

The Cost of Happiness

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Psychologists who have studied the way people look for happiness report that most people will pursue a particular type of happiness until they see that the cost is too great and then they'll stop. In other words, there are too many difficulties, too many drawbacks, too many side effects. The problem is that most people are very insensitive to the costs of the way they search for happiness, so they keep searching for some types of happiness even though there's very little return. Obvious cases are drug addicts and people who commit crime. They get very insensitive to the costs of the way they're looking for happiness, so they keep on creating more and more suffering instead of the happiness they want. They can't seem to get out of that vicious cycle.

From the Buddha's point of view, this is a problem for *all* of us. He talked about how, after his awakening, he surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha and he saw everyone on fire with greed, anger, delusion; passion, aversion, and delusion. And what were the people doing? They were searching for happiness. Yet the way they were searching for happiness was setting them on fire.

This is why, in his very first sermon, this was the first issue he addressed in the two extremes to be avoided: sensual indulgence and self-mortification, two ways of searching for happiness that led to long-term pain. Then he proposed a third way of looking for happiness that actually got results: the noble eightfold path, which is what we're trying to practice here right now. He started out his whole teaching career with this question: How do you search for happiness skillfully? He said to look at the way you search for happiness and see if it's really satisfactory, see if the drawbacks outweigh the happiness you're looking for.

As he said in another discourse, this is the basic question you want to ask. It's the beginning of wisdom: "What when I do it will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?" It's not as if you've suddenly decided to look for happiness. Everybody's looking for happiness all the time. The wisdom lies, simply in realizing, one, happiness will have to depend on what you do, and two, you want a happiness that's long-term, conjoined with your welfare, your true well-being.

A lot of the Buddha's teachings are designed to make us more sensitive to the costs of the way we look for happiness, so that we can come to our senses and look for happiness in a more skillful way. This relates to his very last teaching as well, his advice to be heedful, as you protect your search for happiness. In other words, you have to look very, very carefully at what you're doing.

This is why we develop mindfulness and concentration: to sensitize the mind to the costs of its search for happiness, and in particular the way you're looking for happiness. The Buddha was not saying not to search for happiness. He said to look at the way you search, with the purpose of trying to do it in a heedful, careful, attentive way, a sensitive way so that you can really sense the costs.

Now, for the mind to be sensitive, it has to be very solid and still. Otherwise, you can't detect its subtle movements. This is really clear when you sit down and meditate for the first time. You're with the breath for a couple breaths and then all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else. You have no idea how you got there. These periods of blanking out: That's when the mind is insensitive. It's not seeing what's going on.

One of the most important aspects of the meditation is to make those periods of blanking out shorter and shorter, until you finally get to the point where you don't blank out. If the mind is going to move, you see it move. And you're in a position to decide whether it's a good place to move or not. You can sense how much stress and suffering is caused by those moments. If you don't have this continuity in your gaze, you can't see these things. As a result, you miss the costs of the ways you're looking for happiness.

This is why the skills you develop in meditation are so important and why they're skills you want to take in to your daily life. After all, it's not that you're searching for happiness only now while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. Everything you do in the course of the day is essentially part of that search. You're constantly making choices about what to think about, what to say, what to do. Some the choices are very conscious choices and others are more buried. The results of those choices are sometimes clear and sometimes buried. If they're buried, you don't know what they are. You don't sense them.

So there's a lot of wisdom right here, a lot of heedfulness right here, in learning to be more and more sensitive to the costs of the way you're looking for happiness. When you realize that you have a choice, and you don't have to look in ways that are causing harm, causing stress, that's when you become more skillful. The whole trick lies in seeing these things.

This is why the Buddha placed so much emphasis on seeing stress, seeing the inconstancy, the disturbances in the mind. Look for them. He said that no matter what comes up in your meditation, no matter how peaceful everything may seem, always keep your eye out for that question: Is there still stress in here? Is there still changing? If you see it, don't ignore it. Otherwise, you fall into that old trap of getting only halfway along the path and suddenly deciding that this is a good place to lie down. Well, it's right in the middle of the road. You're going to get run over.

In some of the passages in the Canon, the Buddha talks about very refined states of concentration, such as the themeless concentration of awareness, where awareness is centered but there's no specific object there. Or the totality of non-dual consciousness. They all sound like very good places. But if you get there, you have to look: To what extent is it still fabricated? How are you going to see the process of fabrication? You look to see: Is there still any change? Is there any stress? If there is, then it's something not worthy of your attachment. You might want to stay there for a while to get settled and still so that you can look and see. He's not telling you to drop states of concentration as soon as they come up. He's actually encouraging to develop them. But they're for the purpose of getting more and more sensitive. The more still you are, the more refined your focus, and more refined your solidity, then the more refined the movements you can see. Always look for that. That's your guarantee. That's your protection against mistaking some halfway point on the path for the goal.

It's in this way that the Buddha's first teaching and his last teaching are connected to what you're doing right now. You're looking into the way you search for happiness and you're very heedful about it. Try to make your focus as steady and imperturbable as possible, keeping your eye out for ways you can make it more imperturbable, steadier, more solid.

In this way, you finally reach a happiness that has no cost, no drawbacks at all.