The Noble Search for Happiness

July 1, 2012

The Buddha once said that our normal reaction to pain and unhappiness takes two forms. One is we get bewildered. We don’t know why the pain is there or why it’s so bad, even though we may know that we hit ourselves or got hit by somebody else. So the question is, why does there have to be pain? It’s like that discussion in Catch 22 between Yossarian and an Italian woman. They’re lying in bed. He asks her, “Why did God put pain in the world?” And she was giving her reasons. “Well, he wanted to warn us about doing things that were harmful to ourselves. So he said, ‘Why couldn’t we have this light in our forehead that would light up whenever we did something wrong? Why do we have to suffer pain?’” So there’s that sense of bewilderment. Why is there pain in the world? Of course, when you first encounter pain as a child, it’s extremely bewildering. You don’t know where it’s coming from. You don’t know why it’s there. You don’t know what to do to put an end to it. So you’re bewildered. And that leads to your second reaction, which is to look for somebody else who knows a way to get out of the pain. As children, of course, we run to our parents. As we get older, we run to our friends. We run to experts in various fields, hoping that they’ll know some way to put an end to the pain. So there’s bewilderment and there’s a search. So basically, what we’re searching for is a way out of pain, suffering, and the way to happiness. This is one of the main metaphors the Buddha uses for his teaching. It’s what people are searching for. The Buddha started out by noticing he was looking for his happiness in things that were going to age, grow ill, and die. He himself was going to age, grow ill, and die. You spend all your time searching for happiness, and then it ends. The question is, what good is that? Especially if it’s sensual happiness. Because many times you can harm yourself and harm a lot of other people by the way you look for happiness. This is one of his major insights, that the type of happiness he was looking for depended on his actions. So he started looking at his actions very carefully. This is one of the reasons why we meditate. You’ve got the mind still, you can see what it’s doing. Because if we’re running around and lots of our thoughts are running around, you run into these thoughts, but you don’t know where they’re coming from, where they’re going. But if you can get the mind really, really still, you can see where a thought’s coming from, where it’s leading to. So this is why we focus on the breath. Breath is something right here in the present moment. And it’s not in the mind, it’s quality of the body. It’s breath energy flowing through the body as you breathe in, breathe out. It’s not just air coming in and out of the lungs. There’s a movement of energy throughout the nervous system. You want to get sensitive to that. And notice the quality of the energy. The way you breathe has a huge impact on the energy in the body. Long breathing can have one impact, short breathing can have another. Fast, slow, any combination of these—deep, shallow, heavy, light—it takes some time to get sensitive to this. And at the same time, it’s leading to a higher level of well-being, a higher level of happiness. The word sukha that the Buddha used for happiness can also mean pleasure, well-being, even bliss. But that’s what we’re looking for. It’s interesting that he never defines the term. Because your sense of what counts as happiness, what counts as well-being, is going to get refined as you go through the practice. But you can start with your general sense of not liking to suffer and wanting to find freedom from suffering, whatever kind of suffering is bothering you. And as you work on the practice, you get more and more refined notions of what that suffering is, and more refined notions of what pleasure, well-being, is. And one of the distinctions the Buddha made is the distinction between sensual pleasure and what he called pleasure not of the flesh. That’s the pleasure that comes from inhabiting your sense of the body from within. In other words, it’s not what you touch or see or listen to. It’s how you feel inside your own skin. That’s called the pleasure form, and it’s based on dropping unskillful mental states. This is one of the Buddha’s main discoveries, that you’re going to find real happiness. Drop your greed, aversion, and delusion. Most of us think we’re going to find happiness through our greed or our aversion. Some people really like getting off in anger. But the Buddha said if you want to really find happiness, you’ve got to learn how to find happiness that’s not burned by those things. In other words, the happiness you want to look for is one that comes from good states of mind. And it so happens that the better the state of mind, the better the happiness. The better the action, the better the action, the better the happiness that comes. There are three qualities the Buddha himself developed in the course of his practice as he refined his sense of what he was doing and the results he was getting from his actions. He would ask himself, “Why am I doing X? This is leading to stress. It’s leading to suffering. Why don’t I try acting in a different way?” Instead of looking for a happiness that was subject to death, he wanted a happiness that was deathless. And this required developing good qualities, as he said. The three main ones are wisdom, compassion, and purity. As he said, wisdom starts with a question, “What will I do that will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?” The reason that’s wise is, as you ask this of someone who, as far as you can tell, has no brain, you notice that your happiness is going to depend on your actions. It’s not just going to come floating from outside, or it’s not going to be a gift from somebody else. It has to come from what you do. And you want long-term rather than short-term. It would seem to be a no-brainer, but you look at the way most people live, and they live as if they have no brain. They write for whatever’s immediate pleasure and don’t give much thought to consequences. But if you realize you’re putting effort into finding happiness, you want a happiness that’s going to be worth all that effort. That’s the beginning of wisdom. As for compassion, there’s the story of King Vasanthi and Queen Mallika. They’re alone in the palace bedroom one night. The King turns to Mallika in a tender moment and says, “Is there anyone in the world you love more than yourself?” Of course, being king, he’s expecting her to say, “Yes, Your Majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” But that’s not what she says. