The Wisdom of Patience

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We’re here because we want to learn how to be truly happy. And the beginning of wisdom is realizing that it is something you have to learn. For a lot of people, happiness is something that just happens to come and go, and they can hardly figure out what it’s all about. Some days they’re happy and they don’t really know why. Sometimes they’re miserable and they don’t know why. A lot of times they do things that try to make themselves happy, and they end up causing more misery. Or they try to make other people happy, and both sides get miserable. So you’d think it wouldn’t take too much wisdom to figure out that this is something you have to learn. But there are a lot of people who refuse to think that way. For years back, when I was a teenager, a neighbor introduced me to the book Cosmic Consciousness, which the author described as his own experience of suddenly opening up to a sense of the totality of the cosmos. Then he’d gone through history and noted other people who’d had a similar experience. He mentioned Buddhist practice in passing and saying this was a technique. He did it for bringing about that kind of consciousness, but he distrusted it, or mistrusted it, because for him a large part of it was the total ramdhanus, the unexpected act of grace, I guess he would call it. He didn’t trust the idea that you could actually induce a sense of oneness or wholeness, which is how he interpreted the Buddhist awakening. He was wrong on several counts, but the main one is that the idea that if you induced it, it was artificial, as if somehow the random event was also not artificial, fabricated. In the case of the Buddhist training, it was learning how to fabricate things skillfully, not leaving things up to chance. So learning how to be truly happy is something that you can train yourself in. And it is a wise pursuit. It’s striking how often issues of happiness and wisdom or discernment come together in the Buddhist teachings. There’s that question that the Buddha says lies at the basis of discernment. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term well-being? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? The wisdom there lies in realizing that long-term is better than short-term. And it will depend on your actions, and you do have choices in what you’re going to do and say and think. The fact that we’re aiming at long-term happiness means that we’re going to have to learn some deferred gratification. We can’t push things to be the way we want them to simply through the force of our will or to get the result as quickly as we want. This is one of the major mistakes of new meditators. They want results right away, right away. They don’t have time for a long practice. Part of this is our culture. One of the modern cultures is one of the few cultures in the world where we actually train our children to be impatient. We let the TV, the internet, educate our children. And what are they educated in? Well, impatience, desire, not learning, deferred gratification. So if that’s the way we’ve been raised, we have to unlearn. And it takes time to learn that endurance, patience, learning how to wait for something really important, is wise. If you try to force things too much, too quickly, they die. There’s that story in the canon of an old Brahmin who has a young wife, and he’s very proud of the fact that she’s pregnant. And they start talking about the gifts they want to give the child when it’s born. And the wife said, “It’d be really nice to have a little monkey for the child to play with. If the baby is a boy, she’d like to have a blue monkey. If it’s a girl, she’d like to have a pink monkey.” So the Brahmin decides he’s going to go out and buy the monkey right away to please the wife. But he doesn’t know if it’s going to be a boy or a girl, so he opens her womb to see what it is. Of course, that kills the child, kills the wife. Sometimes your impatience can actually destroy whatever you’re impatient to get. So you have to learn how to look after the causes properly and realize that patience is a virtue. It’s an important quality of mind that we have to develop if we’re looking for long-term happiness, something that’s really solid and really secure. And the immediate question, of course, is, “What’s the quick way to learn patience?” It’s like asking, “What’s the easy way to do what’s difficult?” To learn patience, you have to learn patience. But there are ways of making it easier. Not necessarily easy or quick, but you can make it easier to learn this virtue of endurance. And the main one is to focus on what is going well right now. There may be hardships that you have to face, difficulties you have to overcome. But if you learn how to gain strength from the fact that there are still good things along the path, that’s what enables you to keep going. