Happiness without Limitations

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The Buddha encourages us in our search for happiness. Or the one proviso that we’re trying to be wise in how we do it. There’s so many ways that we could be looking for happiness that are actually harmful for ourselves, harmful for other people. But there are ways of looking for happiness that are not harmful at all. Those are the areas in which he encourages us. As he says, wisdom begins with a question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” We look around. As we chanted just now, we had that phrase, “the beginning of goodwill.” “May I be happy.” But it comes after that reflection about the world. The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. It has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. That places a lot of limitations on where we’re going to look for happiness. Those reflections come down basically to aging, illness, and death. The ideal happiness is something that is not subject to aging, illness, and death. Looking for that kind of happiness, the Buddha said, is noble. But we do look for other forms of happiness along the way, as part of our nourishment as we live in this world. But we have to be very selective to make sure that we look for happiness in ways that don’t waste our time, don’t waste our energy, because we have a limited time and limited energy. And if we devote ourselves to one search for happiness and it turns out that the results are very fleeting, we’ve wasted our time. That could be spent on much more valuable forms of happiness. Because it’s not the case that every form of happiness is conducive to every other form of happiness. Some actually get in the way. And as the Buddha said, when you can see that there is a greater happiness that comes from giving up a lesser happiness, you should be wise enough to give up that lesser happiness for the sake of the greater happiness. So it means you have to be selective. You have to be determined. The word determination means basically that you take all your various desires for happiness and you learn how to establish some order in them, a set of priorities as to which forms of happiness are more important than the other ones. So you can focus yourself well. If your search for happiness is not focused, it gets scattered and you end up with not much of anything at all. Some people are afraid to devote themselves to one path to happiness. We’d like to have our cake and enlightenment too. But often you end up with neither the cake nor the enlightenment. So it’s good to establish some sense of priorities inside as to what really is important in your life, and then live by that set of priorities. There’s a sutta where the Buddha lists four determinations, which are basically four things you should be determined on, no matter what you determine as your goal in looking for happiness. It’s good to keep the four in mind. First you’re determined on discernment. You’re going to use your discernment and figure out what is a good goal, and what is a good way of getting there. In fact this covers all of the other determinations, because you have to weigh things carefully. So much of discernment is in value judgments. You contemplate a particular goal, and then the Buddha would have you ask, “Is there any inconstancy in that goal?” If it’s inconstant, it’s not going to be long-term. It’s not going to be reliable. “Is there any stress or suffering in it?” If it’s characterized by stress or suffering, it’s not going to be happiness. And if it’s stressful and undependable, why would you want to claim it as your own? Why would you want to aim at it or hold on to it? So you look for a goal that doesn’t fall into these three areas of inconstancy, stress, not self. You look for something solid. Once you’ve determined on a goal that’s solid, then you look at what’s required. This is where the other determinations come in. There are things you’re going to have to do. So you’re true to that determination. There’s a saying in the Chan tradition that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. Now this doesn’t mean that you don’t prefer happiness to misery. Of course you do. What it does mean is that whatever is required for true happiness, you’re willing to do it. If it requires that you be virtuous, okay, you develop virtue. If it requires concentration, you work on your concentration. Whether it comes easily or not is not the issue. There are so many skills in life that you have to take on, even if you’re not naturally talented in them. And this is one of them. In fact, this is the primary one. Learning how to get your mind under control, because this lies at the essence of all other skills. Maintaining your focus, like right now, stay focused on your breath. And if the mind wanders off, you just bring it right back. Wanders off again, bring it back again. And try to relate to your breath in a way where you’re on friendly terms with it, to make it easier to come back. For example, when you realize that you’ve wandered away, come back. Reward yourself for coming back by breathing in a way that feels really gratifying. Otherwise, when you realize there are things you have to do as part of this path, you learn how to make them attractive, make them interesting. So it’s not just sheer willpower that keeps you going. You keep going because you find that it’s really