The Skill of True Happiness

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So, close your eyes. Take a couple of good long deep in and out breaths. And notice where you’re most sensitive to the breathing. Maybe in the middle of the chest, the stomach, the throat, someplace in the head. Choose which chair or spot seems most congenial to work with. And then watch. And then watch long breathing for a while. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. Try shorter breathing, more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. You get to choose what kind of breathing you like. And if you like something for a while, then decide you don’t like it so much. Then you can change. The whole point of concentration is to find a sense of well-being inside. And so you get to choose what you like to be with. And the breath is good for this purpose because it keeps you grounded in the body. And of all the various functions of the body, it’s the one you can control most easily. And it does have an impact on how you experience your body from within. The Buddha calls the breath bodily fabrication. In other words, it’s the process that fabricates or dresses up your experience of the body. He teaches that together with what he calls verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. You direct your thoughts to a topic and then you make comments on it. And then there’s mental fabrication, which are perceptions and feeling tones. Perceptions are the labels you put on things that identify what they are, what worth they have, what they mean. And then feelings, of course, are pleasures, pains, and feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. Our emotions are made up of these three things. And so when you’re working with the breath, you’re working with the groundwork of your emotions. Because, of course, you’re talking to yourself about the breath, you’re asking yourself, “Does it feel good?” If it doesn’t feel good, what can be done to make it feel better? And when it does feel good, what can you do to maintain that sense of feeling good? And then finally, when you’ve got it maintained, what can you do to maximize it? How can you spread it around so that sense of well-being flows throughout the whole body? This is where your perceptions come in. The image you have of how the breath flows in the body. You can think of Chinese medicine with the different channels going through the body. In Thailand, they talk about the breath going down the spine, and out the legs, and then down the back of the neck, out the shoulders, out the arms, running from the front of the body, around the heart, down through the various organs, down into the intestines. And all through your head. So ask yourself, “Where do you feel the breath move in the body?” And think of the whole body breathing together, so the sense of comfortable breathing fills the body. This gives you a good place to rest, because we’re bombarded by so many things. And we need a place to have as our own. So make this your home. The Buddha calls this “vihara dhamma,” which means basically a home for the mind. You need a home like this to keep yourself protected. And maintaining this is a skill. Sometimes the question comes up, “Is Buddhism a religion or is it a philosophy?” And it’s really a skill, a skill in how to find true happiness. In a way that harms nobody. That’s pretty radical, because most people, when they look for happiness, don’t care about whether they’re going to be harmed or other people are going to be harmed. They just go for whatever they like. And then after a while they decide that maybe looking for happiness is a bad thing, because it seems to be selfish. So they try to deny themselves. The Buddha was experienced in both of those extremes, but neither of them worked. When you realize that the path to true happiness lies in finding a happiness that’s harmless, so that you’re satisfied, you don’t impose anything on anyone else. That, in fact, is the beginning of wisdom. The question, “What will I do?” will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness. It’s wise, because you realize that your happiness is going to have to depend on your actions. And there is such a thing as long-term happiness. Sometimes you hear that the Buddha taught that everything is like waves coming on shore. The waves come in and they disappear, come in and disappear. Nothing is lasting. But he did say there is long-term happiness. And of course it’s better than short-term. And from that you begin to realize that if your happiness depends on harming other people, it’s not going to last. This is the beginning of compassion. And you realize you have to take other people’s happiness into consideration. There’s a story in the Canon. King Vasanidhi is in his private apartments with his queen, Mallika. And in a tender moment he turns to her and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” You know what he’s thinking. He wants her to say, “Yes, Your Majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” But this is the Pali Canon. There’s no room for nonsense like that. And Mallika says, “No, I don’t love you more than I love myself. Do you love anybody else more than you love yourself?” The king has to admit, “No.” That’s the end of that scene. So he leaves the palace, goes to see the Buddha, tells him what had happened. And the Buddha said, “You know she’s right. You can search the whole world over and you will find anybody that you love more than yourself.” And just the same way, everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely. So there’s a status that you shouldn’t harm anybody or get them to do any harm. For the reasons I mentioned. If your happiness harms them, they’re not going to stand for it. And finally, the third quality, looking for happiness in a wise way, is purity. In other words, seeing that your actions really do follow in line with your compassionate intentions. Because it is possible to have good intentions, but they may not be skillful. There’s confusion in there. So you check before you act, “This action I want to do, will it lead to