

True to the Practice

September 12, 2005

The two chants that we chanted in translation just now very neatly sum up the dilemma that we all face. On the one hand, we want happiness. On the other hand, we're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. These are normal parts of our lives. Most people try to resolve the dilemma by forgetting about the second fact, pretending that it doesn't happen, or only rarely happens, or it's unusual. But that simply sets people up for a real fall. They base their happiness on things that will age, grow ill, die, and get separated—and then where are they?

This is why we meditate, to find a happiness that can be based on something else. That's what the fifth of the contemplations is about: to remind us that it's through our own actions that we can find that something else. There's nobody out there who's going to come and help solve the problem for us. And it's not solved simply by luck. You hear stories about people suddenly gaining awakening or enlightenment experiences without having any idea what they were doing. But those stories don't ring true. Any kind of experience like that without understanding doesn't really offer much hope or insight. If you scratch a little deeper, you usually find that the people have gone through a really bad neurotic episode and then come out, feeling relieved after having gotten out from under the cloud. The sense of relief was so great that it seemed like an awakening. Awakening is something else, though. It comes through our efforts to understand what the mind is doing.

So the first order of business is to settle down and look at the mind, to see what it's doing right now. This is why we give the mind a place to stay, because if it doesn't stay in the present moment, you can't watch it. It's like trying to watch a movie when your purpose is to understand how the director created the movie, but all too quickly you get caught up in the story line. You're so totally immersed in the story that you can't really observe how the movie is crafted. So what we're doing right here as we focus on the breath is to bring the mind into the present moment to see how it crafts things. At first it seems like tying it down, so it's going to struggle, because the mind is used to traveling around.

So to make the task easier, we give the mind something pleasant to stay with in the present: the breath. In the beginning, the breath may not seem very pleasant, but you realize after a while that you can change it. You can make it more pleasant. You've been breathing all your life and never really looked to see what kind of breathing really feels good, what's best for the body, what's best for the

mind. So take some time to get to know these things right now. You can focus on any spot in the body and just watch how the breathing process feels there. Try to make your focus comfortable. In other words, don't tense up the area that you're focusing on. Focus on keeping it open and relaxed.

If you slip off, come right back. Slip off again, come back again. This is a practice that takes some determination. That's why we have those reminders at the beginning of the sit. After all, if you can't find happiness here in the present moment, where are you going to find it? If your happiness depends on this that and the other thing—things going a certain way, your body going a certain way, your relationships going certain way, the world going a certain way—it's all very fragile. As with any skill, it's the people who have a strong sense of the dangers that come from not mastering the skill, and the advantages that come from mastering it: Those are the people who will work hard at the skill and have a real chance of mastering it.

As the Buddha said, there is a happiness that's timeless, that doesn't have to depend on anything else at all. It's there if you look carefully enough, if you can get the mind still and if you can gain some understanding about how the mind moves around, how it lays claim to the things, identifies with them, and creates all sorts of stories and make-believe worlds out of them, and you can see that these things really get in the way. There is something that lies behind all that process. If you learn how to see through that process, you can see through to what it is that lies behind it. When you reach that kind of happiness, the well-being that comes there, then you're secure wherever you go, because it doesn't depend on anything. When aging, illness, and death come, that happiness is not shaken. When separation comes, that happiness is not shaken.

Deep down inside, that's the kind of happiness we all want. Many of us would like to think that it's going to come on its own, willy-nilly, but it doesn't work that way.

So give this practice your full attention. The more fully you attend to it, the more you can see what its potentials are. The more you're true in doing the practice, the more it's going to take you to that truth, the truth of the happiness the Buddha talked about. So you've got a whole hour here, and this is all you have to do. Try to make the most of it.