Protect Your Desire for True Happiness

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Training the mind is a form of protection. Because the mind needs protection, both from influences outside and influences inside. It’s so easy to get blown around. Both by the currents of other people’s ideas, other people’s emotions, and by your own creative urge and delusion. So where are you going to find protection? Because there are problems outside, problems within. Where do you look for the protection? We have to look both outside and inside. Outside, you have to look for people who are reliable. People who have some experience in protecting themselves. And inside, you have to look for the qualities within you that are reliable. And if they’re not reliable enough, do what you can to make them more reliable. And as you get more reliable inside, you get better and better at recognizing who outside is reliable. So it’s a process where you have to learn from both sides as you develop each. Outside, the Buddha says, look for people who have four qualities, that they have conviction. Traditionally, this means conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. And that goes further to conviction in the principle of action, that your actions really do shape your life. And you really do have to pay careful attention to what you’re doing and saying and thinking, because these things are important. That sort of person will also be virtuous and generous. You also want to look for someone who’s wise, who has a sense of how things arise and how they pass away. Why they arise, why they pass away, what you can do to take that knowledge and apply it to the arising and passing away of stress and suffering. That’s what you look for outside. Inside, you have to look for your own truthfulness. And particularly the question, do you truly want to be truly happy? Because, of course, there are going to be parts of the mind that are not so reliable and not so truthful. You can’t let yourself get waylaid by them or discouraged by the fact that you can’t trust everything in the mind. But this is something that you should be able to learn to trust. Do you really want to be truly happy? And you’ll say yes, and then you’ll find yourself turning around and acting totally against that determination. So you have to learn how to protect that. That’s one of the most important things you’ve got to protect in all the practice. Remind yourself that true happiness is possible and that your desire for true happiness is something that should be respected. Don’t let anything trample over it. Don’t let people outside tell you that it’s impossible, that you’ve got to learn how to set your sights a little bit lower. This is as good as it gets, so you might as well learn how to content yourself with that. There’s one of the versions of the story of the Buddha’s life when he was still a young prince, in which the king, his father, is concerned that his son is getting dissatisfied with his life as a prince. And so he sends his son’s friends to talk to him, and they remind him of all the great people in the past who have contented themselves with being princes and kings. And the young prince’s response is that in that case they’re not really worthy of respect if that’s what satisfied them. He wouldn’t let the principles or the values of his culture trample on his desire for true happiness. We sometimes hear people saying that Buddhism has been brought over from Asia and it’s got a lot of Asian soil in its roots. We’ve got to clean off that soil so we have the pure roots. Of course, what happens when you have a plant with pure roots? It dies. But there’s an awful lot about Buddhism that’s not Asian, it’s not Indian, it’s not any country’s culture. Wherever you are, you’ve got to go against the values of your culture. Because the culture, of course, is there to keep things going, to have families, to keep having kids, to keep greed, aversion, and delusion moving through the world. Whereas the Dhamma teaches something else, goes against the general current of the culture. But it goes against the current not just out of contrariness or orneriness, but to remind you that if you really want to be true to yourself, to be truly happy, there are certain trends in your culture that you’ve got to buck. You can’t let yourself let other people or other people’s ideas trample over your desire for true happiness. In the same way, you can’t let your own greed, aversion, and delusion trample over your desire for true happiness. That’s got to be protected. Or as the Chan Mun said in his final talk, the soldier that’s fighting this battle here is the one who has a desire not to come back and suffer ever again. It’s essentially the same thing. You want true happiness. Happiness is not going to change. So that’s what you want to protect. Once you’ve got that value in mind, then you look around yourself at the way you live your life, the way you meditate. You look at every aspect of what you do and say and think. To what extent are you damaging your own desire for true happiness, and to what extent are you protecting it? When you’re dealing with other people, you have to ask yourself that same question. To what extent are they trying to limit your desire for true happiness or deny your desire for true happiness? And to what extent are they actually helping you? When you keep the question really simple like this, it’s a lot easier to sort through what things you need to do as you practice here at the monastery. When you go home, practice at home, you have a real sense of how precious it is that you’re even allowed to think about the possibility of a really, really true happiness—happiness that doesn’t change. It’s not affected by conditions. And not just think about it. There’s a path. You may not be one hundred percent sure about the path yet, but the people who’ve trod it come back and say, “Hey, it works.” And they look like reliable people. It’s like that story of the elephant hunter seeing the large footprints in the forest. You may not be sure that it’s a bull elephant, but it looks pretty likely, so you follow it. So when we talk about having refuge, the refuge actually is the true happiness. But to get there, you have to learn how to protect that desire for true happiness, because that’s what motivates you. And then you just learn to get more and more honest about what’s helping and what’s not helping. What’s coming up in the mind that’s moving you away from that? And what are you doing to bring those things up in the mind? When you’re getting the mind still and in concentration, what is it that still disturbs the mind? Sometimes it’s things outside the concentration. Sometimes it’s things in the concentration. Again, that’s the question. What’s disturbing the mind when things change? This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you focus on inconstancy. It’s not just to say, “Gee, these things arise and they pass away, and therefore I’m just going to let them go.” You’ve seen them arise and pass away whom knows how many times, and you haven’t let them go. Why is that? Because when they arise and pass away, there’s something worth holding on to here that’s worth the effort. But there are other reasons for looking at arising and passing away. One is to see what’s causing the arising, what’s causing the passing away. Like when there’s a disturbance in your concentration, the level of ease goes up or down. When you see that happening, you want to be right on top of it to ask yourself, “What did I just think?” or “What did I just change? What perception came into the mind?” The books may tell you that it’s this kind of thought or that kind of thought, but only if you catch it in the act does that knowledge really have an impact. You say, “Oh, it was because I thought this or I did that, and there, right there, was a result.” When you see that connection directly, that’s when you get a better sense of what you’re able to let go or, conversely, what you should do if it’s something that raised the level of ease or raised the level of well-being. So you can follow this question quite far—what’s helping and what’s not helping—in your quest for true happiness. You get the mind still and Jon Suwat once said, “Just seeing whatever it is that disturbs the mind in the stillness, that’s something you’ve got to look into. That’s where you’re going to find the fabrications. That’s where you’re going to find the ignorance that causes suffering.” Ultimately, the most persistent causes for suffering are the actions of the mind. Not finding true happiness comes from within. Still, you have to be careful of things outside as well, of other people around you, the extent to which you open yourself up to the media. Try to keep that one persistent thought in mind, that your desire for true happiness is really worthy of respect, really worthy of all the protection you can give it. Because ultimately, that’s the one thing you can really trust.

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