Happiness without Drawbacks

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When we practice meditation, it’s part of a larger peace. If we practice it, it includes generosity and virtue for several reasons. One is that you learn from the practice of generosity and virtue that there are forms of happiness that don’t require that you take something from someone else. In fact, the happiness comes from giving. You give material objects, you give your energy, you give your time, you give forgiveness. And even though in some cases it may go against the grain, if you stick with it, you find that it really does give rise to a sense of well-being. Virtue, too, is a form of generosity. You give safety. You’re not going to kill anyone, steal anything from them, have illicit sex, lie to them, get drunk and abuse them. And the more universal you can make that, the more you’re spreading some happiness around. And you get a share of that as well. Again, it requires that you go against the grain sometimes, but if you stick with it, the sense of well-being is really solid. You practice the development of goodwill. Work through any sense of ill will you might have for someone—people who’ve wronged you, people who’ve wronged the people you love, or wronged people you care about. And you learn to put any sense of generosity aside—desire, say, for revenge, or even the desire to see them suffer. And the heart is lightened. We learn from this that many forms of happiness, if they’re going to be genuine, are somewhat counterintuitive. And we learn the beginnings of discernment. After all, the quest for discernment is a quest for happiness. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? That question is the beginning of discernment. And it grows from this experience you have with generosity and experience with virtue. When the Buddha would teach the gradual discourse, getting people ready to appreciate the Four Noble Truths, he would start with generosity, virtue, the rewards that come from the practice of generosity and virtue, and then finally realizing that even those rewards have their limitations. He’s not bad-mouthing these things. He’s just simply saying they can provide a happiness, but it’s not the ultimate. There’s more. There’s better. So it’s a pursuit of happiness all along, from the very beginning. And as we try to bring the mind into concentration, it’s carrying on that same principle. As the Buddha said, he realized that he first got on the path when he began to divide his thinking into two types. There’s thinking imbued with sensuality, with ill will, with heartlessness, and with harmfulness. And there was thinking that was free from that. And just the thinking, he said, could in itself be harmful. And then, of course, if it’s imbued with sensuality, you can say nothing of the harm that’s caused by acting out on those thoughts. But if you keep thinking in these ways, they’re going to create ruts in the mind and the mind is going to be inclined in that direction, or, as he said, bent in that direction. It’s a result of doing away with that unskillful thinking. Notice even the simple act of sitting there and thinking is a kind of karma that you have to be careful about. So he directed his thoughts to renunciation, to non-ill will, i.e., good will and equanimity, non-harmfulness. But even that, he said, if you thought nice thoughts like that for a day and a night, no harm would come from it, aside from the fact that the mind would get tired out. And when the mind is tired out, it’s very easy for it to go back to unskillful ways. So you look for the happiness of concentration where the mind can rest. You remember the Buddha’s quest earlier on. He tortured himself for six years out of fear of pleasure, fear of happiness. When he finally realized that that wasn’t the way, the question arose, “Okay, what would be the way?” He tried sensual indulgence, and that didn’t work. Then he thought of the pleasure that comes when the mind is free from sensual thoughts, free from unskillful thoughts, and is able just to focus on one topic. You direct your thoughts to the one topic, like the breath, and you evaluate it. What kind of breathing is good? What kind of breathing can the mind stay with? What states of mind help you stay with the breath? And as you get the mind and the breath adjusted so they fit well together, the mind can settle down with a sense of pleasure and rapture. He had been practicing for six years, avoiding every kind of pleasure. He asked himself, “Is there anything wrong with that pleasure? Why am I afraid of it?” He said, “There’s nothing skillful, there’s nothing blameworthy.” In other words, it doesn’t cause any harm to anyone and doesn’t create any intoxication in the mind. It’s a pleasure that he said is free from the usual passion that goes with pleasure. So he decided he wasn’t afraid of it, but he had to eat and regain his strength so he could actually practice that way. But it was that realization that this pleasure is harmless and it’s actually part of the path to some greater happiness. This is something we really want to cultivate. It’s the first factor of the path that the Buddha discovered. Notice it goes together with right resolve. Because that teaching on how to train your thoughts to stay away from sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness, that’s right resolve, too. Right resolve goes from mundane to transcendent levels. You start out with that level of right resolve, and as you