Take Your Happiness Seriously

July 11, 2013

Sit with your back straight. Close your eyes. Place your hands on your lap, your right hand on top of the left. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breath. Does it feel comfortable? If it does, just keep breathing that way. If it doesn’t, you can change. How do you know if it’s comfortable? You have to stay with the sensation of breathing. If any other thoughts come in the mind right now, you just let them go. We’re here to train the mind. Because the mind is the source of all our pleasure and pain, our happiness, our unhappiness. It all comes out of this awareness, the thinking, that pulls us in one way and pulls us in another way. Sometimes the thoughts are skillful, sometimes they’re not. Skillful meaning leading to a genuine happiness. There are all kinds of pleasures in the world, all kinds of pains. Pleasures you can get from outside, pains you can get from outside. But the ones that really weigh the mind down are the ones that come from within. So if you can train the mind so that it doesn’t cause you any suffering, then you’ll be able to learn how to think in ways that are skillful. Then you can live anywhere, in any situation, and still be happy. This is an important skill because the nature of the world is that there are pleasant sights and unpleasant ones. There are pleasant sounds and unpleasant ones. The same for smells, tastes, the tactile sensations, the feelings you touch with the body. And the thoughts that come wandering in and out of the mind. So if you’re making your happiness depend on these things, you’re really setting yourself up for a fall. Because no matter how good things can get, there’s always the fact of aging, there’s the fact of illness, there’s the fact of death. We don’t like to think about these things, but again, it’s something that’s inevitable. If you don’t think about it, then when these things come, you’re not going to be prepared. And whatever happiness you’ve developed up to that point will be very fragile, just get shattered. If you haven’t developed the skill to deal with these things, then you’re going to be at a loss. This is why it’s good when you’re young and strong. It’s good to prepare for the times when you’re not going to be young and strong. When things are relatively comfortable outside, you want to prepare for the time when things won’t be. That way you can face any situation without any fear, without any trepidation. Because you’ve developed this strength of mind, the strength of a trained mind. This is what the Buddhist teachings are all about, that you have to train the mind if you really want to be happy. Because an untrained mind can take really good situations outside and make a mess of them. Of course, a trained mind can live, as I said, anywhere, even when things are really bad. There’s a sense of inner strength, a sense of inner well-being that outside things can’t touch. So that’s where we’re headed as we meditate. And to get in that direction, you have to develop some good qualities of the mind. Mindfulness is one. That means keeping something in mind. Like right now, you’re going to keep the breath in mind. How long can you keep the breath in mind before you forget? But a lot of people, as soon as they sit down to meditate, their mind’s gone. Then you have to remember and come back to the breath. The next thing you have to do is just drop whatever thought has pulled you away, and you’re going to be right back here. If you wander off again, just drop it and come back to the breath. Try to keep remembering. You’ve got to stay with the breath to develop this quality of mindfulness. That means you have to be alert as well, watching what’s going on. Here it is, the mind in the present moment is shaping all kinds of things. All kinds of intentions—the desire to do this, the desire to do that. Some of the intentions are very clear and you’re very conscious of them, and others are just little blips. And then you go with them. It’s like somebody whispers something you can’t quite hear, but you want to go with them anyhow. So you have to be very alert to ask yourself, “What kind of intention is this? Can I really trust it?” All too often we’re like a person standing at the side of the road. Someone comes driving up in a car, and you jump in. Sometimes they may say, “Okay,” and invite you to jump in. But other times you just jump in and just go off with them. And then you start asking, “Okay, where are you going? What are we doing?” If we lived our lives that way outside, we’d die. Yet that’s the way the mind is. A thought comes by and you just jump in with it and go. That’s what it means to have an untrained mind. With a trained mind, you’re mindful of the fact that you want to stay with the thoughts that are skillful. You want to stay with the intentions that are skillful. You have to be alert. You have to learn how to use your powers of evaluation. Once you see something is arising, “Where is this going? Where will this lead me?” As in that chant just now, “Whatever I do for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” Okay, what