The Management of Suffering

March 19, 2025

The Buddha’s teachings are like a buffet table. Lots of different things you take from him. How to live a happy life in this life, how to prepare for a happy life in the next life, how to get out of lives altogether, which doesn’t mean death, because death is a part of life. But there’s an escape from both life and death. Which the Buddha said is the ultimate happiness. But that’s a part of the buffet table that a lot of people say, “I’m not ready for that yet.” So there are other things you can take. His teaching on how to find happiness in this life basically comes down to learning how to be hard-working, be thrifty. Having initiative is one of the qualities. Realizing that if you’re going to make a living, you have to put forth the effort and decide what you want to take as your livelihood. And then when you’ve gained things rightly, you want an honest livelihood, then you take care of them. And you spend in line with your income. In other words, you’re not too miserly. At the same time, you’re not too spendthrift. We expect the Buddha to say, “Don’t be a spendthrift.” But interestingly, he says not to be too miserly. He says, “Get some enjoyment out of your work.” Because if you can’t enjoy your work, you turn into a very shriveled kind of person. You resent the pleasures that other people find in life. And then finally, have good friends. Admirable friends, people who would keep you steered in the right direction. They have four qualities that he enumerates. And it turns out the four qualities are the qualities that lead to a good life in the future. Conviction, conviction, and the Buddha’s awakening. Now what does that mean for you? It means that through the power of your own actions, you can make a difference in your life. Your happiness depends on your actions. And the quality of your intention is what shapes the results of the action. That doesn’t mean only good intentions. A really high quality intention is also free of delusion. Which means you try to be very reflective in what you do. Looking at what you do, looking at the results. And always aiming at long-term happiness. We talked about this briefly today. About when to take a stand, when not to take a stand. And it has nothing to do with your feelings. It has everything to do with what you anticipate would be the long-term consequences. We need conviction in that principle, because it’s all too easy to go for the short term, the quick fix, the things that are immediately to hand. But the Buddha should have a larger perspective, because that’s one of the messages of his awakening. The responsibility that you can be reborn in line with your actions. So what does that tell you about your actions? How much attention you should give to them, how much care you should take. That’s the first quality of a good friend. That’s the first quality that leads to happiness in the future lifetimes. The second quality is virtue. The desire to be harmless in your actions, in your words, in your deeds. You should look after your intentions, because the intention is what determines the quality of the action, as we said. So make sure that your intentions are harmless. When the Buddha was teaching his son, he basically said, “If you think that the act you intend to do could cause any harm, don’t do it. Act only on your best intentions, because that enables you to learn. If you know you’re acting on unskillful intentions, then you get bad results, you haven’t learned much. In fact, sometimes you pretend that you didn’t have those bad intentions to begin with, which means they go underground. So you want to work, act on your best intentions. And then when they get bad results, then you say,”Well, this is something I have to learn here.” You figure it out on your own, you go for others for advice. Usually we hear about virtues in terms of the five precepts, but it’s also qualities of the mind, qualities of the heart, qualities of the character. Things like contentment, the willingness to go out of your way, to be helpful to other people, willingness not to be burdensome. That’s a part of virtue as well. The third quality you look for is generosity. People like to share what they have. That’s one. After all, if they’re intent on sharing, that means they’re probably going to try to take things away from you unfairly. You’ll benefit from their generosity, and you’ll benefit from their example. A good friend is someone who reminds you that the best things in life are not material objects, they’re qualities of the heart. And finally, discernment is defined as penetrative knowledge of arising and passing away. At first glance it sounds simply like seeing things coming and going, but when the Buddha adds that adjective, penetrative, what he means by that is you have a good sense of when something arises, is it arising for good or for bad? Where does it come from? Where is it going? What things should be encouraged and which things should not be encouraged? The discernment here goes together with the right effort. That’s what you look for in a friend. The people you share your life with, the people you go to for advice, you want them to be good people, because they’ll help keep you on the right path. Because it’s so easy. I’ve seen cases where people are industrious, have a lot of initiative, they gain wealth, and they start hanging around with wealthy people. Using the wealth as the measure of who they’re going to take as their friends. That’s not a reliable guide for who is going to be a trustworthy friend at all. So the best friends are not necessarily the ones who are the most brilliant conversationalists, but they’re people you can take as good examples. Some of the Buddha’s recommendations on how to find a happy life in this lifetime, and then also in a bunch of future lifetimes. Someone once called this the third and a half noble truth. It’s not the truth of the cessation of suffering, it’s the truth of the management of suffering. You don’t have any plans to go all the way. You have to realize that wherever you set your sights, there’s going to be disappointment at some point. A lot of people say, “Well, I’m not ready for the ultimate goal yet.” But you’ve got to be forewarned that the happiness that comes as short of the goal is going to leave you. There’s a story of a man who’d lost his son, his little son. He went to the cemetery every day to cry. And he called out, “Where have you gone, my little son? Where have you gone, my little son?” He comes back from the cemetery one day, stops off to see the Buddha. And the Buddha says, “Where have you been? You look like someone who’s deranged out of your mind.” The man said, “How could I not feel that way? I’ve lost my only son.” The Buddha says, “Yes, there’s a lot of suffering that comes from those who are dear.” The man immediately rejects, “No, it’s happiness that comes from those who are dear.” And so he doesn’t bow down. You hear so many times when people listen to the Buddhist talks, they’re gratified and delighted. Well, he wasn’t gratified, he wasn’t delighted at all. He just laughed. He meets up with a group of gamblers and he tells them what the Buddha said. And the gamblers agree with him. It’s an interesting touch on the story. Trying to find happiness short of Nirvana is a gamble. Because if you think about it, the relationships we have with people who are dear to us, we’re feeding off of them, they’re feeding off of us. When the relationship goes well, you’re okay with the idea that they’re feeding off of you, because you get some satisfaction feeding off of them. But even if they die, or something happens, if somebody decides that it’s an unfair feeding arrangement, which is why divorce court is the most violent of all the courts in the country, but you have to be clear-eyed about the fact that if this is where you’re looking for your happiness, there’s going to be trouble. You’ve got to be prepared. Have a lot of compassion, have a lot of empathy. Develop patience, equanimity, goodwill, kindness. Learn to be wise. That teaching on the discernment of arising and passing away applies very much to the happiness we have in this round every birth. When people die, you have to remind yourself, well, when does it ever happen that people who are born don’t die? They’re arising, and it holds the seeds for their passing away. You’ve got to be prepared for that. The more you prepare yourself, the less you’re going to suffer. Which means that you have to find something inside that you can feed on. When the food of other relationships is either taken away from you, or turns out to transport you to the next world, you want to have something deep inside that you can fall back on. This is why meditation is such an important part of the training. When the Buddha described his path to the end of suffering, concentration lies at the heart. You may have noticed in that chant we had just now, which described the different factors of the path, the one on right concentration was the longest, because it’s the most complex, and the hardest to master. But also the most important, after right view. So try to have this as your fallback, as part of that truth of the management of suffering. That way you’ll be prepared. Looking for happiness in areas where there’s going to be disappointment, so the disappointment doesn’t weigh you down.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250319_The_Management_of_Suffering.mp3>