

## *Patterns to Happiness*

*July 31, 2006*

For most of us, happiness is something pretty much hit or miss. When it comes, you don't know why it comes. When it goes, you don't know why it goes. Most of us think that's the way it has to be. But that's crazy-making. They've done experiments with pigeons where they put them in cages with two bars in each cage. In one cage, if the pigeons pressed the right bar, they got food. If they pressed the left bar, they didn't get food. Those pigeons were pretty happy and well-adjusted. In the other cage, though, it was arranged that sometimes a pigeon would press the right bar and it would get food. Sometimes it wouldn't. Sometimes it pressed the left bar and got food, sometimes it wouldn't. The pigeons in that cage were neurotic, very disturbed birds, because they couldn't figure out what was going on.

Most of us live in a world where we can't figure out what's going on. We tend to think that maybe there is somebody out there who likes us or doesn't like us, but it's crazy-making, trying to figure out what you can do to please this person, whoever it is, this being or whoever it is. As they said in *The Onion* one time, God has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. On any given day things can be really nice one place and miserable someplace else. Or as I saw in a cartoon recently, God comes down and says, "Okay, America. I'm going to bless you like you've been asking me for so long." A person from Iraq comes and say, "Please bless Iraq, too. God says, "Well, I can't do that. If I bless everybody, it's as if nobody gets blessed."

In other words, given the world as it is, if you think there's an intelligence out there behind all this, it's pretty arbitrary, capricious, crazy-making kind of thought. Fortunately, that's not the way it has to be. As Ajaan Fuang once said, the whole purpose of what we're doing here is to discover that there are basic principles to happiness. They're complex, but when you figure out the causes, you can tap into the happiness when you need it. You can tap into a sense of inner pleasure whenever you need it. To understand the process, though, you have to be very observant.

It helps to start out with a good, clear sense of cause and effect. As when Ajaan Lee talks about the first jhana, he says there are basically three factors that are the causes. One is directed thought., when you direct your thoughts, you direct your attention, to a particular object. The second is evaluation. You evaluate the object to see what's working in the sense of getting the mind to settle down. For

instance, when you're focused on the breath, you can play with the breath in different ways: long in, long out, short in, short out, long in, short out, short in, long out. Try to see what rhythm feels best for the body right now.

You can focus in different spots in the body. Then you can explore the way the breath energy feels in the body. How does it feel when you breathe in? What kind of posture do you have? What happens if you change your posture? Try to sit with good posture and notice how that might change the way you have to breathe. Or you can think of the breath energy going down the spine, out the legs. Or you can think of it coming up the spine, to support your back when you need support: coming up from the soles of your feet up through your legs, up through the back to support you, up the back of the neck. There are lots of ways of playing around. And think like that: You're playing. We're not here doing drudgery work. We're exploring, trying to bring a sense of interest, a sense of enjoyment in playing around, seeing what works to get the mind to settle down.

Once there's a sense of ease in the breath, you can think of it spreading. You might think of channels in the body. Some of them are open and some of them are not quite so open. You don't have to force the breath into the body, just think: Open up the channels. And the breath will flow. You don't make it flow. The nature of the breath is to flow. All you have to do is open the channels.

So try to get a sense of where the channels are blocked, what you need to do in changing your posture, changing the way you think of the breathing process to open up those channels and keep them open all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, until finally you sense that you're aware of the whole body, and the breath fills the whole body. That's all you have to think about: just "whole-body breath, whole-body breath," all the way in, all the way out.

As you get absorbed in these issues, the mind gets more and more focused on them to the exclusion of everything else. Your mind has one object, and that one object—the breath—fills your awareness. That's called singleness of preoccupation—the third of the three causal factors.

And the results will be pleasure and rapture. When you get the causes right, the results come. The problem is that we tend to add too many factors into it. It's like getting a good recipe and trying to jazz it up in ways that aren't really appropriate—adding hot peppers to your cake recipe—and then complaining that the recipe isn't any good.

Just follow the recipe. There are a lot of unnecessary things we tend to add to the meditation. We bring a lot of attitudes about whether we deserve to be happy or not. Some people say, "I don't deserve it." When happiness comes or pleasure comes, they're afraid—or else they tend to have a controlling mindset. When the

rapture comes, sometimes the rapture can be really strong and overpowering, and for people who like to control things, it's threatening.

