Happiness as a Skill

March 22, 2019

When we talk about getting the mind into concentration, the emphasis is on the oneness of the object. But to get it to become one, you have to start by focusing on three things. You’re focused on the breath, and you’re focused on the mind watching the breath. And you’re also focusing on the feeling that comes about, whether it’s a feeling of well-being or not. And you’re trying to adjust things in the mind and in the breath so you do get a rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure that you can maintain. So in the beginning, you’re a little bit busy. You’re focusing on three things in sight and trying to get them to come together. It’s like a chicken with three baby chicks that are running around, and you’re trying to get them to come together. So notice your breathing. What kind of breathing gives rise to a sense of ease? What way of focusing on the breath gives rise to a sense of ease? Focusing your attention and also holding a perception in mind of exactly what the breath is that you’re focused on. And John Lee recommends focusing on the energy in the body. In other words, not the air coming in and out through the nose so much as the energy flow in the body. That allows the air to come in and go out. And then as you get sensitive to that, you realize it’s connected to other levels of energy. You think they’re all flowing together smoothly. That helps give rise to that sense of ease that you want. You can also focus on the rate of your breathing, whether it’s long or short, or in-long, out-short, in-short, out-long. But try to breathe in a way that feels good. It feels good all around. Because as you’re bringing the mind and the breath and the feeling of ease together, you want them to fully penetrate one another. In other words, the breath fills the body, your awareness fills the body, the sense of ease fills the body. That’s what you want. So we’re working on a skill here, bringing these three things together. And as with any skill, it involves doing and watching. This is an essential part of the meditation. We can just do things we want or just watch without doing much, but we want to learn how to do this well. So you have to be conscious about what you’re doing. Do it deliberately. Then check the results that you’re getting. Is there a sense of ease? Can you maintain it? Can it spread through the body? Those are the results you’re looking for. And as you do this, the mind settles down without you having to think too much about forcing it down. If you can take an interest in the breath, reminding yourself that the health of the body depends a lot on how you breathe and how the energy flows in the body, that helps you get concentrated without much force. And this way you watch. And evaluate what you’re doing. Is it good enough yet? When it feels good enough, you can drop the evaluation and just be with the breathing, realizing, however, that just that idea of being is also kind of doing. And when things begin to lose focus, you go back to the evaluation again. Because we’re learning a skill, it’s the evaluation that’s going to make it into a skill. After all, this is the purpose of the meditation, to get sensitive to what you’re doing. After all, the Buddha’s analysis of suffering is that we’re doing things that are leading to suffering, and we don’t realize what we’re doing. We don’t see the connection. We’re doing this all in ignorance. So you want to get very sensitive to your actions. The best way to get sensitive to your actions is to learn a skill. You can go into a kitchen and try cooking and just go by your instinct. But that doesn’t make a skill. The skill comes when you go by your instinct and you realize, “Whoops, something happened. Something went wrong.” And you have to go back and be very careful at looking at what you actually did and making adjustments. If you don’t watch what you did or watch what you’re doing, no skill is going to come. You find this when you’re learning a language. You move your mouth in a way that seems normal, but it’s not going to create the other language. You have to learn how to adjust your mouth around the language. Get very sensitive to what you’re doing with the different muscles of your mouth. And then you can begin to approximate the language. The fact that you’re trying to learn a skill forces you to become more sensitive to what you’re doing. Things that you’ve done in the past without thinking too much about it, which is precisely the definition of ignorance, the cause of suffering. Now you’re becoming more sensitive, more attuned to what you’re doing. So you’re learning the language of the breath, learning the language of the mind, trying to stay with the breath. You’re seeing the way the mind reacts around the breath. Sometimes you notice that you tend to tighten up as you’re focusing on the breath, because the mind’s instinctive feeling is that if you don’t tighten up or get tenser on something, you can’t stay concentrated on it. Well, here we’re trying something new, staying focused on something but with a sense of ease and relaxation. How do you do that? Well, you learn through trial and error, through doing and watching. And then making adjustments. This is how the Buddha has you approach your whole life. Because we’re here not only to learn a technique of meditation, but the purpose of this meditation is to look at how you’re going about looking for happiness in your life and asking yourself, “Is it really leading to happiness, or are you the one getting in the way?” Buddha’s analysis is precisely the problem. It’s not what other people are doing. It’s not the sky, it’s not the earth, it’s not the temperature outside. It’s what you’re doing that’s getting in the way of happiness, getting in the way of well-being. So he’s asking you to take your happiness, to take your well-being, really seriously. For some of us, that’s paradoxical. We like the idea of happiness as being something spontaneous, unlightened, unthought-through. But when happiness is not thought through, our actions are not thought through, and the results are things that we didn’t want. And we can be in denial about the connection between cause and effect, but that just piles more ignorance on top. Look at the example of his life. All those things he gave up. He had the palace, he had the potential of becoming wealthy and powerful, all the sensual desires and sensual pleasures that go along with that kind of life. And he realized that the happiness, the pleasure he had there, was fleeting and very unstable and very unreliable. He was setting himself up for danger. That’s one of the definitions of bhikkhu. He’s someone who sees danger. Even before he ordained, he saw the danger in an unreliable happiness. And he decided to devote his life to finding happiness that he could depend on, and he was willing to make whatever sacrifice was needed. When he found the middle way, he realized that some of the sacrifices he’d made were not necessary. All those years of torture were unnecessary. But the path he did find involves, on the one hand, gaining a sense of pleasure through the meditation, gaining pleasure in being generous, gaining pleasure in being virtuous, but also giving up some other things that get in the way. And it was by approaching his happiness as a skill, and learning what skills do lead to happiness, through this process of doing and watching, judging and then making adjustments. So approach happiness as a skill. I know in my own case, this is what attracted me to meditation to begin with. My experience with other religions was that everything was pretty hit-or-miss. But this approach is a skill. I’ve known people who didn’t like Buddhism for that reason. There was a book I read years back called Cosmic Consciousness, where the guy was celebrating those moments of spontaneous sense of oneness. And he mentioned the fact that Buddhist monks actually cultivated that and had worked out techniques for finding it, creating it. He didn’t like that, and he thought the spontaneity was the essence of the experience. But that’s just a sign of the person who’s not willing to take happiness that seriously, not willing to explore the fact that we have these capabilities. We can approach happiness as a skill. And what it loses in spontaneity, it gains in reliability. And it also loses danger. I think it’s the happinesses and the pleasures we find that disappoint us, set us up for a fall again and again and again. As a John Fruin once said, the sensual pleasures that you really want in this lifetime, the fact that you want them so much means that you had them before and you miss them and you want them again. Which means if you get them again, you’re going to lose them again, and miss them again, and do what you can to get them again. And all too often, the doing to get those pleasures back is not going to be all that skillful. So the whole process just drags you down, creates more suffering. So it’s up to you to decide. Do you really want to approach happiness as a skill, or do you want to approach it as a crapshoot? And the Buddha’s here offering you the various skills that you can master. And it’s up to you to take them or not. But the Council, the Sangha, the noble Sangha, their advice is that it’s always best to give the Buddha’s challenge a try. Because that’s what they did, and they found that they benefited. And happiness approached as a skill is a happiness you can rely on.

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