High Standards for Happiness

July 21, 2011

We start the meditation every evening with thoughts of goodwill, a wish for our own true happiness and a wish for true happiness of others, to remind ourselves of why we’re here. We’re looking for our special happiness, something that really can be relied on, that doesn’t turn into something else. And that’s going to require work. Ordinary, everyday happiness is all around. There are lots of different ways you can find pleasures that last for a little while. It doesn’t take much effort, but they don’t really last. And sometimes you get to the point where you find yourself doing something really unskillful to gain those pleasures, and then you’re stuck with the karma. The pleasure is gone, but the karma is still there. So you have to keep reminding yourself that that’s not the kind of happiness you want. It’s easy to attain, which is why it’s so seductive and why the mind keeps going back to that kind of happiness. But we want to look for something better. Because most people spend their lives going back and forth between pain and sensual pleasure, because they don’t see any other alternatives. That’s what the Buddha was talking about in the night of his very first sermon. People go back and forth between pain and sensual pleasure. But in either way, do you find any real peace, any genuine happiness? So he said, “It’s important that you realize there is another alternative, there’s another way.” And keep that point in mind as you’re following that way, because it’s not always easy to stay on the correct path. And it does require effort. It requires a sense of conviction, that as you’re working at it and the results haven’t really appeared yet, all you have to go on is that sense of conviction that this is something really worthwhile, that you’ve tried other alternatives and they don’t work. You want to really give this one a try. Because in one way, the meditation is not all that hard. This path we’re following, all you have to do is focus on your breath. Breathe in once and you’ve got the breath. But the problem is that you tend to lose it. The breath is always there, coming in, going out, but the mind wanders off. The difficult part of the path is learning how to stay with the breath. One way of inducing yourself to stay is to take an interest in the breath. We talk about breath here. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s a feeling of energy flowing through the body. And when you breathe in, where do you feel that energy? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? Is it comfortable? If it’s not, you can change. This is one of the good things about the breath, one of the reasons why we focus on it as our topic, because it’s one of the few processes in the body that you can actually adjust. You can try longer breathing, shorter breathing, heavier, lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, and find what rhythm of breathing really feels best right now. Then you stick with that for as long as it feels good. Then you may find that the needs of the body change, and so the breath needs will change as well. So you adjust the breath to fit in with what the body needs now, and then now, and then now. And try to make yourself as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. It makes it more interesting. Because if you lose interest, it’s very easy for the mind to go wandering off to its old ways. So you find ways of bringing it back. Sometimes all you have to do is remind yourself, “Whoops, you’ve slipped off. You’re here to meditate, and you’re off thinking about what you’re going to do tomorrow. Bring the mind right back to the breath.” Sometimes the thoughts that pull you away are more insistent, things that happened in the past that really grabbed your attention. And now that you have a little free time here, they just want to run in, take up the time. You have to say no. So you have to remind yourself of the drawbacks of getting yourself involved in that kind of thinking. It’s a huge waste of time. And even if it is something where you have to plan, say, for something you’ve got to do tomorrow or the next day, now is not the time for that. You can think about those things some other time. This is the time to develop qualities of the mind. We’re developing mindfulness. We’re developing alertness. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind, and it’s when you’re trying to remember to stay with the breath. And alertness is watching what you’re actually doing. And noticing the results of what you’re doing. These are qualities that you need in any activity. So here’s a good way to train them, to strengthen them. Then there’s a quality called ardency, where you really try to do this well. You’re not just going through the motions. You want to find out what it’s like when the mind settles down. What is the breath like right here in the present moment? How could it be made more comfortable? How could it be made more soothing, more refreshing, more energizing when you feel tired, more relaxing when you feel tense? There are lots of things you can explore right here. So think of all the good things that can come as you focus on the breath and you develop these qualities of mind. That gives you some impetus to stick with it and to really pay attention to what you’re doing. Because the concentration is not just a matter of holding the mind with the breath. You’re actually trying to get interested in the present moment because there’s a lot going on in the present moment. Your