Responsible for Your Happiness

January 29, 2020

In the passages we chant on goodwill, there’s a sentiment, “May I look after myself with ease. May all beings look after themselves with ease.” That’s the conclusion of the expression of goodwill. In other words, it concludes with the realization that if we’re going to be happy, we have to take responsibility for our own happiness. We can’t look outside. We look outside to some extent. After all, we’re human beings. We’re social animals. We live in relationships. Relationships are a very imperfect way of trying to find happiness. Even with the best relationship, it has to end. And there are a lot of relationships that are not the best. They’re imperfect. And the memory of a good relationship is not necessarily a happy thing. You realize that what you had is no longer there. The people who helped you are no longer there. There’s going to be a sense of loneliness, a sense of abandonment. So first we have to deal with those unskillful sentiments. We should have a sense of gratitude. After all, people choose to relate, and the people who choose to relate in a helpful way deserve our gratitude. They had that choice. They chose to be helpful. They chose to be beneficial. So express gratitude for them. Try to repay their goodness. Otherwise, you appreciate goodness, which means that you’re going to turn around and look at yourself. It gives you the chance to appreciate goodness in yourself, realizing that other people had to go out of their way to help you. And if you’re going to help others, you have to go out of your way. They say that gratitude is a sign of a good person. For just that reason. If a person’s not grateful, there’s very little reason for them to realize that they have to go out of their way to help people. So gratitude is a proper response. But a more important response is the realization that no relationship, no matter how good, is going to make you happy. It can provide some pleasure, but the deep-down inside happiness that’s going to be really satisfying, that’s going to be really solid, has to come from within. This is why we meditate. This is why we look for happiness through generosity, through virtue, through the meditation. We’re taking responsibility for our own happiness. When you have a more solid sense of well-being inside, you can look back on your relationships from a much larger view. Remember that image that we had. On the one hand, saying, “Which is greater, the tears that you’ve shed or having lost a mother, or the water in all the oceans?” It’s the tears you’ve shed. Remember the tears you’ve shed after having lost a father, a brother, a sister, a daughter, a son. In each case, more than four great oceans of tears. Then as you reflect further, it’s going to be hard to find someone who hasn’t been your mother in some point in a previous lifetime, someone who hasn’t been a father, brother, sister, daughter, son. You think about that, as you said, and it gives rise to a sense of sanghvega, a desire to get out. So you move from gratitude to sanghvega, and from there the motivation to enter practice, to take responsibility for your happiness. Otherwise, we go through life trying to grab at relationships to help us. The Buddha has an image, he says, “It’s like being swept down a stream by a river, and there are grasses on the side of the stream. So you try to hold on to the grasses, but they’re the kind of grass that cuts your hand.” That’s for your own aggregates. But it’s the same way with relationships outside. The more you try to hold on, the more it’s going to cut through your hand. There’s a reason recently that we go through space-time. If you’re just sitting still and going through space-time, you’re going at the speed of light. So we’re hurtling through space, hurtling through time. And trying to hold on to things outside is going to be really, really painful. So you want to find a happiness that doesn’t lead you with pain. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha said that happiness lies in acts of merit. When you’re generous, the memory of generosity is a good memory. When you’re virtuous, the memory of virtue is a good memory. These things are good as you anticipate them, good as you’re doing them, and good as you remember them. They may not be easy, but there’s a very strong sense of self-worth. There are criticisms of Buddhism, saying that as Buddhism comes to the West, one of its big lacks is that it doesn’t appreciate the happiness that can be found in relationships. Well, the Buddha said, “Look at relationships. They’re going to be hard. Even when they’re going well, they’re going to end.” So all this is to remind you why we’re meditating. We need something solid inside. We have to be able to look after ourselves with ease. And that means we have to train the mind. As the Buddha said, if you can’t depend on yourself, if you can’t take yourself as a mainstay, who are you going to depend on? So what have you got to depend on? Well, you’ve got what the Buddha calls fabrication. You put things together in the present moment. You construct the present. So try to construct it well. You construct it by the way you breathe, by the way you talk to yourself, by the perceptions you hold in mind, and by the feelings you focus on. You look at any situation. You can talk to yourself about a situation and make yourself totally miserable. There can be a situation outside, a situation inside. Or you can talk to yourself in another way, and each way would be true in its way. So which way are you going to choose? If you’re responsible, you learn how to use fabrication to create a sense of well-being. You want inner fabrications that are true and beneficial and right for the time. The same holds for the perceptions you hold in mind. We learn how to deal with these things carefully as we meditate. You work with the breath. You talk to yourself about the breath. You evaluate the breath. You hold a perception in mind that allows the sense of well-being from the breath to spread. So there’s a sense of well-being that fills the body. When you learn that you can do this just simply with your breath, then as you leave meditation, you’re engaging in the same forms of fabrication. And they’re going to make all the difference. So be responsible in how you fabricate the present moment. May you fabricate the present moment with ease in a way that makes you happy. It has to be true and beneficial and timely. You don’t just make things up to make yourself happy. But the truth has so many aspects. There are so many dimensions that you can focus on what’s actually going to be useful and leave the useless things behind. The Buddhist teachings force us to be adults. As we’re children, we want to depend on other people. But as we grow up, we realize we’ve got to depend on ourselves. Yet so many people want to revert to childhood and end up suffering again and again and again. So learn to be an adult. Develop the skills for being an adult so that you can look after yourself with ease and you can be responsible for your own happiness. That way, as you engage in relationships, you’re not so hungry. They don’t cut through your hands. You’re going to have gratitude for the goodness of other people. You can appreciate it and take it as an example. Incorporate their virtues into your mind. And as for the things that are not so inspiring, just let them go. Otherwise they will cut through your hands. Remember, the problem is that you’re holding on. You know the Buddha’s image of fire. Fire is stuck in its fuel because it’s clinging to the fuel. It’s not the case that the fuel is clinging to the fire. It’s the fire that’s clinging to the fuel. It’s going to be released not because the fuel releases it, but because the fire lets go. That’s the Buddha’s image for how the mind finds happiness. It’s trapping itself with the things that it’s holding on to. It frees itself when it lets go. So train yourself to be an adult, to be responsible for your own happiness, to look after yourself with ease. And then you can let go without any fear of being lost or being deprived, because you’ve learned how to provide yourself with everything you need.

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