work with it, it brings the mind into concentration. And that’s transcendent right resolve, the right directed thought and evaluation that goes into getting the mind to settle down. So these are pleasures. Not only don’t get in the way of training the mind, but they’re actually an important part of it. They give you strength along the path. The Buddha compares the four jhanas to food. The practice, he said, is like having a fortress on the frontier. You’ve got the soldiers, which are right effort, and you’ve got mindfulness, which is your gatekeeper, to keep balance. You allow unskillful thoughts, unskillful qualities, and you allow the skillful ones in. Now, these need food to keep them strong, and that’s where the concentration comes in. Just having the mind at peace like this, this is nourishment. It’s strengthening for the mind. If your mind is running around, frantic, trying to figure this out, trying to figure that out, it gets worn out. Then you try to use it to gain discernment, thinking that, “Well, my mind is sharp, my mind is intelligent, this should be no problem at all.” And you find that it’s like a dull knife. You can think the thoughts, you can read the books, have a really sophisticated grasp of what the Buddha was teaching, but then you actually try to apply it to your own mind and you find that your knife is dull. It just doesn’t cut things away. This is why there’s a very strong emphasis, as you’re practicing concentration, to put what you’ve learned from the books aside. So your directed thought and evaluation doesn’t keep going back to directing your thoughts to the books or evaluating the books. You’re evaluating your breath, something that’s right here, right now. The words are meant to point you right here, right now. So use them for their proper use. Develop discernment. This is what directed thought and evaluation are. These are the discernment factors in your concentration. John Lee talks about several types of evaluation. One, just evaluating the in-and-out breath. Is it too long? Is it too short? Too deep? Too shallow? What can you do to it? Make it more comfortable. Once it is comfortable, then the next question is, what do you do to make the most of that sense of comfort? Why do you let it spread around? Think of going to different parts of the body. Which parts of the body seem most starved of that kind of energy? Provide them with the energy they need. Once there’s a sense of well-being that’s fusing more and more through the body, how do you maintain it? That’s the next step you have to evaluate. All this requires discernment. This is how you develop your discernment, because you’re looking at what you’ve been doing to cause unnecessary stress and what you can do to put an end to it. You’re beginning to get the mind in the framework of the Four Noble Truths. Not only within the framework, but also doing the duties that are appropriate to them. We don’t like to think of the word “duty,” but these are duties for happiness. You’re trying to comprehend the stress and the sufferings to the point where you can abandon the cause. You develop the path so you can realize the cessation of suffering. These are all good duties, because they actually are for the sake of your genuine, harmless, stable happiness. So the practice is all of a piece. It begins with the realization that your happiness doesn’t have to depend on taking things. It doesn’t have to be a zero-sum game. You can actually give, and other people get more. You get more at the same time. I’ve told you the story before of when Jon Swat was first teaching at IMS. After the second or third day, he turned to me and said, “Do you notice how grim all these people are?” He attributed it to the fact that they didn’t have a foundation for their meditation in generosity and virtue. The continuation of the story is that the next day I was asked to give a Dhamma talk in the morning, so I gave a talk on generosity and virtue. The need to keep the practice within this context. One of the retreatants actually left the retreat, complaining that he hadn’t come there to be taught religion. It’s a sad misunderstanding. I guess the idea being that religion is just these truths that you can’t use or are made up to make you feel bad about yourself. Here the Buddha is not making you feel bad. He’s not imposing arbitrary requirements on you. He learned from experience what kind of happiness really does lead to peace, and how you can give rise to that happiness. These practices of generosity, virtue, and meditation create a special well-being that doesn’t create limitations. The happiness that comes from material gain, status, praise, and pleasures of the world, that intoxicates the mind and creates divisions. You gain, somebody else has to lose. It’s not all that reliable. You create a lot of karma in trying to find that kind of happiness, and it just slips out of your fingers like water going through the fingers. It’s because the Buddha wasn’t wanting us to be truly happy, and to do it in a harmless way. This is why he set forth these duties, so they’re not imposed out of an arbitrary idea of just making people behave. They’re all for our well-being, and a well-being that spreads around, spreads deep inside the mind, and spreads around to contribute to the well-being of the people around us. That kind of happiness, as Ajahn Manwa once said, is happiness without any drawbacks. And that’s what true goodness is.

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