Happiness as a Skill

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I had a friend in school who was the daughter of a doctor. She said that whenever she got sick, her father would just go through the sample medicines that came from the drug companies saying, “Try this.” In other words, she didn’t get the careful treatment that his other patients got. This was the case of all the kids in the family. It’s like the story they tell in Thailand of the carpenter’s house. The carpenter builds really nice houses for everybody else, but for his own family, he just bangs things together enough to keep going. That’s the way a lot of us approach our own happiness. We work hard. We have to toe the line when we’re at work. And so when the time comes to say, “I’m going to do this for myself,” just do anything at all. One of the things the Buddha teaches us is that we have to take our own happiness seriously. You don’t have to do it. It’s not that he’s imposing it on you. But still, it’s something that’s worth doing. We’re often told that our own happiness may be selfish, but he says, “No, it’s not. Because the qualities you have to develop to be really happy are good things.” If you learn how to take care in your own search for happiness, then you have more to share with others. Because for him, happiness is not just pleasure. It’s not nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. In fact, he says, “In order to be really happy, you have to get over your fascination with those things.” Look more at what you’re doing and why you’re doing it. Learn to be really skillful in how you approach this issue of happiness. It starts with some pretty basic practices. Generosity, virtue, developing thoughts of goodwill. These are the basic activities of merit. Merit is one of those concepts that’s not very popular in the West. It sounds like brownie points, merit badges. It might be better to just translate it as goodness. You look through happiness through goodness. And the things the Buddha tells you to do to be happy are not selfish at all. You find happiness in generosity. You find happiness in being virtuous, in abstaining from doing harmful things, and in spreading thoughts of goodwill to everybody. Even people you don’t like. Have the sense that you can rise above your likes and dislikes. Because, after all, what does goodwill mean? You wish that that person will find happiness too. It’s not going to just come out from a cloud of pink energy that emanates from your mind or your heart. That person is going to have to understand what the causes for true happiness are and be able and willing to act on them. That’s something you can wish for anybody, and it’s a good thought to keep in mind. When the Buddha was sick, that was what he did. He would spread thoughts of goodwill in all directions, even to the people who had wounded him. That way, he wasn’t just on the receiving end of the suffering or feeling victimized by the pain. He took a more proactive attitude. In fact, that’s all the Buddha has to say. If you want to find happiness, it comes through your actions. It comes through the skill with which you develop your actions as you engage with yourself and as you engage with other people. The same observations apply to teachings of the Four Noble Truths. If you want to be happy, he says, you have to comprehend your suffering. You can’t be happy by running away from it or denying it or pushing it away. You push it away and it comes back. The more you push, the more you suffer. You want to look into it. Imagine what that would be like, a life in which you were not afraid of pain and not afraid of suffering. The sense of freedom, the sense of strength that would come with that. Well, that’s what the Buddha is teaching. But first, he says, you have to face up to the pain, you have to face up to the suffering to figure out what it is. He didn’t say that life is suffering. He just said that clinging is suffering. The word for clinging in Pali means to feed. What are you feeding on? As he said, you feed on your inner sense of the body. You try to find pleasure there. You feed on your feelings. You feed on your perceptions. You feed on your thought constructs. You feed on your consciousness. And ultimately, he said, the ultimate happiness is where you don’t have to feed anymore. In the meantime, he teaches you to feed well. There are three kinds of mental food that he talks about. There’s the food of consciousness, the food of contact at the senses, but most importantly, there’s the food of your intentions. You want to encourage good intentions in the mind. I guess it becomes a mind that’s more pleasant to live with. You’ll find, of course, that the mind has all kinds of intentions. But you can be more selective in which intentions you go with and which ones you don’t. This is where we come to the practice of concentration. As the Buddha said, you can think good thoughts all day and it wouldn’t be harmful, except that it really tires you out. So you need energy. So you develop the skill of concentration. This is where you really take happiness seriously. It gives you a sense of well-being that you can tap into. Once you’ve mastered the concentration, you can tap into it at any time at all. Which means there can be all kinds of unpleasant situations outside, but you’ve got your own little air-conditioned room inside. And the qualities that make this into a skill are the ones that the Buddha said go into the practice of mindfulness. You want to be mindful and keep in mind what you want to do, alert to what you’re doing, and then be ardent in trying to do it well. In other words, really notice what’s happening. All these three qualities connect also with what are called the four bases of success. You have to look at your desires. What do you want out of life? As the Buddha said, all things, all dhammas, come from desire. In other words, everything you could possibly experience, except for nirvana, starts with desire. So which desires are you cultivating? Which ones are you not? And which ones should you be cultivating, if you really want to be happy? Look into that. Then you’re persistent. You stick with it. Whatever you see as really good, whatever is really truly beneficial for yourself, you stick with it. And you pay full attention to what you’re doing. In other words, as you meditate here, you’re not just going through the motions. What is your breath like right now? Does it really feel good? Could it feel better? When you’re adjusting the breath, how