

Mature Strategies

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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Try to get comfortable. Sit with your back comfortably straight. If you're bending over, it's going to put a lot of pressure on your back. And be comfortable with your breath. Find the breath sensations in the body that feel comfortable and stick with them. Allow them to stay there, undisturbed. As that sense of comfort begins to grow, be careful not to get sucked into it too much. Try to maintain your mindfulness and your alertness so that the mind doesn't start drifting off. That's one of our problems: We get a little bit of pleasure, a little bit of comfort, and we let go, wallowing in the pleasure, forgetting where we are, forgetting what we're doing. As a result, the pleasure goes away because the causes for keeping it there get dropped. The mindfulness, the alertness, the ardency of your effort to stick with it weaken. And when they weaken, so does the pleasure.

So try to stay alert. As soon as there's a sense of pleasure, try to be aware of the whole body, letting the pleasure seep through the body, and keep that awareness going. You'll find that it's not as easy as it sounds because the mind has a habitual tendency to shrink. Keep reminding yourself: "Whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out." And the amount of mindfulness and alertness that are required to keep that whole body awareness going will keep you awake, keep you alert as long as you maintain them.

This is one very immediate, very visceral way of showing goodwill to yourself, providing yourself with a sense of pleasure and ease. When you think about it, just about everything we do is based on the pleasure principle, trying to maximize pleasure and minimize suffering. We come to the meditation because we've found that other ways, other strategies for pursuing the pleasure principle haven't worked or are not working to our satisfaction. This is why the Buddha points his teachings at the issue of suffering and the end of suffering. These are the big issues in our lives, and there's a lot of bewilderment surrounding them. As the Buddha said, our reaction to suffering is one, bewilderment, and two, a search for someone to show us a way out.

This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis on who you hang around with, who you associate with, who you look to for your advice, because they can set you on the right path to the end of suffering or they can set you on wrong paths winding in all kinds of directions. This is why you have to be very careful. We'd like to think that all paths lead up to the top of the same mountain, but I don't know any mountain in the world where that principle works. The path to the top of Palomar doesn't lead to the top of Everest. And there are a lot of paths

on each mountain slope that lead away from the top of the mountain. Some lead you over a cliff. So we have to be very careful about which path we choose. The same is true with the old idea that all rivers lead to the ocean. They don't all lead to the ocean. Think of the rivers that end up in Great Basin. They just dry up. The water will evaporate and form clouds and maybe someday fall down in the catchment basin of another river that *will* flow to the ocean, but that can take a lot of time.

So you have to be careful about who you hang around with and what kind of strategies you employ for a lasting happiness. The Buddha said that this is the beginning of wisdom. When you find wise people, you ask them, "What can I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Then you reflect on their answers. You compare them to the strategies you've been pursuing and you see what's worth giving a try. Most of our strategies work to some extent. If they didn't work at all, we would have discarded them long ago. But the Buddha saw that a lot of our strategies don't work as well as they could.

For example, there's a habitual strategy to avoid even thinking about suffering. You do anything you can to put the thought of suffering out of your mind – the idea being that if you avoid thinking about it, pay it no attention, ignore it, it'll go away. And there may be a few cases in life where that works – where focusing on your pains makes them worse – yet there are so many cases where it works only for a while and then it breaks down. But because we're used to this approach, used to this strategy, we feel a lot of resistance to even listening to the Buddha's first noble truth. This is why there's so much misunderstanding about the first noble truth as well. People think that the Buddha says that life is suffering. Then they think, "That's not true. I don't believe that. There's plenty of joy in life." Actually, there's no place where the Buddha said that life is suffering. It's amazing how many people – even scholars and Dhamma teachers – believe that, but that's not what he said. He simply said that there is suffering in life. You can't argue with him there. And he points out all the obvious sufferings we live with. Birth is suffering, all the pain that goes into being born and giving birth. Aging, illness, and death: These are all suffering. Being separated from what you like, having to live with what you don't like. Then he summarizes his definition of suffering with the five clinging aggregates.

This is where he starts getting technical, and where he starts attacking another one of our common strategies, which is our sense of self. This is another one of the Buddha's great insights – that our sense of self is an activity, a strategy for avoiding suffering, for maximizing happiness. We latch onto certain things and say, "This is me. This is what I have to watch out for. As long as I watch out for this, maximizing the happiness and wellbeing of this thing, that'll provide the happiness I want." This way of thinking is an activity, a strategy. It works to some extent, but then there are areas where it breaks down because the things we latch onto are all impermanent. No matter how much time we try to dress them up, fix them up, keep them going, they ultimately break down. Form, feeling,

perception, thought constructs, even sensory consciousness: They all break down. But we're strongly addicted to this approach, to hanging onto them as ends in themselves.