interesting to understand your mind in this way. How is it that it seems to be one mind and yet it seems to be many minds at the same time? One mind that wants to meditate, another mind that wants to think about something else, and another mind that wants to think about something else again. And they’re ready to sabotage your meditation. So how do you not give in to them? And how do you not fall for their tricks? This comes under the third determination, which is relinquishment. As I said earlier, there are going to have to be things you’re going to give up if you want to focus on finding genuine happiness. It’s like planting a garden. You may decide that you like eucalyptus trees. But if you put eucalyptus trees in your garden, they’re going to kill all the other plants. What to do without? Just realize that there are other plants that are more valuable. And so you see relinquishment not so much as deprivation but as a trade. That too makes it easier. So you’re sitting here and part of the mind wants to think about something else. You say, “Well no, I’m going to learn a skill here.” And the skill requires doing without a lot of thinking for the time being. Whatever thinking you do engage in is going to be centered on how to get the mind to stay here with a sense of well-being. When there comes a sense of well-being, you focus on how to make the most of it, how to maintain it. Then when there’s a sense of ease that comes with the breath, how do you spread that sense of ease around the body? And the Buddha talks about permeating the entire body with a sense of fullness, a sense of ease. So think of the body as being open and porous enough so that the ease can spread. And so you see by giving up the mind’s desire to think about whatever it wants, you actually gain something much more valuable in return. And the fourth of the determinations is stilling. This basically is two sorts of things. One, stilling as part of the path and stilling as part of the goal. As part of the path that means when you get upset over having to give up something you learn how to calm the mind down and how to keep it in a good humor. This is an aspect of meditation that a lot of people miss. But it’s what keeps you going. In other words, when things don’t go as well as you like, when there are setbacks, you don’t allow that to devastate you. You see? Learn how to take it in stride. And tell yourself, even if things are not going well, you’re learning the perfection of persistence, the perfection of patience and endurance. And those may not be as flashy as concentration and discernment, but they’re virtues nonetheless. And they’re good virtues to have. And they’re made a lot easier if you can keep a sense of good humor about the whole thing. There’s a story of a Zen master in the Midwest who had a student who was planning to come out here to California, try his luck at the movie industry. The Zen master asked the student, “Suppose they knock you down, what are you going to do?” The student said, “Well, I guess I’ll just have to accept it.” The master said, “No. They knock you down, you bounce back. They knock you down again, bounce back again.” You can’t let yourself get defeated by setbacks. So the parts of the mind that are complaining when there are setbacks, you just learn how to calm them down. As for stilling, which is part of the goal, the Buddha talks about the stilling of fabrications, or sankharas. This, he says, is true peace. This is the happiness that’s not subject to aging, not subject to illness, not subject to death. The happiness that makes your determination noble determination. And the happiness where your determination actually yields its results. So as the Buddha said, learn to see this stilling as a positive thing. If you see that the stilling of fabrications would lead to a sense of suffering or confinement or dullness or boredom, he says you’ve got wrong view. That wrong view is going to get in the way of your practice. He says it’s something totally positive. So learn to adjust your views, go back and look at your discernment, because the discernment is what’s going to run all of these other determinations. Give you strategies on how to be truthful, give you strategies on how to relinquish things that need to be relinquished, giving you strategies on how to still the mind. And it’s in this way that in spite of the fact that the world is swept away, it does not endure, you can still find happiness in this lifetime. A true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t disappoint, a happiness that doesn’t let you down. Happiness that actually goes beyond being long term, goes outside of space, outside of time. So what you’re doing is you’re finding a way within the limitations of the world, and in your physical limitations, your mental limitations, to find something that is unlimited. Some people might ask how can the conditions of this limited world yield something that is unlimited? They don’t yield it, but when you learn how to use the powers of the mind, what strength you have physically and mentally, to create the path, the path will take you there. And once you’ve gotten there, you realize that’s all that matters. Because there’s nothing else that can ever weigh the mind down again, or place limitations on the mind ever again. That’s when you know that you’ve used this life wisely.

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