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. How about you? Is there anybody you love more than yourself?” The King, suddenly forced to be honest, had to say, “Well, no.” At the end of that scene, the King leaves the palace and goes to see the Buddha. He tells him of the conversation they had. The Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You could search the whole world over and you would never find anybody you love more than yourself. At the same time, though, everybody else in the world loves him or herself that fiercely.” So his conclusion is not just fight for whatever you can get or that it’s a dog-eat-dog world. His conclusion is never harm anyone. Because if your happiness depends on other people’s harm, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do what they can to put an end to it. At the same time, there’s the question of basic fairness. If you really love yourself and don’t want to be harmed, how can you live with yourself if you know that your happiness is causing harm to other people? We see a lot of this in the world. A lot of denial around the harm they’re doing to others, the idea that they’re not doing harm, or those people don’t matter, or who are you to be asking these questions, that kind of response. But if you want to be honest with yourself, you have to say, “No, I don’t want my happiness to harm anybody else.” So that’s the beginning of compassion, your willingness to think about other people’s well-being and to do what you can not to harm it. Your purity comes from really looking at your actions before you do something or say something or think something. Ask yourself, “What do I expect to happen as a result of this action?” And if it’s going to harm yourself or harm anybody else, you don’t do it. While you’re doing it, you look at it again. Is it causing any unexpected harm? If it is, stop. When it’s done, you reflect on its long-term consequences. After all, the Buddha did teach about karma. We have that chant just now, “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions.” You can’t look for happiness without thinking about what results your actions are going to have. Sometimes they’re immediate, sometimes they’re over a long period of time before they show their results. But if you can see that what you did either harmed yourself or harmed somebody else, you’re going to talk it over with someone who’s experienced on the path, and then you resolve not to repeat that mistake. If, on the other hand, you see that you didn’t harm anybody, then, as the Buddha said, take joy in your practice, that you’re getting more skillful. This, he said, is the basic principle for developing purity in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds. In other words, your compassion for other people is not just a vague, friendly idea. You actually try to put it into practice in what you do and say and think. This is another reason why we meditate. Many times there are things that you would like to do, but you know that they’re going to cause harm. And you have to have an alternative source of pleasure. So you’re not really hungry because of the things that people do when they’re hungry. And then afterwards, when the hunger is gone, they look back and say, “Oh my gosh, how did I do that? Why did I do that? It made no sense at all.” So you want to develop a sense of well-being. A sense of well-being inside that enables you not to hunger for pleasure or any pleasure that comes by. So again, learn to work with the breath. Think of the breath energy in the body moving in different directions, going up maybe, going down. Think of all the atoms in your body being surrounded by space so that the breath energy can come in and out of the body without any obstruction at all. Think of your body as a cloud of atoms and the breath as moving around in that space. There’s a great sense of well-being. It enables you to develop these three big virtues—wisdom, compassion, and purity. It’s interesting that the Buddha’s recommendations on how to find happiness end up developing all the virtues you need. You’ve got mindfulness, concentration, discernment, goodwill, compassion. These are all based on looking for happiness skillfully. We tend to think of the search for happiness as simply just indulging in your lusts and indulging in your greed and desire. The Buddha said it’s okay to have desire, but you want skillful desire. You don’t want to be overcome by greed or lust. You want to be noble. So what we’re doing is we’re meditating, learning how to take our desire for happiness, pleasure, well-being, bliss, all that cluster of words that come under the Pali word sukha, and we’re turning it into a noble quest. We develop good qualities of mind, and the results of our actions are totally harmless. And we find a true and lasting happiness. Sometimes you hear that the pursuit of happiness for yourself is a selfish thing. But as the Buddha said, if you pursue your happiness intelligently, you’re going to find that your actions are helpful for the happiness of others. Either you help them directly, or you’re a good example, or at the very least, you don’t harm them. As you find the causes of your actions become better, as you train the mind, the results of your actions become better. So this is why the Buddha has us reflect on those five reflections that we chanted just now. You’re subject to aging, illness, death, separation, all of which are downers. But as a reminder, don’t look for your happiness in things that age, grow ill, die, or are subject to separation. You’ve got the power of your actions. That’s why there’s that fifth reflection. Your actions will make a difference. As you learn to act more skillfully, the happiness you receive will become more refined, more reliable, longer lasting. And your relationships with other people become lighter because you’re not piling all your hopes for happiness on them. It’s one of those rare forms of happiness where everybody benefits. So look at the way you pursue pleasure and happiness. And try to be honest with yourself and see whether there are areas where you’re still causing harm, either for yourself or for other people. Ask yourself the same questions that the Buddha asked himself when he was searching for awakening. If you see that you’re causing harm, affliction, suffering, either for yourself or for other people, ask yourself, “Why am I looking for happiness this way? Isn’t there a better way?” And the more you train your mind with your meditation, the more you find that there really is.

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