are you going to fall heir to? You’re going to fall heir if you follow this particular intention. So it’s not to be fooled by these intentions and not to just be very easily nudged off in a certain direction. You want to get the mind to be really solid. This is why we’re working on concentration. It’s a mindfulness and alertness, and your powers of evaluation. There’s a quality called ardency. You want to really do this well. You want to do this skillfully. The concept of skillfulness is really central to the Buddhist teachings, because your life is shaped by your actions and your words and your deeds. You want to learn how to act skillfully, speak skillfully, think skillfully. We ordinarily don’t think in these terms. We think about what we want to do or what we don’t want to do or what someone else tells us we ought to do or ought not to do. But the Buddha encourages you to look at your actions and see what kind of results you anticipate. If you think it’s going to cause harm, you don’t do it. While you’re doing something, you want to look at the results you’re getting while you’re doing it. If it’s causing harm, you stop. If it’s not causing harm, you can go on and continue with it. When it’s done, you want to look at the long-term results. If you realize that it did cause harm over the long term, you talk it over with someone else, someone you trust, so you can learn not to repeat that mistake again. If you don’t see any harm, then you take joy in the fact that your mind is getting better trained. In other words, you take your actions seriously and you take your happiness seriously. This is what the Buddhist teachings are all about. That’s the opposite of being apathetic. Your happiness is important. And where does it come from? It comes from your actions. That’s why it’s important to be skillful. This is how you develop the skill—anticipating the results of your actions. You may find out, though, that something you anticipate is going to be harmless actually does cause harm. But you’ve learned an important lesson. The next time around, you can be more skillful and learn how to avoid that harm. The same applies to your words and the same applies to your thoughts. You have to learn how to be very watchful of what you’re doing and saying and thinking. Every time you meditate, get the mind in a good, solid place with a sense of well-being. When the breath feels good, coming in, going out, think of the breath energy spreading through the whole body, that sense of comfort spreading through the whole body, all the way down to the tips of the fingers, all the way down to the tips of the toes. When you’re coming from a sense of well-being like this, it’s a lot easier to say no to unskillful thoughts and yes to skillful ones. You’re coming from a position of well-being, you’re coming from a position of strength. So when you’re skillful in what you do and say and think, that’s what it means to have a well-trained mind so that your actions don’t cause any harm, don’t cause any harm. When the mind is not causing any suffering, you’ll find that the pains of the outside world, the disappointments of the outside world, just go off like water off a duck’s back. But most of us are not like that. We’re like vacuum cleaners. All the dirt in the world, we just suck right up. All the unpleasant things, we just suck them right up. And then we complain that the mind is dirty, the mind is feeling unhealthy. Or you’re feeding it on the wrong things. Learn to turn around and look at the good qualities you have inside. Learn how to feed off those. And if they look weak, you can strengthen them. That’s what the meditation is all about. It’s like strength training for the mind. So it’s a simple skill in the sense that it doesn’t require that you go out and buy a lot of gear. You don’t have to read a lot about Buddhism in order to do it. There are cases in the time of the Buddhists where seven-year-old kids made it all the way to nirvana. All it requires is that you take your happiness seriously. You’re not grim about it, but you realize your desire for happiness is something you want to honor. And you take your actions seriously, because they do have an impact on whether you’re going to be happy or not. If you take both of these things seriously, then you really do want to train the mind. And the Buddha’s not forcing you. He wasn’t a creator god or anything. He just asked you to think about your happiness seriously. You’d think that people would, but you look at the way people live their lives in this world. They do all kinds of crazy things just because they saw somebody else do it. You see people going after wealth, and you say, “Well, maybe that’s where the happiness is.” So they go after wealth. They go after power. They see people going after power. That’s what they try. Yet they get disappointed again and again and again. It’s because they don’t look carefully. The really happy people are the ones who are happy from inside. And this is how it’s done.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2013/130711_Take_Your_Happiness_Seriously.mp3.mp3>