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha included right concentration as part of the path, and emphasized the quality of pleasure and rapture that can give nourishment to the path as you go along. So it’s not just a long journey. It’s not just a long stretch of desert road before you finally get to the oasis. We’re actually walking through a very pleasant countryside. It may take energy to walk. You may get tired sometimes from the walking. But there are streams along the road. There are plants along the road that if you learn how to recognize them, that you can eat, you can use as medicine. Then there are shelters, little pavilions along the road as well. So even though the fact that we’re following a path that leads to a goal which may be a distant goal, we learn to take nourishment from what’s along the path itself. So learn how to find some refreshment in the breath. Learn how to find a sense of well-being in the breath. Because this not only gives you strength, but it also keeps you on the path. One of the signs of someone who’s forcing the meditation too much is that the breath starts getting abnormal. It starts throwing the elements in the body out of balance. The way to bring them back into balance is the breath. The breath is sort of the main moderator of all the elements in the body. So try to breathe in a way that’s refreshing, that feels good. It feels nourishing. It feels healing for the body. Don’t try to force it to be too refined, or too heavy, or too constricted, or too anything. Learn how to develop your sensitivity to the breath. That gives you a backdoor into getting a sense of when the mind is getting out of balance, when it’s forcing things too much. Because remember, true happiness is something you have to learn. Learn how to be truly happy. And part of it is learning to take advantage of what potentials for happiness there are here in the present moment that are skillful. And also learning that true happiness is going to take work, it’s going to take time, it’s going to require patience, determination, truthfulness, all those things. Those hard virtues. But you don’t have to make it harder than it has to be, because there are the refreshing virtues as well. The virtues of concentration, when the concentration is right. The virtue of knowing that you’re on a good path, a path that harms no one. It doesn’t harm you. It doesn’t harm the people around you. It forces you to develop noble qualities of mind. This is a good place to be. It’s a good place to walk. And then you learn from the walking. It’s in learning how to get the mind to settle down, how to deal with distractions, that you gain real insight into the mind. There’s that long-standing misunderstanding that you do concentration practice for a while and then you turn around and then you do insight practice, as if they were two totally separate practices. But you can’t get the mind to settle down in a proper way without gaining some genuine insight into it, how it distracts itself, how it hides things from itself. You’ve got to learn these things. And the only way you can learn them is through practicing concentration, really being determined to get the mind to settle down with the breath, how you can motivate your own mind to stick with a path. That’s an important part of discernment as well. Learning how to be strategic, figuring out ways to get the mind to do the right thing, to figure out what the right thing is and then to know how to do it. Sometimes it’s not all that easy. It requires that you make sacrifices, that you learn the hard virtues. So you’ve got to generate the desire to do that. Maintain your intent to do that. As we chanted just now, chandang janeti, generating the desire. Chittam bhagavati, arousing your energy. Chittam bhagavati, upholding your intent, making sure that this is something you really do want to do. And not forgetting that. And not looking for shortcuts. Because many times the shortcuts abort the whole path, like the brahman and his wife. So it’s the search for true happiness, or learning to train yourself in the search for true happiness. That’s how wisdom grows. It starts with the realization that it is something you have to learn. And it grows as you learn about happiness. This is why the Buddha started his teaching with the Four Noble Truths. And even before the Four Noble Truths, he talked about the Eightfold Path. He was reminding his listeners that this is something you do have to do. It’s a path to a goal. Some paths are long. But when the goal is really worth it, the length of the path shouldn’t matter. It’s better to be on a path than just wandering through the underbrush, totally lost. And the first factor of the path is understanding what suffering is. Not because we’re after suffering, but because if we don’t understand suffering, we’ll never understand true happiness. We’ll never reach true happiness. So you have to go through suffering in order to get to that true happiness. But it’s not just weighing yourself down with suffering. It’s learning how to comprehend it, giving yourself the tools you need by developing the path so you can look into suffering. Abandon its cause so you can reach the end of suffering, which is the ultimate happiness, the truest of all happinesses. So understand that this is the path of practice that’s really wise. Not simply because some wise person said it was good, but because it leads to your true happiness. The best of all goals.

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