mind is forming thoughts, it’s forming perceptions, feelings, and often it does it in a way that’s really not all that skillful. And so you end up suffering. The suffering may not be intense, but you don’t find it a good place to stay, so you try to create more thought worlds that last for a while and then they change. The mind keeps up with this process. It’s called becoming. And we get really involved in this, thinking up a thought world and then playing a role in that thought world, and then getting tired of it and finding another thought world and playing a role in that one. And it may be entertaining, but it doesn’t really lead anywhere. And often you find yourself in a world that’s not all that attractive. It’s not all that enjoyable. Then you ask yourself, “Why are you doing this?” Because normally we think that we’re doing and saying and thinking things for the sake of happiness, and yet we end up causing suffering and stress. Why is that? What are we doing wrong? We have to look into the present moment to see what you’re doing wrong, where your ignorance is right now. Because that’s why you do things that get the results you don’t want. Because you’re not really paying attention to what you’re doing. So there’s actually an awful lot going on in the present moment. But for some reason we’re not willing to stay here and watch and understand the process. So we use the breath as a tool. It’s a way of luring ourselves in, trying to make the breath as comfortable as possible, make it as interesting as possible. Because the way the breath flows in the body has a huge impact on its health. There are ways of breathing that can actually induce disease, but then there are other ways of breathing that can clear those diseases up. Stress diseases, for instance, have an awful lot to do with the way you breathe. So as you get interested in the way the breath energy flows in the body, the way it flows in your nerves, in your blood vessels, all over the body, out to the pores, you’re getting more established in the present moment. And as you’re more established here, you begin to notice it’s not just the breath. The mind is also doing things in the present moment as well, things that it normally hides from itself. But now you’re beginning to see some of the things you don’t want to see, at least part of you doesn’t. But if you’re really interested in trying to figure out why there’s suffering, these are things you really ought to look into. The mind does have its unskillful habits. Greed, aversion, and delusion really are defilements in the mind. They cloud it so that you don’t see things clearly. What we’re trying to do is bring in the light of mindfulness and alertness, and this intention to be serious about fighting through happiness. That’s what changes the equation, that your standards for happiness are higher than they used to be. You want something better, something more reliable. And you’re tired of falling for the mind’s old tricks, and accepting little bits and scraps of happiness that it’s been tossing at you in the past. This is why we need to have that chant on goodwill in the beginning, to remind ourselves we want something that really is a genuine happiness. We want happiness that doesn’t harm ourselves, doesn’t harm anybody else. We want something better. It’s really ironic. Many times you hear people talking about the Buddha saying, “Well, just learn how to accept, accept, accept, and everything will be okay.” But actually, the Buddha had extremely high standards. And there’s a lot he wouldn’t accept, especially in his own mind. As he said, this was the secret for his awakening. He was not to rest content, even with the skillful qualities he had found in his mind, to say nothing of the unskillful ones. There’s always that question, “Could it be better?” And as long as there’s any stress at all in the mind, the answer is yes, it could be better. We haven’t found for ourselves yet the limits of what human happiness can be. The Buddha found them, and he found that it’s unlimited. This is why he keeps telling us, “Don’t rest content with just your everyday pleasures. There’s something better, something nobler, something more reliable. It’s going to take work to find it, but the work is worth it.” An image John leaves us of the water in the ocean. He says that the water in the ocean is salty, but there is fresh water in there, and the tools for fresh water are there. But to get the fresh water out of the salt water, you have to distill it. You have to apply heat. It’s not going to just sit there. You have to take the water out of the ocean, put a cupful on the sand, and watch it. The salt is not going to separate out. You have to distill it. You have to put in the effort. And then you get the fresh water. So the same principle applies here. The potential for true happiness is there, but you have to do a lot of digging and a lot of observation and put in a fair amount of time, and develop your powers of persistence and endurance, and all the good qualities that keep you at something that may not be easy to begin with, but it’s really going to pay off in the end. So these are some of the things you should be thinking about as you repeat those phrases we have at the beginning. “May I be happy.” Not just ordinary happy, special happy. “May all living beings be happy.” “May my happiness not interfere with their happiness.” And allow that motivation to keep you on the path. Don’t drop it for anything less.

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