

## *Lessons in Happiness*

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Once, during my first year as a monk, Ajaan Fuang made the comment that sometimes you hear people describing the path as one of letting go, just letting go. But remember, he said, that it's not just letting go, it's also developing.

At that time, I had only a partial notion of what he was talking about. But as you live with the teaching, as you live with the path, you realize it can't just be letting go. You've got to develop things. Because if you're just letting go, often it's letting go out of aversion, letting go out of a desire to run away, and not wanting to do any work. And that kind of letting go isn't healthy. Before you let go of anything, you have to develop it, work at it, so that when you let go, you let go out of understanding, you let go, not out of aversion, but simply out of a sense of having had enough. You let go out of a sense of fullness.

For instance, we know that we're going to have to let go of the body, let go of attachment to the body, but what's the first thing you focus on when you meditate? You focus on the breath, which is part of the body. And you're not just letting go of the breath, you're actually working with it. Look at those sixteen steps of breath meditation. They're basically lessons in how to develop happiness out of the breath, a sense of well-being, a sense of ease from four different angles.

Those sixteen steps fall into four tetrads. The first tetrad deals with the body, the second with feelings, the third with the mind, and the fourth with phenomena or mental qualities. And in each of tetrads, instead of just dropping things or running away, you're told to sensitize yourself to what you've got there. As you get more sensitive to it, the next lesson is in how to develop a sense of ease within that sensitivity.

So you're not to blocking things out. You're actually making yourself more aware of what's going on from that particular angle.

For example, you start out with the breath coming in, going out. And you know when it's coming in long, know when it's going out long, coming in short, going out short. You sensitize yourself to the varieties of the breath, and the longness and shortness of the breath. But that's only one facet of the varieties you'll find. There's also deep breathing, shallow breathing, fast, slow, broad, narrow, heavy breathing, light breathing. You want to be sensitive to the different ways you breathe. And to get more sensitive to what kind of breathing really feels good for the body, you've got to make yourself aware of the whole body. You

breathe in sensitive to the whole body, breathe out sensitive to the whole body. In other words, you get to know the breathing process as a totality.

Then you allow the breathing to calm down so that it becomes gentler, there's less intentional fabrication, and the breath can get more and more quiet, more subtle. As you allow the breath to get more subtle, there's a greater sense of fullness in the body.

One way of inducing this fullness is to remember that when you're breathing out, don't squeeze the body. Think of the body staying full, even as the breath goes out and comes in again, to induce even more fullness, and more and more, so that you really begin to notice that there's something special you can do with the way you breathe. You can develop a sense of ease, a sense of well-being that's very full, very refreshing.

So that's the pattern: You sensitize yourself to this, and then you learn how to make it pleasurable, learn to do what's needed in order to make it a good place to stay. Only then can you let it go.

The next tetrad is working with feeling. Now that you've got the breath feeling comfortable, you sensitize yourself to that feeling of comfort, but you don't focus directly on the comfort. You stay with the breath as your primary focus. You're training yourself with the breath, but you sensitize yourself to which ways of breathing feel easeful, pleasurable, which ones give rise to a sense of fullness, rapture, refreshment. And then you sensitize yourself not only to the feeling, but also to the other member of what is called mental *sankhara*, mental fabrication, which is perception: the perceptions you hold in mind that induce pleasure, the perceptions that induce a sense of fullness. Which ways of visualizing the body, labeling the breath, understanding the breath, are helpful? Which ones are not? Which ones are agitating, which ones are calming? Then you go for the calming ones.

So here again, you follow the earlier pattern. You sensitize yourself to the fabrication of feeling and perception, and then you allow it to become more calm.

That's when you put it aside and start focusing directly on the mind: the sense of awareness, the knowingness that's been watching over the breath. And where are you going to find this knowingness? Right there at your awareness of the breath. You begin to notice that sometimes it gets weak and loses energy, so you find ways of gladdening it, to lift its spirits. Other times it feels shaky, so you find ways of steadying it. Or it might feel confined by one thing or another, so you find ways of liberating it from its confinement. In this way, you become sensitive both to this quality of awareness and to what you can do to put it into good shape.

That's when you let go of that focus and move onto just phenomenon of mental qualities in and of themselves. You see how inconstant they are. This is sensitizing yourself to them in a very deep level, seeing that even the really good mental qualities of concentration, ease, rapture: They, too, are inconstant. They, too, are fabricated. This is when you start looking at them in terms of what are called the three characteristics, or, more accurately, three perceptions. These are the perceptions you apply: You look at them in terms of their inconstancy, in terms of the stress that's there, and in terms of their being not-self—not you, not yours, not really under your control. You can nudge them here and nudge them there, and exercise *some* measure of control over them, but, ultimately, they follow their own laws, which you have to respect.

