Three Wishes

March 15, 2019

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself, “If someone could grant you three wishes, what would you ask for, aside from more wishes?” It’s a good exercise. What do you really want in life? From the Buddhist point of view, the things you should ask for are things that you’re able to do, not so much things you get from other people. Because things you get from other people don’t last very long. But a good wish would be, “May I always be skillful in my actions.” That’s basically what we’re wishing for when we spread thoughts of goodwill. It starts out with the things you would like to receive. “May I be happy. May I be free from stress and pain, free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble.” But then you have to ask yourself how those things come about through your actions. That’s why it concludes with saying, “May I look after myself with ease. May I have the ability to act in ways that are skillful.” That can give rise to freedom from oppression and trouble. It can give rise to happiness. And then you think about the world outside. If you want everybody else to be happy, well, may they look after themselves with ease. May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. You focus your wishes on calm. Of course, the question is how much happiness would be enough. The Buddha said not to rest content until you’ve achieved awakening. That’s when your happiness would really be secure. So there you are, three wishes. It’s good to think like this, because our wishes and our desires tend to be pretty random, slipping out in all kinds of ways. There are all kinds of different directions, like fish. When they get excited, they just scatter. As a result, we don’t really get what we want in life, because we haven’t stopped to think, “Well, what do we really want?” We haven’t listed our wishes in terms of priorities. So here, as you’re meditating, it’s good to stop and think, “What do you really want?” The Buddha recommends true happiness, and he says true happiness is possible. He wasn’t the sort of person who would say, “Well, I’ll just accept whatever.” He also wasn’t the sort of person who would say, “Well, we’ll just look at this life. Don’t worry about other lives.” Because, as he had seen, consciousness doesn’t have to depend just on the body. It can depend on craving. Craving depends on consciousness. Consciousness depends on craving. They can keep each other going for a long time. And your actions now can have consequences that go for a long period of time. Sometimes we think about rebirth as kind of a wishful thinking. We don’t like the idea that people we love are annihilated. But when you think in the larger perspective, it’s kind of scary. You really don’t know where you’re going to go. And there are so many places you could go. It’s not always ever upward. Just look at your own mind as you go through life. It’s not the case that you’re always going ever upward. There are things you forget, good qualities you develop, and then you let them lapse. So it’s kind of scary. That’s why the Buddha said the ultimate goal is to get out of this system, out of this complex system we find ourselves in. Unfortunately, we can do that with our actions, too. So these wishes, “May I be happy,” “May all living beings be happy,” are there not as an appeal to somebody or a prayer? They’re an expression of a wish that should take priority in your life, a desire that should take priority. So you can think about the other things you want, whether they fall in line with that overlying wish or whether they go across purposes. If you can keep this wish in mind at all times, then it becomes easier to sort out when a desire comes up in the mind what to act on and what not to act on. This is why the Buddha said good will is a form of mindfulness. The fact that this is an overriding desire is a form of determination. You make up your mind, “This is something you really want to see. You really want to master. You really want to master the skills for true happiness. If possible, you’d like other people to do that, too.” This is why equanimity has to come in with the Brahma-viharas, though, because you realize that other people’s actions are totally up to them. You can influence them to some extent, but there’ll be a lot that you can’t. This is why the fourth of the Brahma-viharas, after good will, and then its corollaries, compassion for people who are suffering or doing things that are going to cause suffering, empathetic joy for people who are happy or doing the things that are going to lead to happiness. Then there’s equanimity. It’s expressed in a different way. The others are “may, may, may.” This has no “may” at all. It says, “All living beings are the owners of their actions.” That’s just a fact. And it’s a fact that grounds the other three. It keeps reminding you that if you want to be happy, you have to look at your actions. It’s something of a warning, but it’s also an expression of your power. You have that power to make choices that really will make a difference in your life. I was reading a piece today from the New York Times when they’re saying Buddhism denies that human beings have agency. I don’t know where that writer got that idea, because everything is about your agency, your power to affect events through your actions, through your decisions, particularly in connection with your state of mind. This is why we train the mind, because it’s the quality of the mind that affects the actions and that will lead to certain results. The Buddha saw this on the way to awakening. In fact, this was the point he said