Trustworthy Happiness

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We come to the meditation because we realize that to a large extent our happiness has to depend on the state of our mind. If the mind is in bad shape, then no matter how good things may be outside, it’s not going to be satisfied. So it’s going to need something more. But if the mind is in good shape, things can be pretty bad outside and the mind is okay. The more you meditate, the more you realize how true this is, and how radically true this is. If you still have a few investments outside—things have to be that way, things have to be this way—then you’ll be happy. Supposing yourself to a lot of suffering. And not only that, you’re making yourself less than reliable. Because if you feel that the world has to be a certain way for you to be happy, you’re going to defend that particular corner of the world. And you may be willing to do all kinds of unskillful things in order to keep that. It may seem skillful to you in terms of your desire for that particular corner of the world, but in the larger picture, they’re unskillful. So you really have to focus in here and say, “This is your refuge, the state of your mind. This is your mainstay, as the Buddha said. If you’re not in your own mainstay, where are you going to find anything that you can really depend on?” Focus on what’s going on in the mind, what’s still disturbing the mind, what’s still uncertain in the mind. Dig down until you arrive at a certainty that you can really trust. And we start with the breath, because it’s easier to focus on, a lot easier than the focusing directly on the mind. You try to notice how the breath feels in the body. It keeps you interested in the present moment. It makes it a lot easier to stay here, both with a sense of ease and with a sense of curiosity. But we’re not here to get the breath. We’re using the breath to catch the mind. In Chan Phuong’s images of trying to catch eels, you try to reach down in the mud and grab hold of the eels. They just slip right through your fingers. But, he said, if you find something the eels like, and his image wasn’t all that pretty, but it’s memorable, he said, you find a dead dog. Put the dead dog in a jar down in the mud, and the eels will come into the jar. And there you have them. Fortunately, this is not a dead dog. This is your body. This is your breath. The breath is comfortable. It’s a lot easier to stay with it. And you start exploring how the breath energy feels in the body. And so you realize you’re not just here to rest, but to discover how you can create a sense of well-being simply by the way you breathe and by the way you focus on the breath. And this puts you in a much better position to think about the other things that you might like to base your happiness on. And realize that they can’t compare even to this. They change. They are so easy to lose. They can get stolen. When people steal things from you, how you feel. They are things you can contemplate doing. But this is your breath. You don’t need to do any of that stuff. You maintain it yourself. The only way you can lose it is if you forget. And you begin to realize the real dangers in life don’t lie outside. They lie in the mind, in the mind’s own inability to depend on itself. So you’re trying to be more and more attentive, more and more. You’re looking for anything in the mind at all that might cause you to slip away. Because when you watch the mind, you realize that sometimes it’s the slightest little thing that can put you in a totally different mental world. So when you’re alive to the dangers in the mind, then it’s a lot easier to focus. You can focus on where the disturbances are, where the little bits and pieces of wrong view are still lurking in the mind. And when you’ve got the breath as your anchor, it’s a lot easier to look at those things and admit them for what they are. There’s a sense of well-being that comes with staying with the breath. It makes the mind a lot more willing to see its own faults, its own shortcomings, and have the strength to do something about them. And you look at what the world has to offer. It has material gain, but there’s also material loss. There’s status and there’s loss of status. There’s praise, but there’s also criticism. There’s pleasure and there’s pain. That pretty much covers everything. You notice these things come in pairs. You can’t have the gaining side without the losing side. And our normal reaction to these things is to want just the good side and not want the bad. It’s like saying you don’t want the world to revolve. You want just daytime or you want just nighttime. You don’t want the other side, but the world revolves. And our fortunes in the world go up and down. If our happiness depends on these things to go up and down, then it’s going to go up and down, too. So we want to find a place in the mind that’s not snagged by these things, doesn’t get caught up by them. So the breath provides you with a place from which to look both at the world and then back at the mind. Then you realize the problem is not so much with the world; it’s here in the mind. And simply being with the breath is not going to solve these problems. It’s going to provide you with a more reliable basis, but you’ve got to go deeper than that. Look for any craving, any clinging, any impetus, any desire. It’s in the mind that would send you back out for looking for happiness outside. So to be really free of danger, this is where you have to look, and this is where you have to train all your attention. Be very, very careful to see any seeds, any germs that are there. There are many inclinations that would go out and want to get a little bit of this, a little bit of that, as a basis for happiness. As John Lee once said, “You regard the ways of the world simply as ornaments, decoration along the path.” In other words, when they’re there, it’s nice. When they’re not there, it’s also okay. They’re not the path that you want to follow. They’re things on the side of the road. So determination for true happiness is here on the path. You want to do good. You want to say good things. You want to think good things, i.e., skillful things. Things that really will lead to a true happiness. And in training the mind in these good things, you find that you develop more mindfulness, more alertness. You raise the level of the mind so it’s not out there grubbing with everybody else. The Buddha once said, as he got started on his practice, he saw the world as a pond of water where the water was drying up. The pond was full of fish, and they were just fighting with one another for a little bit of water. He knew it was inevitable that the water was going to dry up. And it’s not really worth it, all that competing, pushing other people out of the way, doing all kinds of unskillful things to get that little bit of drying up water. Because you end up with what? You end up with nothing. Aside from this karmic record of all the unskillful things you’ve done in order to grab what little pleasure you wanted. Then, as he said, he looked deeper and he realized that the real problem was here in the heart. There’s an arrow embedded in the heart, he said. It’s this craving that we’ve got to get that water, that the only way we’re going to find happiness is to get a little bit more of that water. And as long as that’s how you feel, then you can’t trust yourself. So you’ve got to put the mind in a position where it can trust and see that there is a higher happiness. And it can pull out the arrow, realizing there’s something that’s a lot better than this. And when you can maintain your focus in this direction, that’s when the mind becomes a lot more reliable. You have a lot less to fear. So this is why training the mind is the number one priority. And you want to give it as much of your attention and as much of your energy as you can. Because it’s the only way you find true safety, a safety you can rely on. One that doesn’t have to depend on anything that changes at all.

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