of the guidelines don’t require that much effort, and others require a lot of effort and a lot of dedication. So the effort and dedication come from your sense of heedfulness, that if you don’t do something about your habit of creating suffering, it’s just going to keep creating more and more suffering. This is what the Buddha assumes is that we want happiness. We don’t like suffering. It’s a reasonable assumption. He’s simply asking us to take that desire seriously. And as we look around us, we see that other people want happiness, too. This makes you reflect. If you’re happy, happiness depends on their suffering. They’re not going to stand for it. So again, you want to look for happiness that doesn’t harm anyone. This is the basis for the Buddha’s teachings on compassion. It’s not that we’re all one. You should be compassionate for others only if you felt that they really were you, or if somehow we were all one. That’s a very selfish form of compassion. We talk about feeling other people’s pain, but we can create pain within ourselves when we see other people in pain, but we don’t really feel their pain. John Sawatt once made a comment, like when he was teaching in Massachusetts. There was a retreatant there who was brand new to Buddhism, extremely high-strung, working as a telemarketer. At one point in the retreat, he said to John Sawatt, “You guys would have a good religion here in Buddhism if only you had a God. That way, when the going got tough, you could have some confidence that the God would come in and help you.” John Sawatt said, “If there were a God who could arrange that when I eat one mouthful of food, it would make everyone in the world full, I’d bow down to that God.” In other words, when you eat, other people don’t get full. When other people eat, you don’t get full. You might be happy for them, but that’s a different feeling entirely. If we really were one, we’d have a common stomach. But we do know that our actions have an impact on one another. And if you want to be truly happy, you have to make sure that your actions don’t harm anybody else, because they’re looking for happiness, too. So you sympathize with them, even though we realize, ultimately, that we’re separate. After all, if we were all one, when the Buddha gained awakening, we all would have been awakened at the same time. But finding true happiness is something each person has to do for him or herself, because the reason we’re unhappy is because of our lack of skill. As we all know, you can’t make someone else skillful. You can show them your own skill and give them pointers, but they have to be observant. They have to do things for themselves—what works and what doesn’t work. They have to improve their powers of observation. And the happiness and the pleasure and pain that they experience comes from their actions, just as ours comes from our actions. So you sympathize with them. You recognize our commonality. And even when we don’t sense commonality—in other words, when other people’s values seem really bizarre, really short-sighted, selfish—still you realize that we all come from that same point. We all want happiness. And a lot of us are very happy. We’re very deluded about it. We’ve been deluded ourselves, so there’s no reason to look down on other people because they’re deluded. Each of us has our own forms of delusion. But what we have in common is this desire for happiness. And it’s the great wisdom of the Buddha’s teachings that he tells us to take that seriously. For so many people, the desire for happiness is narrow and selfish and hedonistic. But as the Buddha said, if you really are serious about happiness, you have to be pure in your actions—in other words, harmless. You have to develop discernment as to what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. And you have to be compassionate, realizing that your happiness cannot depend on the suffering of others if it’s going to last. Wisdom, purity, compassion—these are all noble qualities. They grow in the mind that really takes happiness seriously. So he asks us, “Do you really want to be happy?” And if you say, “Yes, okay, here’s a path to follow.” Because it’s a path that gives priority to that desire. People have followed it and gained good results. We see other people following the path, and some of them seem inspiring, others don’t seem quite so inspiring. But you can simply ask, “Well, are they really following the path or not?” The path is reasonable, as the classic statement is, adi kalyanam vajay kalyanam pariyosana kalyanam. Good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. The Buddha never asked you to do anything that’s mean or spiteful or ignoble. The path builds on good qualities and it creates good results. So even if you don’t go all the way to the end of the path, it’s a good path to be on.

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