we got on the right path, when he realized that he had to look at his actions as to where they came from in the mind and where they were going to lead. And he saw a connection. Actions based on sensuality, i.e., your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, actions based on ill-will, actions based on harmfulness, those are going to lead to unfortunate consequences. It was the quality of the mind that determined the results. Whereas actions that were based on renunciation, non-ill-will, non-harmfulness, those would lead to good results. Again, the quality of the mind is what determined the results. So we work on the quality of the mind. We make ourselves more mindful, more alert, and ardent in doing what’s right. Ardency is basically right effort, giving rise to the desire and then maintaining the desire to do what’s skillful and to abandon what’s not. And that needs food. In Buddhism it’s just like a frontier fortress. The right effort there is the soldiers. The concentration is their food. It’s a sense of well-being that comes when you settle down with the breath and the breath feels good. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change it so that it does. Again, here’s an example of your agency, your ability to do something, to make a difference. First, inside. By the way, you don’t have to think about it. You breathe and then, by the way, the mind begins to think. Simply working on the breath is not going to be enough. Sometimes you hear about meditation techniques where they say, “All you have to do is follow our directions and you’ll come out enlightened.” The Buddha never said that. He said, “You’ve got to use your ingenuity. You have to use your own powers of observation as to what’s working and what’s not working.” He makes a comparison with the cook. He provides different kinds of food and then notices the person he’s feeding. What does this person like? What does he reach for? And the next time around he provides more of that kind of food. That kind of cook is going to get a reward. The Buddha compares this to another cook who doesn’t really notice. He prepares the food and then doesn’t watch his master. That cook is not going to get a reward. Because he’s not paying attention as to what works and what doesn’t work. The mind, to settle down, needs something that it likes. It can be kind of fickle. Sometimes today it’s going to like one thing and tomorrow it’s going to like something else. Which is why you can’t depend on just one technique to carry you through all the time. Sometimes working with the breath, simply focusing on the breath, is going to be plenty. Sometimes you need a meditation word. Sometimes you need a count. Sometimes you need to supplement the breath with other topics. Stop for a while and think about goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. Or, if you’re getting lazy, you can think about the fact that death is going to come. Then you can ask yourself, “Are you ready?” Well, no. What is keeping you from being ready? Well, there’s something in the mind. The mind’s attached to something. If you leave that thing there in the mind and let it drag you down, is it really worth it? These are different ways of thinking that get you in the right mood to meditate so you’re ready to go back to the breath. The important thing is that you watch your mind and see what works, what the mind likes, today. And then you provide that. Just like the cook, then, you’re going to get your reward. Your mind will settle down with a sense of well-being. And then you take that sense of well-being and you put it to good use. We’re not here just blissing out. We’re blissing out, if you can bliss out with the breath and it is possible, with a purpose. To give the mind enough strength to do what it really needs to do when it sees that something is unskillful, this gives it the strength to question that. One to recognize an unskillful state and then to question it. Ask yourself, “Do I really want to go there?” All too often we think that any thought, any desire, any feeling that comes up in the mind is ours. But you have to recognize that sometimes your thoughts just come in randomly from your old karma. They actually could destroy your happiness if you follow them. Do you want to follow it? Remember your overriding wish, “May I be happy. May I look after myself with ease.” And then in dealings with other people, how can you deal with them so that they can act in skillful ways? Have you ever thought in those terms? Those are good terms to think. Because it means that your meditation becomes a seamless part of your life, and life is in line with your overriding desires, that you be happy and the beings around you be happy. So think about these as your three wishes. You wish that you knew how to act, how to behave in a way that leads to happiness. You wish that other beings would know how to act in ways that lead to happiness. Now would you focus on a real happiness that you can trust, a happiness that doesn’t change? It is possible. It may not happen right now, but working on the mind leads it in that direction. You could also think of this as your bucket list. What would you really like to do before you die? Why would you really like to know how to be happy? It’s not a question of wanting to go here, go there, see this painting, listen to that, whatever. Again, the really good bucket lists are the ones that say, “Focus on skills that you can develop, skills that you can take with you.” That’s what the practice of guru-dhamma is. That’s what goodwill is all about.

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