A Happiness Big Enough for Everyone

November 21, 2013

It’s good to develop the Brahma-viharas, the sublime attitudes, every day. They say that Ajahn Mun would practice this three times a day, when he woke up in the morning, when he woke up from his afternoon nap, and before he went to bed at night. Spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings. Spread compassion, thoughts of empathetic joy, thoughts of equanimity, to all beings. It’s an important reflection that we think about what is happiness, because that’s what goodwill is about, what empathetic joy is all about. Compassion is a wish for those who are not happy to find happiness. So it’s good to think about this. For most of us, as we’ve grown up, happiness has been the sort of thing where you have to get it from somebody else, and you have to beat somebody else to get it. The source’s supply is limited, and you’ve got to compete. As a result, we develop all kinds of habits that are designed to be good competitors. This is what we’re trained in as school. Not everybody can get A’s. You apply to a school, not everybody can get in. You apply for a job, not everybody can get the job. And not everybody can keep the job. So there’s a constant scramble. Then you develop the habits of a scrambler who scrambles for the kind of happiness that is in limited supply. But the Buddha saw that there was another kind of happiness. There was an unlimited supply. He said it was like the ocean. The water from all the rivers in the world can flow into the oceans, and there’s always room for more. In the same way, no matter how many people enter Nirvana, there’s always room for more people. We’re not in competition with anyone outside. We’re in competition with ourselves. But it’s a different kind of competition. So when you stop to realize that your true happiness doesn’t have to depend on competing with other people, it makes it a lot easier to have goodwill for them. And to think about them not simply as fellow scramblers and fellow competitors, but as beings that have the opportunity to find true happiness. That puts a different light on your life. It helps to develop the kind of attitude that makes it really conducive for the mind to settle down. Because what you’re doing here, you’re not competing with anybody for attention to your breath. Nobody’s going to try to push you out of the way to look at your breath. Your breath is totally yours. And for the time being, nobody’s going to make any other demands on your time or your attention. It allows the mind to settle in and spread out a bit. If you took a picture of most people’s minds, it would be like a cat that’s always ready to jump. Tensed up, tightened up, ready to go. So here we’re giving you a nice warm spot in the sunlight. Let the mind get a little bit more liquid, like a cat that’s resting in the sun. Think of your awareness just spreading out easily. You’re not forcing it out. Just allow it to melt through the body, permeate through the body. And the question is whether you deserve the happiness that comes from meditation or not. That’s not a question here. The Buddha never talks about people deserving or not deserving happiness. He talks about people wanting happiness and being able to find it. Because they master a skill. It’s not a question of being a good little boy or a good little girl. It’s a question of learning the skills. And the skills are partly technical skills in terms of how you focus the mind, where you focus the mind, how you conceive the breath, how you can keep the mind on its topic. But some of the skills have to do with values. Like your ideas about what true happiness is and what qualities are really worth developing inside. Again, the world gets us to try to develop the qualities that are good for competing with others. Some of us have learned fair ways of competing, and others of us have learned unfair ways. But here the competition is different. It’s not that you’re trying to wipe out somebody else or push somebody else out of the way. You’ve got lots of different committee members inside who have their ideas about what happiness is, and they want to take the floor. So this is why the Buddha talks about the important victory in life. It’s not victory over others. It’s victory over yourself. Or as we might say, victory over your many selves, many of which you developed for the purpose of other kinds of happiness. For all of us, selfing is a strategy. We talk a lot about how the Buddha would use concepts of self and non-self as strategies. Well, everybody does that. It’s simply that the Buddha was able to do that really skillfully. If you hold on to a concept of self that has to compete with others, and if you can’t get what you need or want in an aboveboard way, well, sometimes you’re willing to cut a few corners, make a few backroom deals, and that becomes a kind of self. It becomes a kind of strategy. And you have many different selves for many different kinds of happiness. So for the happiness of Nirvana, you have to develop a different kind of self that’s going to help you along the path. And part of it is learning how to compete with greed, aversion, and delusion. Not so much to kill them, but to take away their teeth and take away their claws. John Lee gives the example of being someone who learns how to convert your enemies, but you have to remove the teeth and the claws. But they’ve got energy, and there’s a certain insight that comes even with your defilements. After all, they are strategies for happiness that have worked in one way or another, which is why you’ve kept them and you’re stable. So you want to be able to take advantage of the energy they have and take advantage of some of the skills they have and convert them. And convert them to a larger purpose, a higher purpose. Because after all, all of these selves are after happiness of one kind or another. So in that way, you’re not just pushing them out of the way. You know what happens when you push certain members of your community out of the way? They come back. They don’t come back right away. They come back underground, like the thing stretching its tentacles underground until it pops up and strangles somebody. So as you’re sitting there, there are times when you’ll just push away, say, ill will for somebody else, or push away sleepiness, or push away lust. And in the beginning, to get the mind to settle down requires a fair amount of just pushing away and saying, “I’ll deal with this problem later. Give me some space first.” But then you’ve got to turn around at some point and actually deal more directly with these things. Take them apart. Ask yourself, “What are the assumptions underlying this particular sense of self or this particular strategy of self? What are the assumptions of underlying other ways in which you have applied not-self to certain members of your committee when you don’t want them? And what are the effective strategies and which ones are not effective? How can you convert the unhealthy members of your committee so that they become more healthy?” There are things I found amazing. When I went to Watasukara, I met a number of people who were pretty marginal in one way or another, but had become very devoted students of Ajahn Lee. Marginal sometimes, and they were, as they say in Thailand, not a full dollar, half a dollar. Either they’re kind of retarded, or some people have a very hard, really emotional problem. Some people were kind of on the fringes of the law. But in Ajahn Lee, they saw someone that they really admired and really respected, and he was able to turn them into good people. That’s the kind of approach he took. And that’s the kind of approach he took within his own mind, and he was able to take it with people around him. So when you see that the mind has unskillful members of your committee, remember, there’s something good in there. There’s a desire for happiness. It’s just gotten warped. Sometimes warped from outside influences, sometimes warped from your own misunderstandings. You can’t blame everything on the world outside. If you’ve had any children, you’ll know what that’s like. You give the kids the same environment, the same upbringing, and they turn out very differently. That’s because they come with different attitudes, different backgrounds. But you look for the good. You try to encourage that. So instead of just trying to push people out of the way to get what you want, you realize there’s a source of happiness that doesn’t require any conflict outside. And all that requires is that you sort out things inside your mind. We practice concentration, getting the mind to settle in like this, giving ourselves a good, core place in which we can bring these issues up and question and probe and try to understand what’s going on in the mind, what’s going on with all these different self-strategies that we’ve been developing over time, to see where they can be changed a little bit so they actually become helpful, which ones have to be totally dismantled. And what’s the best way to do that? It’s because the potential for true happiness is not a limited potential. It’s not a zero-sum game. That should change all the other equations in your mind, which is why it’s important to reflect on this every day so that your selfing and not-selfing strategies actually become more and more skillful, more and more conducive to the happiness that we all want, the happiness that has enough room for all of us to gain it, just as the ocean has room for all the water coming out of all the rivers of the world.

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