So it's not just a matter of getting the ingredients together. You also need to clear out whichever things are *not* ingredients. It's like making a cake in a pan that you yesterday used to make pizza, and you didn't take the ingredients in the pizza out. You end up with a very weird cake. Make sure your pan is clean.

Now, the mind is not like a pan. You can't just look at it ahead of time to see what's there and then clear it out. But notice when you do run into these other things, just put them aside. Learn *how* to put them aside—because it *is* a learning process. Many of these attitudes we carry around with us don't just go away. If you find an attitude that gets in your way, reason with it.

The first step though, of course, is to put it aside if you can. There are some attitudes where, when you notice them, you can simply say, "This is strange." And seeing a how strange the attitude is enough to get past it. Other times, you really believe in that attitude. It keeps coming back, coming back. That's when you've got to argue with it. Ask yourself, "Why should I believe this?" A lot of us come to meditation with attitudes we picked up from our upbringing: the culture we grew up in, the religion we grew up in. They tend to get in the way. If there's the question of deserving happiness, or not deserving happiness, remember that the Buddha never uses the word "deserve." No matter how bad your past karma is, he never says that people deserve to suffer.

When someone does a particular kind of action, that particular kind of action will lead to a certain kind of results. But that doesn't mean that you deserve to suffer from a bad action. You can develop attitudes of limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, so that when the results of that action come, the results get minimized. Or as in the case of Angulimala: He became an arahant even though he had killed all those people. The karma he got was pretty minimal: He just got his head broken a couple times, which is very minor, considering what he had done before.

So the Buddha doesn't live in a world where people deserve to suffer or deserve anything at all—aside from arahants, who are deserving of gifts. That means we're free to learn about the world so that we can tap into happiness when we need it. That's a very liberating thought. Think about that again and again and again, whenever you find this question of deserving or not deserving coming up and getting in the way of your meditation.

So meditation is a process both of getting the ingredients right, getting the causes right, and also clearing out any irrelevant ingredients, any irrelevant actions when you run across them.

During my first year as a monk, I found it frustrating that there would be times when the mind would seem to settle down, and other times when it could not settle down at all. I found myself having to deal with old issues from high school, grade school even sometimes. Old relationships. Present frustrations. I tried to push them out of the way but I realized I couldn't just push them away. So I had to deal with them, reason through with them. Fortunately, living with Ajaan Fuang, having him in my mind, gave me a different perspective on these things. I was able to step out of them. But still there was a sense of wasting my time, until later I realized that if I hadn't cleared out those things, I'd never be able to get the mind to settle down more reliably. Once I realized that that was part of the meditation too, things went a lot more easily.

So meditation is both putting together and clearing out, so that you finally do get just the right ingredients in your cake pan. You don't have yesterday's garbage and you don't have who-knows-what left over from the days before. You've got just the ingredients you need. And when you've got just the ingredients you need and you put them together in the right way, you get you results.

So meditation is not a crapshoot. It's not hit or miss. It may seem hit or miss if you don't look for cause and effect in the proper way—or if you're told that it's hit or miss. That's even worse, because you stop looking. There *are* patterns to the mind. They're complex. As the Buddha said, dependent co-arising is very complex. He warned Ananda when Ananda said that it was clear. He said, "No, don't say that. It really is complex." But it *is* comprehensible. It does give you a roadmap. There are points you can focus on—in terms of intention, attention, or perception—that can help you make sense of this whole question of why there sometimes is happiness, and why sometimes there isn't, and what you can do to master the processes of cause and effect so that you can tap into happiness, tap into a sense of rapture whenever you need it.

So learn to look for patterns. That was Aristotle's definition of intelligence: to see patterns where they hadn't pointed out to you before. So try to be intelligent in your meditation. Develop an intelligent heart, intelligent about this question of happiness and unhappiness. Think of the heart and mind as one. They work together. When they work together—as you try to figure out this issue of what makes you happy, what doesn't, what provides pleasure and what doesn't—you've got all your mental faculties working together in an appropriate way, a useful way. And when you've got that, you're sure to get results.