The Wish for True Happiness

January 8, 2015

Take some deep, long, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the movement of the breath in the body. Try to make that your main focal point. The breath will stop and start up again. Stay right there. Stay centered in the body. Notice what kind of breathing feels good and what kind of breathing doesn’t feel good. And it’s entirely up to you to decide what you like and what you don’t like. When we practice concentration, the whole point is to find an object you like so you can stay with it. But particularly, you want to get an object that’s here, in the present moment, that helps you work with your mind. Watch what’s going on in the mind, because we’re not only to get the mind to settle down and have a sense of quiet and stillness, but also to gain some clarity about what it’s doing. Because what is the mind doing all the time? It’s looking for happiness, looking for pleasure. The Pali word sukha has a wide range of meanings, but it covers all the feelings of well-being. Everything from immediate physical pleasure to deeper states of well-being and bliss. That’s what we’re looking for. And what the Buddha proposes is to teach you the skill of how to do it well. Happiness isn’t something that just kind of floats in and floats away. It has its causes. And if you learn to look at the movements of the mind when you’re getting ready to say something, when you’re getting ready to do something, even as you get ready to think something, you want to know ahead of time whether these things are going to lead in the direction of happiness or not. So he lays down some principles, but also wants to teach you the principles of how to observe yourself. The large principles just cover the general framework, but the specific thoughts coming up in your mind can be disguised in all kinds of ways. There are some things that look like they’re going to lead to happiness when you think about them, but when you actually do them, you find they’re something else entirely. Either in the immediate present, or after the action is done, you realize, “Okay, that actually caused suffering. That actually caused pain.” So you want to learn how to read the thoughts of your mind and peel away some of the disguises with which your mind presents itself. Sometimes it presents you with ideas about what you might want to do or say or think. But to see that clearly, you want to be able to settle down. Sometimes you tell the mind to stay with the breath, and it’ll stay right there. Other times it’s not willing. This is when you have to think about why you’re here and what you want to gain from this. Those reflections we chanted with translations just now give you some ideas about how to think about why it’s good to be here. The first one talks about how the body is subject to aging, illness, and death. Living in this world, we’re going to be separated from the people we love, the things we love, which means you have to really look carefully about where you’re going to look for your happiness. That fifth reflection on how we’re the owners of our actions and heir to our actions, that points to where the solution lies. Looking at how we’re doing things, saying things, thinking things. Then there are the reflections on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. The Buddha wants you to think very carefully about what it means to wish for happiness. “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” How do those two phrases go? How do you look for happiness in a way that doesn’t cause suffering for others? Because after all, if it causes them suffering, how are they going to sit around idle and watch you be happy if they’re suffering because of the way you’re finding happiness? It’s not going to last. So this is our motivation for practice, finding a happiness that’s blameless. It also points us inside. The source of true happiness has to come from within. That doesn’t have to take anything away from anyone else at all, the way you train your mind. So thinking in these ways helps direct you into the present moment. This is where the training happens. Vamavahara is in addition to goodwill. That’s what they’re called, the sublime attitudes. They give you a framework for thinking about happiness in a little bit more detail. When there are people who are suffering, which may include you, or people who are doing the things that lead to suffering, you want to have compassion for them. Right now, this means having compassion for yourself. Sometimes when the mind gets still, you start thinking about unskillful things you’ve done in the past. Then you have to resolve, “I don’t want to repeat that mistake again.” That’s how you show compassion for yourself. And, of course, showing compassion for others. If you saw that you led them to do things that were unskillful, you want to learn how not to do that again. That, again, brings you back to the practice. We’re trying to develop good qualities here in the mind that make us more clear about what the mind is doing. As for things you’ve done that led to happiness in the past, you want to remember those and appreciate them. Sometimes we don’t let ourselves think about that. We get embarrassed about it. We feel that it’s a sign of pride. But if you’re going to learn the skill of happiness, you have to learn how to recognize what actions connect with happiness and what actions don’t. You have to recognize that when you did something unskillful, learn how to appreciate it. You see other people doing skillful things, leading to happiness, genuine happiness. Learn how to appreciate that, too. That’s what empathetic joy is all about. As for equanimity, you realize there are certain things you can’t do yet, either in controlling your own thoughts or if you see someone else doing it. If you see someone else doing something really