The Search for Happiness

March 19, 2023

Start your meditation with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness. And as we’ll see, the Buddha takes that wish really seriously. You want to be able to develop goodwill for all beings, starting with yourself and spreading out to others. Because you’re looking for happiness that lasts, happiness that’s solid. And that requires that your happiness not depend on harming anybody else. Because other people want happiness too. And if your happiness harms them, they’re not going to stand for it. So we realize genuine happiness comes from within. Safe happiness comes from within. We take the qualities that we have inside and we develop them. In that way we’re not taking anything away from anyone else. And we’re producing a happiness that really is genuine. A happiness that is harmless. And as the Buddha pointed out, true happiness is possible. The happiness that doesn’t change on you. Which is why you take your desire for happiness seriously. Not that you be grim about it, but simply realize that it’s something you have to think about and examine. Sometimes we’re told that we have to accept the way reality is, that things in the world are inconstant, stressful, not self. That sets out the parameters for where we’re going to find happiness. So we have to content ourselves with what kind of happiness can be found within those parameters, within that framework. That means we have to lower our sights. They say that we have to be content with whatever pleasures we can find, knowing that they’ll leave us. And so squeezing a little bit of bittersweet pleasure out of them before they go. But that’s not the Buddha’s approach at all. You look at his life. He left home in search of a happiness that didn’t change, as far as he was concerned. The only thing that would really be worthwhile searching for would be something that didn’t age, didn’t grow ill, didn’t die. Something that was not inconstant, not stressful. And something that didn’t require control at all. And after many years he found it. So he wasn’t sort of a person to lower his sights. He raised his sights. Look for happiness that’s true. And as he taught that framework of accepting reality as it is, and then trying to find happiness within the constraints of that reality, he switched those two frameworks around. So the framework became the quest for happiness. Is there a true happiness? And if you’re finding happiness among things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you’re looking in the wrong place. You have to tell yourself there must be something better. Now as we practice, we are making use of things that are not very constant. We start out with our intentions. Like when we’re meditating, you set up the intention to stay with your breath. Follow the breath. The breath coming in, follow the breath going out. And try to make the breath comfortable. Because if you’re going to stay here in the present moment, the mind will be willing to stay only if it feels comfortable here. So experiment for a while to see what kind of breathing feels good. Long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep or shallow. See what breathing feels good for you right now. If the mind wanders off, realize that you’ve wandered away from your original intention, so you bring it right back. If it wanders off again, you bring it back again. You don’t give up. Each time you come back, try to reward yourself with a breath that feels especially good. Make it continually good, all the way in, all the way out. We’re trying to develop two qualities here. One is concentration, the other is your discernment. Concentration comes when you find an object that feels good to stay with, and you can settle in. And you can think of that sense of well-being that comes from the breath spreading throughout the body. Say for instance you’re focused on the middle of the chest, and you’re able to breathe in a way that makes that area of the body feel good all the way in, all the way out. You don’t make the breath too long, too short. You don’t squeeze that part of the body. You allow it to feel full. Even as you breathe out, there can be a sense of fullness in there. And then you allow that sense of fullness to spread through the body, down the nerves, down the back, down the legs, down the shoulders, the arms, out to the feet, out to the hands, up around in the head. Allow that sense of well-being to stay. That’s how you get the mind to settle down, in a good state of being centered or concentrated. And then comes discernment. You find as you meditate that different feelings will come up in the body, different feelings will come up in the mind. Some of them can be very pleasant. Focus on the pleasant ones, but realize that they are part of the path, they’re not the goal. As for the goal, the Buddha said that discernment begins when you ask questions. And the primary question is, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” Notice, the Buddha has you start with that desire for true happiness, long-term happiness. And the discernment there comes from one realizing that it’s going to have to depend on your actions. The word “action” here covers bodily actions, verbal actions, mental actions. So it’s something you’re going to be able to find through your own efforts. And then in terms of the happiness you’re looking for, one, you want it to be long-term. You realize that long-term is possible, then it’s better than short-term. And anyone can find happiness or pleasure, but it’s the wise person who looks for pleasure that’s long-term. And sometimes that’s going to require giving us the short-term pleasures. But if you’re really wise and discerning, you’ll see that it’s worth it. So that’s the framework. Your desire for happiness, you take it seriously, you realize that it will depend on your actions. And you’re not going to settle for short-term, you want something that lasts. And then you take those three characteristics, or what the Buddha calls three perceptions, and then you apply them to whatever comes up. If something is inconstant, then you realize, okay, it’s not long-term. So you’re going to need to look for something else. If it’s inconstant and stressful, it’s certainly not happiness. So you have to look somewhere else. And if it’s inconstant and stressful, it’s not worth laying claim to as yours. So that’s the test. Real happiness will be something that is constant, free from stress, and actually lies beyond any thoughts of self or not-self. Because it has to lie beyond clinging. So that’s what we’re looking for. Now in the meantime though, it’s not like you throw away everything that’s inconstant. Because after all, the path that we’re practicing has its ups and downs. And there will be things that you have to hold on to that are not permanent yet. It’s part of the Buddha’s insight that it is possible to take a path that’s based on your intentions. Learn how to make your intentions more and more solid. And that path will lead you to something that doesn’t have to depend on the intentions at all. It’s like the road to the Grand Canyon. The road to the Grand Canyon doesn’t look like the Grand Canyon. In fact, if you’re approaching the Grand Canyon from the south, all you see is just pretty flat territory with some scrubby trees. And the road itself doesn’t cause the Grand Canyon. But if you follow the road, it can take you to the Grand Canyon. And you arrive there. And it’s an immense space. Not at all like the road. So there are some things that are inconstant and stressful. The stress may be subtle, but it’s there that we have to take as the path. Anything that’s off the path, that’s not related to virtue, concentration, and discernment, you learn to let go. Again, it’s like traveling on that road. If you find yourself loaded down with all kinds of weights that are totally useless, or it turns out your car that you’re driving has a motor that can pull you back, you have to learn how to turn off that motor that pulls you back. Use only the motor that will take you where you want to go. That way you’ll be able to get there. So even though the path changes, it can take you to something that doesn’t change. As you develop your concentration, as you develop your discernment. So give it your full attention, what you’re doing right now. Because a lot of the discernment comes from watching yourself as you try to get the mind to settle down. All too often we just let the mind wander where it wants. And as a result, we don’t really understand it. It’s when you try to channel it in a particular direction, that you begin to understand how intentions form in the mind. And how other intentions can arise to cut off your first intentions. And how you have to learn how to say “no.” And how to say “no” skillfully. In other words, by convincing yourself that those other intentions are really not worth following right now. This is how you learn by getting the mind to settle down. And you’re taking your desire for happiness and you’re putting it first. After all, that’s what the Buddha did. And he found that by taking his desire for happiness seriously, that desire could take him where he wanted to go. To a place where he didn’t have to need any more desires after that. He found the ultimate happiness. Something that wasn’t inconstant, wasn’t stressful. It was so good that you didn’t even have to hold on to it. So that’s the path that he followed. And the path that he pointed out to everybody else is that this works. So take your desire for happiness seriously. And see what you can learn from the Buddha. And also what you can learn from trying to get the mind to settle down. Stay with one object. And see what you learn about the quality of your mind’s intentions. Both in seeing how they arise and how you may switch intentions and how you can get back to your original intention. With just this skill.

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