

On Human Nature

February 7, 2006

There are a lot of questions for which the Buddha remained silent, issues that were live issues back in his time—and many of them are still live issues now—that he refused to answer one way or the other. For instance, is human nature basically good or basically bad? He refused to answer. If there's anything innate in human beings, it was just one thing: the desire for happiness. That assumption is something that underlies all of his teachings, all of his techniques for training the mind. If we didn't desire happiness, there wouldn't be any purpose in being here. It's this desire that got us born in the first place and has kept us alive up to now. It's also this desire that helps us make sense of the path. Why are you sitting here with your eyes closed? You want happiness. Is that desire a good thing or bad thing? Depends on how you direct it.

The whole point of the Buddha's teachings is to direct it in the right way so that you can attain the true happiness that doesn't cause any harm to anyone. We've come here because we realize that ordinary happiness based on material things isn't enough. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, we still wouldn't have enough for our material desires. So desires for happiness that point in that direction are pointed in the wrong way. We need a certain amount of material support to keep the body going—food, clothing, shelter, medicine—but when you reflect on this, you realize you don't need all that much. Time spent on training the mind is much better spent.

So that's what we're doing here: training the mind in terms of mindfulness and alertness, training it to understand this intention that directs our desire for happiness. That's what we're watching for as we sit here. We're meditating on the breath, but the purpose of focusing on the breath is to get the mind to settle down so that you can really look at the intention keeping you with the breath. The best way to study intention is to intend one thing for long periods of time, so that you can see how the mind fights among its intentions. You're sitting here for a bit, and the desire for something else comes up. You've got to learn how to step in and decide which intention you're going to follow. For the most part, our old habits send us off in other directions: "Who wants to sit here focusing on the breath? Your legs hurt, and the breath is not all that interesting, and there are lots of more interesting things to think about." That's old habit speaking.

So you've got to develop new habits. Just remind yourself that this is one area that you haven't really explored. What's it like to stay with the breath for long

periods of time? Do your best to argue with the mind, cajole the mind, anything that works to keep the mind with the breath, exploring how to make the breath comfortable, looking at the breath energy in the different parts of the body you don't normally look at: the breath in your shins for example, or the breath in your shoulders, the breath at the back of your skull. Shake up the mind a little bit. Loosen up its preconceived notions. If you can't loosen up its preconceived notions, you'll never see anything new.

Then learn to reflect on what works and what doesn't work.

This is how we begin to take that desire for happiness and point it in the right direction. We often think of the desire for happiness as something narrow and selfish, but the Buddha pointed out that we can pursue happiness in a way that actually develops qualities that are noble in the mind: purity, compassion, and discernment.

As the Buddha said, the beginning of discernment is the question: "What when I do it will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?" In other words, discernment is based on two things: One is the realization that there are short-term forms of happiness and long-term forms of happiness. And the long-term ones, even if they take more effort, are the ones that are really worth going for. The second realization is that these things are going to require effort. You have to *do* things in order to attain happiness.

That's the beginning of discernment. You realize you have a limited amount of energy, a limited amount of time, and you want to get the best results out of it. It sounds calculating, and it is, but it's calculating in the right direction. If we think the calculating mind is a bad thing, that's because it usually calculates in the wrong direction. Its calculations are lies; it's self-deceiving. But here you want to take that part of the mind that calculates and ask, "What's really worth it in terms of long-term happiness? What's not worth it?" Train it so that it really does lead to long-term happiness.

That's discernment. As for purity, the Buddha said you develop purity by reflecting on your actions, your intentions. Before you do something, ask yourself: Where is it going to lead? Before you say something, before you think seriously about something, where do you think these words, where do you think these thoughts are going to lead? If you see that they're going to lead to affliction for yourself or for others, don't do those things. If you don't foresee any affliction for anyone, go and do them.

While you're doing an action, if it turns out that it *is* causing unexpected affliction for yourself or others, stop. If you don't see any affliction while you're doing it, keep on with it until you end.