do you adjust it in such a way that you’re not making yourself more tense? How do you give the breath some freedom to go through the body? And when can you learn to lighten your touch? So that all you have to do is think longer, shorter, faster, slower, and the body responds. Pay attention to this. And then finally, use your ingenuity. Use your powers of judgment as to what’s working, what’s not working. And if things are not working, try to be ingenious and figure out other ways of making things work. There’s only so much that the Buddha or any teacher can explain to you from outside. A lot of this has to come from within. Look at the teachings of the Forest of Johns. There’s no one meditation method they teach, and there’s no one approach to things. Lots of different approaches, lots of different angles. Each of them had to go out in the forest and be on his own and come up with solutions on his own. Learn how to frame a problem. Learn how to test the frame. If that doesn’t seem to be quite right, take the frame apart again and try framing things in another way. For instance, if you have a sense that you’re having difficulty in breathing, instead of thinking of the breath as something you have to bring in from outside, remind yourself that there is breath energy in the body. And it actually starts in the body. It doesn’t start outside. It starts in here. So hold that perception in mind. See what happens. As you develop these four qualities—desire, persistence, intent, and your powers of judgment—you start applying them to the rest of your life as well. So going back to that practice of merit, which is nothing that you abandon as you start meditating. In fact, it keeps on going. But you learn how to bring more skill to how you give a gift, more skill to how you observe the precepts, more skill to how you develop goodwill. And you find there really is a lot of happiness that comes from learning to be really skillful at these things. Because in developing a skill, you’ve learned how to be a lot more solid as a person and there’s an inner sense of unshakableness. Remember the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula before he started teaching him how to meditate? He said, “Make your mind like earth. Unpleasant things come and earth doesn’t shrink away. Make your mind like fire. The fire burns up garbage, but it doesn’t feel disgusted by the garbage. Make your mind like water. Water washes away dirt, but it’s not disgusted by the dirt.” The wind blows garbage around, but it’s not disgusted by it. He’s not telling you, “Just accept whatever comes.” Because he then uses these instructions as a preface to his instructions on breath meditation, which involve a lot of experimentation, trying things out. But he’s saying you need the quality of mind that can look at things for what they actually are, rather than in line with what you might like them to be. So you can really see, are your actions skillful or not? To what would be better? How could you improve your level of skill? If the mind is solid, it can see these things more clearly. And it’s this level of solidity that really is a major source of happiness inside. There’s a sense of not being pushed around by things. As the Buddha once said, “There is no happiness other than peace.” As I said this morning, a lot of us might think, “Well, there’s lots of pleasures that don’t involve any peace at all.” Well, what’s pleasant about them is they give the mind a little bit of time where it can just rest with something, but then usually gets pushed out. But if the mind can develop a sense of solidity inside where it’s not shaken by things, then it’s peaceful. I’ve been reading a lot recently, and practicing my French, and studying about different First Ministers of France, and they were all in very precarious positions. They had lots of ups and downs in their careers. People like Richelieu, Maserat, Taylor Hall. But one thing they all had in common was a quality of unshakability that enabled them to face up to the world. They faced up to the downsides or the downturns of their careers so that they were not blown away by them and could come back again and again and again. So try to develop a sense of unshakability inside so you can be more skillful in the meditation, be more skillful in how you’re generous, more skillful in how you’re virtuous—all the good parts of the path. Then this way your happiness is not just something that’s nailed together over a weekend. It’s a happiness that shows good quality workmanship. It’s solid, well done. There will be a sense of duty in here, but it’s a sense of duty that’s not imposed from the outside. That’s the nice thing about the “shoulds” in the Buddhist teachings. You read about Freud and he talks about how people’s minds are divided into the part of the mind that just has basic desire, and the part of the mind that wants to survive, and the part of the mind that tells you, “Well, this is what you’ve got to do. You’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do that.” In other words, the superego is telling you all the “shoulds.” In the society that Freud was working in, all the “shoulds” were coming from a system of thought which didn’t really talk about your happiness. The “shoulds” were just going to be imposed—you’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do that—for reasons which may or may not be connected with happiness, which is why there’s such a struggle inside. But the Buddhist “shoulds” are all there for the sake of your happiness. You should comprehend suffering. You should abandon the cause. You should develop the path. You should realize the cessation of suffering. Why? Because it makes you happy. So you don’t have this big struggle between your desires and your superego and your ego. I mean, there will be a conflict inside, but it’s basically because you’ve got the desires that have the wrong ideas about happiness. But you can learn how to educate them. This is what all your desires have in common, the desire to be happy. And so it’s simply a matter of figuring out which ones will really work and which ones won’t. It’s all for the sake of your happiness, a true happiness, which is not a selfish thing, as I said. It all comes from within. It comes from doing good things. This is why the Buddha said it’s worth your while to approach your happiness as a skill. A skill that requires a lot of effort, but that more than repays the effort that goes into it.

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