

The Center of Your Life

November 24, 2008

The last year when I was still in Thailand at the Ajaan Lee commemoration, they had invited a monk from a monastery in Bangkok to give a Dhamma talk. He got stuck in traffic and sent word ahead that he wouldn't be able to get there in time. So they had another monk from the forest tradition get up and give a Dhamma talk. He talked about how the Buddha's teachings were all about suffering.

Then a few minutes after he'd finished his talk, the other monk arrived. So they asked him to get up and give another Dhamma talk, too. And not knowing what the other monk had said, he gave a second Dhamma talk on the topic of, "The Buddha's teachings are all about happiness."

And of course they're both right. The Buddha's first sermon starts with the issue of suffering but it's for the purpose of happiness. We all want happiness but we suffer. In fact, many of the things we do to find happiness actually cause us to suffer. Not only do they cause us to suffer, they cause other people to suffer as well. It's because we don't understand why there's suffering and what we're doing to cause suffering: That's why we're not happy.

So the Buddha gave his life to finding the answer to that question: "Why do we cause suffering? And how can we put an end to it?" Once he'd found the answer, he gave the rest of his life to teaching it to other people. So it is an important issue in life.

That chant on the brahmaviharas starts out, *aham sukhito homi*, may I be happy. It sounds very simple, very commonplace, not very profound. The reason it's commonplace is because it's the desire that lies behind every action we do.

It was part of the Buddha's genius to say, "Let's look at that very carefully. Let's take this desire for happiness seriously. If you really want to be happy, what does it mean? What do you have to do?"

And as he discovered, it's the first step in wisdom is to ask, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" The long-term there is important. You don't want a happiness that comes and goes and kicks you as it leaves. You want a happiness that stays. And you realize that it does have to depend on your own actions.

So you've got to be careful about what you do and say and think. Because "doing" isn't just a matter of physical action, it also includes the actions of the mind. This brings you very quickly to the issue of training the mind, which is why

we're sitting here meditating: It's because of *aham sukkhito homi*, may I be happy. We want a happiness that lasts.

We want to order our lives around this issue. After all, the wish for happiness lies at the center of every action. So it only makes sense: Let's make this issue clearly, explicitly the center of our lives.

When we're practicing the Dhamma, it's not that we're practicing it *for* something else or *for* somebody else. We're training the mind so it can actually realize that desire, the desire to be truly happy.

So when we talk about making Dhamma practice the center of your life, it means taking this commonplace desire and really taking it seriously. Each time you act, ask yourself, "Is this really going to lead to happiness? Do I know what I'm doing? Or am I just acting on ignorant desires, ignorant opinions, ignorant assumptions?"

If you see that there is some ignorance, try to penetrate it, get through all the darkness. Understand why you've had that assumption or why you hold on to that particular opinion. And is it really worth holding on to that particular opinion or assumption?

Be willing to test these things in your actions. And as for the questions of, "Where is there suffering? And why is it happening? And what can be done to put an end to it?"—keep that set of questions central.

These are the questions that lie at the heart of what the Buddha called appropriate attention, *yoniso manasikara*. Of all the internal qualities that can be brought to bear on the practice, he said, there's nothing more essential for awakening. It's a matter of keeping these questions central: each time you act, each time you speak, each time you think. "Where's the suffering here? What I am doing to cause the suffering? What could I change so I'm not causing that suffering anymore? What would it be like not to suffer?"

Then ask yourself, "What activities would make you pull away from this set of questions to claim that something else was more important?" Then look into those questions and look into the attitudes behind them.

It's by keeping the questions of happiness central that you commit yourself to the practice. These are the questions that always should come first, regardless of the situation. We sometimes think that if only we had a better monastery, if only we had a better retreat center, if only we had more time, then we could really practice the Dhamma.

Well, really practicing the Dhamma is this matter of appropriate attention, coupled with mindfulness, wherever you are. If you're not mindful, you tend to forget these questions. Other things move in and take precedence. But if you can

hold on to these questions and make them central, then no matter where you are, you're practicing the Dhamma.

So as long as the question of happiness and suffering is the central issue in your life, keep reminding yourself to keep it central and do what you can not to lose sight of it. Whether you're here at the monastery or off in the woods, or back in the city, you hold to this set of questions as your basic framework for how you live.

There's an unfortunate tendency to think of the practice of the Dhamma as a particular meditation technique that you then squeeze into whatever time you can find in the course of the day, hoping that it'll somehow start seeping through your life.

Well, from the perspective of the Dhamma, the technique is only a small part of the practice. Actually, the word dhamma is used to describe qualities of the mind. Those are the things that are central. You want to develop good qualities. And appropriate attention is the primary one.

In the Buddha's discussion of the factors for awakening, each factor for awakening is fed by appropriate attention. So whatever the situation, you can ask yourself, "What's going on here? Which of the four noble truths am I dealing with right now?" If there's stress, if you can identify the stress, then try to comprehend it. If you see a mental state that's giving rise to stress, particularly craving or clinging, do what you can to abandon it, let it go.

The letting-go here: It's not as if you're holding on with your hand and you have to release your grasp. It means you're doing something again and again and again. And the abandoning is to stop. You don't have to do that action anymore. Tell yourself, "I can do something else." And that something else could be the path.

If you find that there are already mental qualities that are factors of the path, then do what you can to develop them. And try to see how much stress goes away as you're developing them.

Those are your prime duties, your central duties. But it's not as if they're being imposed from the outside. They come from your desire for happiness.

In Western psychology they talk about the conflict between the ego and the superego, "ego" being your desire for happiness, the desire to keep your happiness alive, and the "superego" being all the different lessons you're taught by society about what you have to do, all the shoulds that are imposed on you. In a tradition where the shoulds are not derived directly from the desire for true happiness, they can be very oppressive. This is why there's such a huge conflict between ego and superego issues here in the West.

In the Buddha's teachings, though, they don't have that conflict. They should all have to do with your desire for happiness. The conflict is simply that your desires head off in different directions. Some of them ignorant; some of them are knowledgeable.

So it's a different type of inner conflict here. They should all have to do with true happiness. And the conflict has to do with your unwillingness to give up certain habitual ways of acting and thinking about true happiness. But if you examine them carefully, you realize that you're holding on to them because part of you thinks that they will somehow create happiness.

So you've got to look for yourself to see what your habitual thoughts, habitual words, habitual deeds actually do, actually create. Are they creating the happiness you want?

This is why these desires can be trained, because they're all based on the desire for happiness, simply that they're misguided. If you can work through all the issues about why they're misguided, then the heart becomes more and more One. It more and more coalesces and comes together around this desire to be truly happy, to find long-term happiness, to develop these qualities of wisdom and purity and compassion that can make your happiness true.

So this is how you make Dhamma practice central in your life. It's by taking that little commonplace wish—*aham sukhitō homi*, may I be happy—that seems so commonplace you're almost embarrassed to say it: You take that desire and you take it seriously.

So in making Dhamma practice central to our lives, it's not as if we're submitting to some force outside that's going to come in and try to take over our lives. It's simply a matter of taking that little desire that's central to every action and learning how to treat it consistently, wisely, so that it actually gets results.