unskillful and there’s nothing you can do to stop them, you have to realize that if you waste your time worrying about things you can’t prevent, waste your energy on those things, then you won’t have the energy to devote to learning how to train yourself. So these attitudes are meant to point you back inside to what you can do right now. And if your concentration is still in the stumbling along phase, accept that fact. But don’t just sit there so you can work with what you’ve got. All too often it’s a problem when you see that your mind is not really doing very well and sticking with the breath. You think, “When is it ever going to settle down?” And it seems impossible. It’s like learning a language. You learn the vocabulary and you learn the grammar, and then you’re faced with a situation where you actually have to use it and you’re tongue-tied. It looks like you’re never going to learn the language. Well, that’s not the case. You just have to learn how to figure out what’s the next step after the vocabulary and the grammar. You have to learn how to put sentences together. Whether you can have a full conversation or not, that doesn’t matter. Just learn how to put the sentences together. Get used to that. And it’s the same with the concentration. If you can be with a breath for five consecutive breaths, okay, the next step is to be with it for six, seven, eight. Don’t let your pride get in the way, which a lot of this is. A lot of us, if we’re not really good at something right away, our pride gets in the way. “Well, I don’t even want to try. It’s not worth it.” You go back to something that you are good at, whether it’s really skillful at it or not. But here you’re learning a skill that’s really basic to living in this world without suffering and how to gain some control over your thoughts. So you’re learning mindfulness. In other words, you’re trying to keep in mind the fact that the breath is where you want to be focused. Alertness, noticing what the mind is doing. And then a quality that the Buddha calls ardency. In other words, you want to do it well, as well as you can. So if you notice just yourself wandering off, just drop whatever it is and you’ll be back at the breath. Learn some discernment in how to get your mind to be interested in the breath, be willing to stay with the breath. This is one of the reasons why we work on trying to make the breath as comfortable as possible. So you want to stay here. Otherwise, it’s like keeping an inflated ball under the water. Only as long as you have a really good grip on it will it stay there. As soon as the grip gets a little bit loose, it comes popping up out of the water. But if you find that you can get the breath comfortable, then it’s more like iron filings around a magnet. The filings want to go. You take the filings away and they’ll come right back. That’s the quality you want. But to get there, you have to learn how to become really familiar with the breath. That may take some time. But it’s time well spent. And you begin to see, as you go through your daily life, that you’re a little bit more alert to thoughts as they come up. And you don’t have to wait until, say, greed overcomes the mind or anger overcomes the mind before you realize what’s happened. You can begin to see the little telltale signs. There’s a little bit of anger stirring, a little bit of greed stirring, a little bit of fear, a little bit of lust, jealousy, whatever. And you realize you have the choice. You don’t have to go with them. This doesn’t mean you bottle them up. You breathe through whatever tension manifests itself in the body around those thoughts. That weakens them considerably. And you learn you have a tool. Because usually when strong emotions come, even in just the very beginning stages, there will be some tension in the body. And that tends to aggravate these states. But if you can learn how to notice that, relax the tension, breathe in a way that relaxes the tension, then those mind states are a lot weaker and you’re more on top of them. So bit by bit by bit you get better at this meditation conversation where you actually get what you want based on a few rudimentary sentences. But then you begin to see that even the beginning stages have their rewards. And then from there you move on and get better and better at it. So try to be sensitive to the breath as fully as you can. This is a way of showing goodwill for yourself, genuine goodwill, i.e., a wish for a true happiness. Because we’ve seen already that in the pleasures of the world there are a lot of them out there that promise a lot but don’t deliver. The things that we expected would lead to happiness can have other sides as well. And when you find that you have a more solid basis for happiness inside, you can begin to look at some of the other pleasures you used to defend and used to hold onto. These pleasures had their drawbacks, but to which you turned a blind eye because you didn’t think you could live without those particular pleasures. And so you lived in denial of the harm that they were causing, either to yourself or to others. But now, when you have a more reliable source of happiness inside, you can look at some of the things you’ve been doing in the past, or are still doing in the present, and you’re better positioned to see, “Okay, this is the allure of that pleasure, but this is the drawback.” When the drawbacks outweigh the good that you get from them, then you’re willing to let go of some of them. Of course, as a result, you don’t have to live in denial. You’re causing less suffering for yourself, less suffering for the people around you. This is how meditation is an expression of genuine goodwill for yourself and genuine goodwill for others. So keep these thoughts in mind and motivate yourself throughout the hour.

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