On Deserving to Be Happy

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One of the most distinctive features of the Buddha’s teachings is that he approaches happiness as a skill. There’s a path of practice that you can master. It takes you to a happiness that doesn’t harm anyone, a happiness that lasts. It’s a happiness that is not dependent on conditions at all, which means it’s not going to change. Of course, the path of practice doesn’t create that happiness. If it created it, it would be conditioned. But the path does take you there. That’s why the Buddha used the image of a path. It’s like the path up the mountain here. You follow the path, you get to the top. The path doesn’t create the top. But if you follow it, you get there. But to get there, you don’t simply follow instructions. After all, you’re learning a skill. And if you’re learning a foolproof skill, it would still leave you a fool. You have to become more intelligent in how you learn. The Buddha outlines four, what he calls, bases for success. There are four ways of practicing concentration. They emphasize different aspects of concentration or what can get the mind into concentration. But if you line them up as a list, then they work pretty well as a guide to what you have to do in order to become skillful. The first is desire. You have to want to get your desires in line with the desire for this true happiness. And that takes some work. It takes what we would call psychological insight. I don’t know how many people I’ve seen who work hard at finally getting the mind to settle down, and there comes a sense of ease and well-being. And then they don’t feel right about it. As if they don’t deserve that well-being. You have to remember the Buddha never talked about people deserving or not deserving happiness, just like he never talked about people deserving or not deserving to suffer. He simply pointed out, there is this path of action. And if you follow it, you get these results. You may say, well, happiness is kind of a narrow individual path. It’s not a natural, selfish thing. But if it’s a happiness that causes no harm, what’s selfish about it? I think about people looking for their own happiness without any concern for other people. It’s usually because their quest for happiness is harmful. Which is why we don’t feel right about it. But in this case, the Buddha said, look, if you can master these steps, you will become a different person. Because what we are comes from what we do. When you get the causes right, the results have to come. And if you can find a happiness that places no burdens on other people at all, that’s one less mouth in the feeding frenzy which is this world of ours. You think of the Buddha himself. The fact that he found this happiness has had consequences for the world ever since. It’s inspired people from all kinds of backgrounds. Some of them pretty unlikely. You think about the forest tradition. Came from a very poor part of Thailand. The educational system there was very poor. But there were people who wanted happiness and they found a way that was skillful. So they didn’t let their backgrounds get in the way. I myself, one time I was giving a talk in New York City, and the person who introduced me told the group that here is a real New Yorker, although I wasn’t from the city itself. I came from about 70 miles outside of the city, out on eastern Long Island, on the North Fork. Grew up on a potato farm when I was young. And after the talk, a woman came up. She had a vacation house in Kutchok, which is not too far from where I grew up. She said, do you think it’s so strange that a little farm boy from Long Island would end up in Thailand? I kept thinking, I felt a little bit insulted. What’s wrong with farm boys? Don’t they have hearts? Don’t they have minds? So you get some unlikely people following the path. In fact, they would have found this path. It’s available to everybody, men, women, children, old, young, educated, uneducated. It’s a good path to a good destination. And so as we think about this desire for happiness, sometimes you have to clear up our attitudes around happiness. So we see that it is a good thing. The word sukha and pali means not only happiness, but also well-being, ease, bliss, pleasure. And if they’re harmless, they’re all good. So the first part of the basis of success is to want to do this and to see that it’s a good thing. And based on that desire, you practice persistence. You stick with it again and again and again, trying to make yourself more reliable. We just stab at the practice every now and then. We get just that, stabbing results. They come and they go, they come and they go. We don’t amount to much. And sometimes we think, well, we’re being wise. We accept the fact that these things are inconstant. They’re going to be stressful on that self, and just learn how to accept that fact. But acceptance is not the duty with regard to the path. The duty with regard to the path is to develop it. There are a scalable amount of states that are not there. You give rise to them. If they are there, you try to develop them even further. That, the Buddha said, is the duty of mindfulness as a governing principle. We hear so much about mindfulness being watching things arise and pass away on their own, and accepting the wisdom of accepting that. But that was not how the Buddha defined mindfulness. Mindfulness is a more active property. We’re trying to keep in mind the duties with regard to the path. We’re looking not for the three characteristics, we’re looking for the four noble truths and their duties. Trying to keep those in mind. And so we try to learn, how do you maintain this state of ease in the mind? First, of course, how do you give rise to it? When it’s not there, how can you nurture it? We explore. We’re talking today about long breathing, long in, short out, or short in, long out. Now, that was one of Ajahn Lee’s real discoveries. It’s not in the texts. They just say long in, long out, short in, short out. When he was off in the woods after he’d had his heart attack, three days walk away from any kind of civilization, what did he have? He had his breath. So he experimented. He found something good, he stuck with it. It’s by sticking with these things that you