Then, after it's done, you have to reflect on the long-term results. If there are some bad results that you hadn't expected, you resolve never to repeat that mistake. Go and talk it over with someone else who is practicing, get their perspective on it, and then, as the Buddha said, resolve on restraint in the future. In other words, be honest enough to admit your mistakes. Have that amount of integrity. And have compassion enough not to want to make that mistake again.

You notice that the Buddha said, "affliction for yourself or for others." You've got to take other people's well-being into consideration. Why is that? If your happiness depends on their affliction, your happiness won't last. They're going to do what they can overturn it. So you realize, if you want long-term happiness, you have to think about other people as well. Find a way of looking for happiness that doesn't harm anybody. That way, your quest for happiness doesn't create enemies. It's on solid ground.

So these two qualities—purity and compassion—go together. Again, in the beginning, it may sound calculating. But you're learning how to train the calculating part of the mind, not denying it, not saying it's bad, just realizing that the desire for true happiness itself is something that can be directed in the right direction. And where does it lead? It leads to meditation, it leads to trying to develop concentration and discernment, so that you can uproot even the roots, the potential for any kind of unskillful action through either greed or aversion or delusion.

In this way, you embody qualities appropriate to the Buddha. After all, those three qualities—discernment, purity, and compassion—are the three virtues traditionally attributed to him. This is how the desire for happiness can be turned into something noble. You benefit; the people around you benefit as well. Don't think that happiness has to be a selfish goal. If you can uproot your greed, other people around you won't have to suffer from your greed. If you can uproot your aversion and delusion, nobody has to suffer from your aversion and delusion. That right there is a huge gift.

It's in this way that your desire for happiness can be turned into something that's wise, pure, and compassionate. As you're sitting here struggling with the breath, it may not seem it's anywhere near, but at least you're on the road headed in the right direction. It's good to keep that thought in mind, because it gives you energy.

Ajaan Suwat tells that when he first went to stay with Ajaan Mun, he was embarrassed to admit, after a couple years of meditation, that he would sit down and all he could see was how distracted his mind was. Ajaan Mun comforted him, "Well, it's in the Satipatthana Sutta that being aware of the distracted mind as a

distracted mind is part of right mindfulness. At least you're aware." Ajaan Suwat took the advice well. He didn't say to himself, "Gee, all I need to do is to be aware of my distracted mind as a distracted mind and that's good enough." It's not good enough, but at least it's heading in the right direction. He realized that Ajaan Mun was trying to give encouragement.

People on the path all deserve encouragement. Being aware of the distracted mind as a distracted mind is a step toward finding what it's like to have an undistracted mind. As the Buddha once said, when a fool realizes that he's been foolish, that's the beginning of wisdom right there. He's at least wise to that extent. Most people go through life as fools and yet think they're wise and clever. Those are the ones whose quest for happiness is going to take a long, long time before finding anything of value. But seeing your distracted mind as a distracted mind, and realizing that the problem is in here, it's not out there, it's right here in the distraction: That gives you something to work on.

It may seem like a small step, but remember it's part of a large leap of taking your desire for happiness—which seems to be frustrated and thwarted right now—and focusing it on the real problem. When you're focusing on the real problem, there's hope for a solution. This particular solution takes the desire for happiness and doesn't fritter it away in mindless entertainments or destructive behavior. It points it in the direction that turns it into something wise and discerning, kind and compassionate, noble and pure.

So remember: This is a path that's good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end—good all the way through. As for yourself, remember that you're not stuck with any particular innate nature. If you find yourself thinking any petty or unwise or selfish thoughts, that's not necessarily your nature. Those are just habits you've picked up from your past ways of looking for happiness, but you're not stuck there.

On the other hand, though, when you're thinking nice, kind thoughts, that's not necessarily your innate nature, either. So you can't be complacent. What's innate in you is the desire for happiness. Make sure that desire keeps pointed in the right direction, and everything else that's good follows from that.