And when you're face-to-face with that fact, what do you do to find happiness? You develop dispassion for it. Notice that the dispassion comes not out of anger or aversion, but out of the understanding that comes from mastery, from having really developed these things. That's when you allow things to follow their way into cessation, and then you return everything back to where it came from. You relinquish it. In this way, the relinquishing comes not from aversion or from a desire to run away, but from having explored the full limits of what you've focused on mastering.

So in each of these four tetrads there's a similar pattern. You sensitize yourself to the fabrication that's going on, and then you find ways of finding happiness within that sensitivity by fabricating with skill. You expand your awareness rather than curling up and trying to hide. You let go, not out of aversion, but out of a full understanding, having learned the lessons of happiness, learned the lessons of pleasure that you can develop from the breath. So even though we know that there are these three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, as Ajaan Lee points out, first you take what's inconstant—the sense of ease and well-being—and you make it as constant as possible. You take what is stressful and learn how to find pleasure in the midst of it: How far can you push the envelope in that direction? You take what's not-self and you make it yours through your mastery. That's the developing side. Once things are fully developed, then you let them all go.

So keep reminding yourself, especially when the mind has this tendency to run away and be done with everything, that that's not the Buddha's way. The Buddha followed the path of exploring, cultivating, developing, letting go of what is unskillful, anything he could sense was a weight or burden on the mind, and then going to deeper and deeper levels, from body, feelings, into the mind, the sense of awareness, the sense of knowing, and finally, sensitive at the level of mental

qualities: things that can be known by simply watching with total equanimity, so that he ultimately relinquished even the equanimity.

That's mature letting go. It comes from developing your sensitivity, learning the lessons of happiness, learning the lessons of pleasure that the breath has to offer.

You look in the texts and you see that breath meditation and the development of the goodwill, the *brahmaviharas*, are listed as separate techniques, but in practice they really come together. In the process of working with the breath, you're learning lessons in how to make yourself happy, how to develop a sense of pleasure within. Once you have that sense of pleasure, that sense of well-being, then it's a lot easier to spread thoughts of goodwill in an unlimited way. Because if you're feeling put upon, feeling simply the desire to run away, it's hard to wish happiness for anybody, much less happiness for all living beings unconditionally.

Once you develop the sense of pleasure, the lessons in happiness that you can learn from the breath are that, one, you understand what happiness is all about, and, two, you've got it. You're in a position where you want to share. And you understand what you're doing when you wish happiness for other beings. You wish that they too could develop their inner resources.

At the same time, you put the mind in a good position to see where goodwill is appropriate, where compassion is appropriate, where empathetic joy and equanimity are appropriate. In other words, you've learned from the breath that there are times when the breath is not feeling good, and you're not feeling good: What can you do to alleviate that sense of stress and disease? That's compassion. There are times when it is going well, so you've got to learn how to appreciate that, to keep it going. That's empathetic joy. And then there are other times where you can't do much of anything just yet, so you've simply got to be patient and to develop equanimity. When you can develop this kind of sensitivity inside, it's a lot easier to be sensitive to conditions outside as well, as to when which of the different *brahmaviharas* is appropriate.

So these practices go together. This is why, in the forest tradition, there's no separate *brahmavihara* meditation. There are the *brahmavihara* chants we do on a regular basis. You can reflect, as they say Ajaan Mun did, at intervals throughout the day. When he woke up, he reflected on goodwill for all beings; in the afternoon, waking up from his nap, goodwill for all beings; at night, before he went to bed, goodwill for all beings. The rest of the day was spent focused on the body, focused on the breath. And it was a seamless practice.

So when you find yourself wanting to run away from the body or wanting to run away from your feelings, remember that you can't escape from them until

you've thoroughly developed them, until you've mastered them and have learned the lessons of happiness they have to offer. That's when you're in a position to find a happiness that's even greater. We move from a sense of fullness to something even more gratifying. We move from fullness to fullness, to the point where you don't need to be full anymore. You go to freedom. But it can't be done by just running away, saying, "Things are bad, they're inconstant, stressful, not-self, I want to be out of here." You have to take these things and turn them into a basis for happiness, so that your liberation comes from not a sense of aversion, but from a sense of enough. That's the only kind of liberation you can really trust.