Delight in the Dhamma

April 8, 2023

One of the prerequisites for getting the mind to settle down is making it glad. Glad to be here. Glad to have this opportunity. A minimum of disturbance. Plenty of quiet. And you think about yourself, the activities of the day. One of the reasons why the Buddha encourages people to perform what he calls aksa-punya, often translated as merit, but can also be translated as goodness, is that they make you happy, put the mind in the right frame for developing itself further. This is the actual doing of things like generosity, the act of giving, the act of observing the precepts, knowing that you have principles that you hold to, developing thoughts of goodwill. The thought of being able to do these things is happy. The actual doing of them is happy, and then the results are happy. They’re among the few things that give happiness in all three time frames. There are some pleasures that you could be experiencing, sensual pleasures, which you’re not necessarily happy as you reflect back on them, either because you miss them or because you realize you did something unskillful to gain them. That kind of happiness grows sour very fast, grows rotten very fast. There’s a term in Thai, sup, which means happiness, but also means ripe, and also means bright. That’s what John Lee plays with those words. The kind of happiness you want is the sukh of stars, the brightness of stars, which doesn’t change. Of course, we know it does change to some extent, but it changes a lot less than the ripeness of fruit. The ripeness of fruit gets rotten pretty fast, but with the stars, you go out and look at them every night. They’re still refreshing. That’s the kind of happiness we want. The happiness of merit is even happier than the brightness of stars, in the sense that it’s always a good memory. So you reflect on the fact that you’ve been doing good in the course of the day, being generous with your time, generous with your energy. Now it’s time to be generous with your defilements, letting them go, giving them up. So be happy that you can do this. The Buddha calls this delighting in the Dhamma, delighting in abandoning, and delighting in developing. These are three of the forms of delight that he recommends. There are six altogether. Reflect on what a good Dhamma this is. It teaches you to depend on yourself. It teaches you how to depend on yourself. So you can put an end to your own suffering, all the habits you have, where you try to create happiness for yourself but then have failed because of your ignorance. The Buddha points out that this is how you act in such a way that you don’t have to give up. You really do get the results you want. So you’re delighted in the fact that there is such a Dhamma. It doesn’t leave things to be a mystery. It lays things out very clearly. It keeps the focus on that issue, the issue of your suffering, the unnecessary suffering you’re causing yourself. Simply the fact that you realize that it is unnecessary, that’s something of delight right there. All too often we go through life saying, “Well, we have to take the bad with the good. There are a lot of things we have to put up with.” The Buddha was not the sort of person to put up with things. We’re often told that the teaching is about accepting, accepting, accepting. But you look at him. If he had accepted things, he would have stayed there in the palace, enjoyed himself, lived a life of a typical king, died a typical death, and left behind a typical legacy, one that would last only for a while and then be totally forgotten in the mists of time. But it’s because he didn’t accept that he had to suffer from aging and bliss and death. That’s why we have the Dhamma. That’s why he left home, went into the wilderness, put up with a lot of hardships, found the Dhamma, taught it. So he’s teaching us that we don’t have to simply accept the fact that there’s going to be suffering. Because our immediate reaction is to put it into suffering when we first encounter it in this lifetime. Of course, it wasn’t the first time we’d encountered it. We’ve encountered it many lifetimes. But we’re bewildered. We want to find a way out. We’re looking for somebody’s, anybody who knows a way out, to put it into this suffering. Of course, we’d like to be able to put it into it for good, but over time we get more and more satisfied with, “Well, just this particular pain I’m experiencing right now, how can I stop that?” But the Buddha takes us back to that original desire. There’s just some way to get beyond the pain of suffering totally. And he didn’t settle for anything less. So he’s pretty audacious. That’s the kind of Dhamma we’re practicing. It’s an audacious Dhamma, but it satisfies our deep-felt desire to stop suffering. The fact that there is such a Dhamma is a cause of delight. Then we look at what it tells us to do. It tells us to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. Some of those instructions may go against some of our personal preferences. But when you step back and look at your life, what would you really like to be able to accomplish? If there’s anything unskillful, wouldn’t it be good to be able to abandon it? Why? Because then you can hold on to things that lead to suffering. If there are qualities you can develop in your mind that take you away from being unskillful, like heedfulness, ardency, resolution, wouldn’t it be a good thing to develop those? And learning how to delight, when you are able to overcome a particular defilement, you say no and you can stick with it. Or when there are things that you should say yes to, like sitting for longer times, putting up with the pain of long meditation, and you’re able to do it, there’s a sense of satisfaction that comes from that. Learn to delight in that. Remember the Buddha’s instruction to Arjuna when he sees that he’s able to avoid causing harm to anybody with his actions. He should take delight in that fact and keep on training. So when you look back on your life, you look back on the day as if you didn’t harm anybody. How many people living in the world can say that? So you take delight in that fact. The Buddha also teaches you to delight in seclusion. When we have a lot of people around here like this, you have to remember that seclusion has many meanings. One is being secluded from your defilements. Another is being secluded from your cravings, secluded from unskillful mental thoughts. When there are a lot of people around, aim for that mental seclusion and then delight in it. Your mind is free from the things that would drag it down. Then you think about where this path is headed. Those are the last two forms of delight. The Buddha says you delight in what he calls the unafflicted. That’s the names from Nibbana. You can go to a place where there’s no affliction at all. That’s where we’re aiming. And then non-objectification. You might say, “Well, what’s that all about?” Objectification is the Buddha’s term for the type of thinking that inevitably leads to conflict. So we’re learning to train our minds to think in ways that don’t have to involve conflict, at least in a state where conflict is over—both conflict outside and conflict inside. So delight in the fact that this is where we’re headed—a place of no conflict, no affliction. These are things that are worth you to delight in. Because if you don’t delight in these, what are you delighting in? There are people who don’t like the idea that there is a dhamma that’s unchanging. They say, “Well, now that the dhamma has come to the West, we’ve got to make it a Western dhamma.” They’d like to be able to change things like that. Well, that leaves us basically living in their preferences. If you’d rather delight in your preferences than delight in the dhamma, you’re going to get far away. If you don’t delight in abandoning unskillful qualities, don’t delight in developing skillful qualities, you’re going to delight in developing your cravings. And where does that lead? Well, it leads you back to more and more suffering. If you don’t delight in seclusion, you never have time to really get to know your own mind, to deal with your own defilements. And if you delight in causing affliction and participating in conflict, that too pulls you far away from any real sense of happiness. It’s going to be reliable and long-lasting. So learn to delight in the right things. Learn to talk to yourself. Talk to yourself to see what’s delightful about them. That’ll put the mind in a position where it’s easier and easier to settle down, because you’re delighting in harmlessness. And so when you settle down, you can remember, “Okay, I’ve lived my day in a totally harmless way.” There’s nothing weighing you down. You think of those cases in the canon where people are listening to the Dhamma and find that all they can think about is the horrible things they’ve done in the past. There’s one king who killed his father, and the Buddha gives him one of the longest Dhamma talks in the entire canon. That’s an amazing talk. All the king can think about is, “Gee, I wish I hadn’t killed my father.” So there are people who go around with big wounds in their minds because of things they’ve done. But you can live by the Dhamma, and your mind is not wounded. So when the time comes to settle down, there’s no open wound, there’s no hardened scar tissue. There is a realization that today you’ve lived a day where you’ve been totally harmless. Now the mind has time to settle down, to get to know itself. And it can delight in being here. That’s more than half the battle of getting the mind to settle down right there.

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