harm to myself or others?” And if you see that it’s going to lead to harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t see any harm, you go ahead and do it. Then while you’re doing it, you ask yourself, “This action that I’m doing, is it harming anybody?” And if you see some unexpected harm coming up, then you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you can continue. When you’re done, you look at the long-term results. And if it turns out you did cause harm, in spite of your good intentions, then you take that as a lesson, and then you go talk it over with someone who’s more advanced than you on the path. See if you can get some advice from them. And then you resolve not to repeat that mistake. And if you don’t see any harm, then you can take joy in the fact that your practice is developing, and you keep on training. This, the Buddha said, is how people purify their actions. Because we can’t go just on the goodness of our intentions. Sometimes you hear it asked, “Which is more important, having good intentions or having actions that give good results?” And that’s a question, because we’re trying to figure out, basically judging actions the way the judge would judge somebody in a courtroom. Assigning guilt here, assigning guilt there. Whereas the Buddha’s not interested in assigning guilt. He’s trying to teach you a skill. And the skill depends both on your intentions and on the results. And you use your knowledge of the results to inform your intentions so they get more and more skillful. This is how we develop the skill of finding a true happiness that’s totally harmless. And at the same time we develop qualities of wisdom, compassion, purity. All good things. So the search for happiness doesn’t have to be selfish. It can actually make you grow as a person. So think of the Buddhism as a skill. As with any skill, you try to master the skill as best you can. There are four qualities the Buddha said are useful for succeeding at any skill. The first is a desire. You really want to get the results, and you’re willing to put in the effort. We’re sometimes told that all desires are bad, which is not the case. The Buddha did point out there are some desires cause suffering. Other desires are part of the path. The desire to be skillful, the desire to get past your unskillful thoughts, that’s a part of the path. Something you should be encouraged. Simply learn how to focus it properly. You focus on the causes, not on the results. It’s like driving to a mountain on the horizon. You spend all your time focusing on the mountain. You’re going to run into people. But if you focus on the road, and trust that the road will take you to the mountain, then you’re going to get there. Of course you check every now and then to make sure the mountain is not in the rear of your mirror. But you focus on the causes. That’s where your desire is. And then you make an effort to give rise to those causes. In this case, when we’re working on concentration, the causes are being mindful. In other words, keeping in mind what we’re planning to do. And then being alert, watching what you’re actually doing. Like right now, you’re alert to how the breath feels, you’re alert to how your mind is or is not with the breath. If it’s not with the breath, then you’re trying to bring it back. That’s the beginning of what’s called ardency. You’re trying to do this well. So there are three qualities you work on. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. And when they all gather together at the breath, this is what brings you into concentration. So you’ve got the desire, you’ve got the persistent effort, and then you’re really intent on what you’re doing. You’re watching what you’re doing carefully. The fourth quality, the Pali term vimamsa, it’s a hard term to translate. It means your powers of analysis and also your ingenuity. All of your active mental faculties working together to figure out if something is going well. Why is it going well? So you can maintain it. If it’s not going well, you try to figure out how to change. The Buddha illustrates this with an analogy of a cook. The cook is working for a king, and the king may not say what he likes or doesn’t like, so the cook has to be really observant. He provides a whole range of foods and watches to see what does the king reach for most. Then you provide more of that. As the Buddha said, in this way, the cook gets a reward. The king is happy. In the same way, you want to be intent on watching what you’re doing and then trying to figure out if something’s not going well, what you could do to make it better. So there you are. Desire, effort, intent. And so you use your ingenuity. This is how you develop a skill inside. This is the skill for finding true happiness. Our educational system is not designed to teach us what is probably the most important skill in the world. We just have to find happiness in a harmless way. They teach us all kinds of other things. Here’s where the Buddha steps in. To have all the skills you can manage, this is the most important one. So it’s something you should work on all the time. You see this in all the analogies he gives that deal with skillful people. Archers who learn how to be good at archery. Cooks who learn how to be good at cooking. People who are good at sports. It all comes from really one wanting to master the skill, putting in the effort, being intent on watching what you’re doing so you understand what you’re doing, then using your powers of analysis to figure out when something’s going well, how to maintain it, how to improve on it. When it’s not going well, what can you do to turn it around in the right direction? So even though we hear Buddhism being basically taught as what you might call a kind of a remote teaching, where it’s all about emptiness, it’s all about compassion, it’s all about acceptance, it’s not all about anything except for it’s all about mastering the skill to try to find true happiness. That’s going to be a complex thing, as any skill is, but it’s a really worthwhile skill to know.

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