Which is why, again, we spend so much time misinterpreting what the Buddha said. "The Buddha says there is no self," we think, "but he can't be right." We're not looking at what he's actually saying. He's saying your sense of self is a strategy – an attempt to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. To some extent it works, and he actually has you use your sense of self as part of the practice, teaching you to be self-reliant, to look after your true self-interest – in other words your long-term welfare and happiness. His teachings on generosity, virtue, and the development of goodwill – all the things that come under the category of merit – are skillful ways of employing your strategy of self.

Basically, he has you take your sense of self, your sense of a continuing identity not only in this lifetime but also even into other lifetimes, and shows how to work with it intelligently so that you're not causing harm to yourself, you're not causing harm to other people. You're creating the conditions for a relatively reliable happiness in this world and on into the next.

He also uses the development of goodwill – immeasurable goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity – to clean up one of the major problems we have in this sense of self: our sense of responsibility, knowing that in the past we've done things that are not all that good, and that the results will come back to haunt us. He has us develop these sublime attitudes, these immeasurable states of mind, as means to allay our fear of the consequences of those unskillful actions. As he says, don't let yourself get tied up in remorse. Focus on the present moment, resolving not to make the same mistakes you made in the past, and at the same time develop an attitude of limitless goodwill, because within a mind like that, the impact of past bad actions gets weaker and weaker. The more limitless your goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity, the weaker the impact of past bad actions. So in all these cases – giving, virtue, the development of goodwill – he takes your sense of self and tries to get you to use it intelligently. That's a strategy for maximizing happiness.

Ultimately, though, self as a strategy can only go so far. This is where the not-self strategy comes in. Look at the various things you hold onto, this activity of creating a "me," or a "mine": Exactly what are you creating it out of? Look at the raw materials and you'll see that they can't possibly be you. They can't possibly provide true happiness in the ultimate sense because they're so unstable and inconstant. They're all stressful because they're all fabricated. They're made, they're intentional. And intentions are inconstant. When the cause is inconstant, how can the result be constant? This analysis, though, goes against the grain.

But hopefully, by the time we come to it, we've been practicing the Buddha's teachings – especially the ones on generosity, virtue, and goodwill – and our confidence in the Buddha's teachings has grown. Our standards for what counts as true happiness have become more refined. Particularly as we develop our

powers of concentration and get used to a more and more refined sense of ease, a more expansive sense of ease, we grow more discriminating in our taste, in our appreciation for what true happiness can be. And there comes a point where we're willing to uncloud our minds and say, "Well, maybe the Buddha is right. Maybe if we let go of these things we won't be burdened by them." This is what the not-self strategy is all about: learning how to let go of all the makeshift things we cling to in order to find the greater happiness that comes from letting go.

So he takes us step by step, starting with our normal desire for true happiness. He says to focus on happiness, focus on what needs to be done for happiness, but also be aware of the limitations of how you've been looking for happiness. As you get more sensitive to those limitations, you can uncloud your mind to want something more refined. That's where he offers you more refined techniques, more refined strategies.

So in that sense, it's a seamless practice, but when we're immersed in the practice it doesn't seem seamless at all. Our minds go back and forth. We seem to advance for a while and then retreat, advance and retreat, go left, go right and all over the place because some of the Buddha's strategies go so strongly against our old habits. The mind tends to rebel. So we have to learn how to be patient with it. As with anyone overcoming addiction, there are going to be ups and downs. But if you're patient enough, sensitive enough, and rely on your powers of perseverance, they see you through. You become more mature in understanding your desire for happiness. After all, we really do want true happiness. It's not an artificially induced desire. It's something that already underlies all our action.

What we're doing is putting the mind in a position where it has a better and better chance of gaining that kind of maturity. It's finally willing to give the Buddha's approaches a try, to replace our old strategies – which have had some success, but not total success, but to which we're so attached – with new strategies that promise something more. Although those new strategies may initially seem counterintuitive, they make more and more sense as you get to know them. And they really do give results. The promised results. A happiness that's unconditioned – because that's the only kind of happiness that can last. Conditions – where do conditions come from? Ultimately, they come from our intentions. And what are our intentions like? Well, you've seen your intentions – they go up and down, backwards and forwards. Even when you try to make them constant in concentration, you find that even the most refined states of concentration have their ups and downs. In this way the Buddha has you cornered. You let go of the grosser forms of happiness, the grosser strategies for happiness, and get used to more and more refined ones. And they finally take you to the point where there's no course left but to let go of strategies. All strategies. It's like painting yourself into a corner. The only way to get out of the corner is not to be anywhere. When you can manage that, you see that what the Buddha taught was right. He really knew what he was talking about. This is the way to true happiness.