learn to see. What are the effects of this kind of breathing as opposed to that kind of breathing? Which is better? Because that’s part of the persistence. It’s learning how to judge what’s preferable. You try your best. When things don’t work out, then you try your best again. This brings in the other basis for success. One is intent. It’s that you give it your full heart, you give it your full mind, your full attention. We’re not here just going through the motions. We’re not here glancing down the way to see, well, how soon is the goal going to come? There’s no way you can measure that ahead of time. Then glancing away, glancing away. You don’t see things clearly right here, right now. So have some conviction that this is a path, it’s a good path, and it’s going to take you where you want to go. You don’t know when you’re going to get there. But you know that you have to follow this path very carefully. Because it is a middle way. If it were a path of extremes, it would be easy. Just go for extreme effort. Pull out all the stops. And those who are the strongest will win. But it’s not that way. As John Vorwan once said, if Nibbana was something you got simply through desire or through effort, everybody would have gone there a long time ago. It requires that you look carefully at what you’re doing. Have a sense of just right. How much pressure should you put on the breath? So it’s not too heavy, not too light. How large should you expand your range? of awareness? Sometimes it’s good to have a very small range. Especially when the mind is tired. Just give it one little place to stay. Other times you need to have a broad sense of the body. So you pay attention. You do your best and pay attention to what you’re doing. And then you judge the results. That’s the fourth base for success. In Pali it’s called vimamsa, which is a term for analysis. You’re trying to figure out what you’re doing, cause and effect. Analyze what you’re doing and try to figure out if something’s going well, why is it going well? If it’s not going well, why is it not going well? And what can be done to change? This is where analysis blends into using your imagination, using your creative powers. In other words, it’s the active side of the mind. The things in terms of goals and how well you are. And getting toward the goal. And figuring out if things are not working, what do you do to change? Again, think of a John Lee. I don’t know if you ever read the Buddha’s 16 steps. There’s no mention of those 16 steps anywhere in his teachings. Or that he read the images of the similes for the four jhanas, where you take the sense of ease and well-being that you gain from your concentration and you let it spread throughout the body. But that was what he did. And he figured out that thinking of the breath energy going through the body makes it a lot easier for that well-being to spread. So he used his ingenuity. That’s how he got out of the forest. After three months of working with a breath like this, he was able to walk out from the forest, from the place he had his heart attack, and live for another eight years, by taking advantage of these bases of success. You see them in their beginning form in the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula. You’re very conscious about what you’re going to do. And you’re trying to do your best. You think of the consequences of your intention. If you follow through with the intention, what would happen? And if you see any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, you do the action. And then you watch what you’re doing while you’re doing it. If you see any harm coming up, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you can continue. When the action is done, then you look at the results over the long term. And if you see that there was some harm that you didn’t anticipate, you try to learn from it. Either through your own powers of observation, or through consulting other people. Then you make up your mind you’re not going to repeat that mistake. Notice how he starts out by saying, you try your best, even before you’ve done something, you figure out what would be the best thing to do. This is how you learn. If you don’t do your best, you don’t learn. You don’t learn anything. If you know that the action is going to be unskillful and it gets bad results, what have you learned? It’s when you think you’re going to be skillful, but somehow, for some reason, it doesn’t come out well. That’s when you’re going to learn. So in the end, you try your best not to make mistakes. But when a mistake does happen, you admit it. And do what you can, using your own powers of observation to learn from it. That’s how you develop any skill. And particularly how you develop the skills of virtue, concentration, discernment. By bringing these four bases of success to bear. You desire to do things well. You keep at it. And you do your best to learn how to maintain when you’ve got something good, you stick with it as best you can. Remember, we’re fighting against those three characteristics to see how far we can go to make this path. We’ll run into our limitations. And in running into the limitations, that’s when we gain insight. But if you start out with the assumption, well, everything is inconstant, stressful, not self, and just stop there, you don’t learn anything. It’s pushing against these things that you see how far they can go before they start pushing back. That’s when you’ve learned. And the knowledge is yours. And if you really are intent on what you’re doing and you use your powers of analysis, you find you can go far. And when you’ve gone far, then you’ve found something that really is very special. And the question of whether you deserve it or not doesn’t come up. It’s just there. Remember the Buddha never asked people if they deserve to suffer. Before he taught them, he said this is how you can stop suffering, regardless of what they’ve done in the past. Because the mind can change direction. And as I said, what you are comes from what you do. So might as well do good things. Look at them and do them better. And you’ll be happier as a result. And this happiness generally is yours. No one can say that you don’t deserve it.

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