

Examine Your Happiness

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During my years in Thailand, I was often asked why I ordained or why I was interested in Buddhism, but one time I was asked a more specific version of that question: What was it that Ajaan Fuang taught that attracted me to him particularly?

I didn't have a ready answer right away, but as I thought about it, I began to realize that there was one teaching that had really struck me when I first went to stay with him, which is that this practice is all about purifying the mind. As he said, everything else in the practice is just games. The real thing, the serious part, the earnest part of the practice, is purifying the mind, purifying the heart. That resonated.

When we think in these terms, it helps give a sense of direction to what we're doing and helps us *check* what we're doing. There's a passage where the Buddha says, "You know another person's purity by the way that person has dealings with others." In other words, when you engage in a trade, are you fair? When you engage in an argument, are you fair? Do you take advantage of other peoples' weaknesses? Do you make underhanded arguments? Do you take more from others than you give, or do you give more than you take?

You can use the same principle looking at the mind to figure out what is meant by purity of mind.

How does your mind deal with itself? How do you deal with the world? Basically, how do you feed on the world? How do you look for your pleasure, how do you look for your happiness? Do you give more than you take, or do you take more than you give? When the Buddha uses the metaphor of feeding, it has a really deep meaning because you begin to realize that ultimately the only pure happiness is one where you're not feeding at all, in any, physically or mentally. But on the way there, you're going to have to feed.

First, though, it's good to think about happiness. What is happiness? The Pali term *sukha* has a wide range of meanings. It starts with basic pleasure and ease, and works up to well-being and bliss. But it's one of those terms that the Buddha never defines.

Lots of other terms he defines very precisely, but some of the really basic terms — mind/*citta*, happiness/*sukha*, and stress/*dukkha*—never get defined. In the case of happiness and stress, he gives examples but he doesn't provide a formal definition. I think part of the reason is that he wants you to take a close look at

where you search for your happiness, and what you regard as happiness. The same with dukkha: He wants you to look at the direct experience of stress and suffering in your internal sense of your mind. Your understanding of all these terms is going to develop as you practice, as you look at them more carefully.

So it's good to stop and think: What does happiness mean to you? How do you go about finding it? What kind of trades do you make with the world, what kind of deals do you make with the world, in order to get the happiness you want?

And what are the results? As the Buddha said, the happiness we're looking for in the practice is one that's not only solid, but also blameless. In other words, in your trades with the world and in the way you feed off the world, are you giving more than you take, are you taking more than you give? If you take more, there's something blameworthy there. If there's any harm involved in what you're doing—either harming yourself by breaking the precepts, trying to incite yourself to passion, aversion, and delusion, or harming others by getting *them* to break the precepts or trying intentionally to incite them to passion, aversion, and delusion—then there's something in your happiness that's not pure.

There's also the issue of the effort you put into that happiness. Is it worth it? Do you really get the happiness you want from it? What's the cost of this happiness you're pursuing? You want to look at this balance sheet very carefully.

One of the reasons we practice concentration is so that we can gain a sense of the range of happiness, the range of well-being that the mind is capable of. For a lot of people, sitting and meditating is not easy. Almost everyone has hardships; the few people who don't have hardships, as I've said many times, are like flowers that were ready for the Buddha to pick. We weren't ready at the time, so we still have to struggle. The Buddha was often clear about the fact that skillful practices can involve both pain and pleasure, and that unskillful practices can involve both pleasure and pain. You've got to look past the immediate pleasure and pain to sort out which kind of happiness, in the long term, is worth pursuing.

With every effort you make, you want to examine: What's the amount of happiness you gain as a result? Psychologists have noticed again and again—and not just psychologists, it's a common factor in our human psychology—that we tend to overestimate certain pleasures, the ones we like to like. We dress them up for ourselves to make us want to go back to them again and again. Yet when you actually look at the direct experience of these things, there's not much there. So the Buddha wants you to get a better sense of what happiness is, what well-being is, what bliss is.

The bliss of concentration is an acquired taste. It's a specific kind of happiness, which the Thais call *santi-sukha*, which literally means the happiness of peace.

This is a basic level of well-being that we tend to overlook because it carries no excitement, no thrills. It's just a steady lack of disturbance, like the flame of an oil lamp undisturbed by the wind. For most of us, we notice pleasure and pain because of the back-and-forth, the ups and the downs. When things are steady and on an even keel, we tend to lose interest and not notice them.

But that's precisely the kind of well-being we're working on here: the kind of happiness that doesn't go up and down, that's steady. We have to learn how to appreciate that. As we stick with it more and more, we begin to realize that we wouldn't want to be without this kind of happiness, without this kind of well-being.

But then the next question is, is this really steady, either?

As you examine it, you find that it, too, involves a certain level of feeding. You're feeding off of the breath, the ease you can create with the breath. You're also feeding off of the steadiness of the intentions that keep you here. But over time, you get more and more sensitive to the fact that even the steadiness of concentration is not totally steady. It involves a very subtle kind of movement, back and forth, sometimes more intense, sometimes less, but there's always a slight inconstancy to it. You want to get sensitive to that, because that's what motivates you to look for something better.

But in the beginning of your concentration practice, you want to focus on the steadiness. That's what motivates you to get into the concentration to begin with and to try to stay there. We often hear the Buddha talking about how the five aggregates are stressful because they're inconstant, and as a result we're taught not to identify with them. But there are levels of the teaching where the Buddha says not to focus on that yet. You focus instead on the fact that some aspects of form, feeling, perception, mental fabrication, and consciousness are actually pleasant, and you want to pursue them for that pleasure.

There's the pleasure of the precepts, the pleasure of generosity, both of which are conditioned things. There's the pleasure in concentration, which is also conditioned, and you want to motivate yourself to look for that to provide yourself with nourishment on the path. If you just go ahead and say, "Well, everything is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, so let's just go beyond the concentration and move on to the next step, without bothering to work on the concentration," that simply short-circuits the path. It starves the path.

With concentration, you're gaining training in happiness, you're gaining sensitivity in what it means to experience well-being, so that you'll be able to recognize the ultimate well-being when it comes. Even though the path involves a kind of feeding, it's the kind of feeding you need so that you're not feeding on

something more blameworthy, something more unskillful. This is a happiness that's relatively pure, not absolutely pure, because there's still a kind of feeding. Still, at this point you need to feed, so you go for what's relatively better.

As the Buddha noticed when he was practicing, if he didn't eat, he couldn't practice right concentration. The body needs nourishment, the mind needs nourishment, but you learn to be pure in your dealings with other people. You try to be fair. Having this internal source of food helps you to be less grasping and needy in your dealings with others.

Still, there comes a point when you realize that even the purity of concentration is only a relative kind of purity. You want to look deeper. The only absolutely pure way that you can engage with the world is if you don't have to feed on it anymore. You don't have to take anything at all.

This is why the arahants don't store up food. A lay person who becomes an arahant has to ordain because that person just doesn't want to store food, doesn't want to take from the world anymore. Such a person is willing to live off what's offered day by day. The idea of going out and taking things from other beings is repugnant. Only if those beings are happy to give it do arahants want to receive.

So take a good close look at what well-being means to you. What is happiness? What is pleasure? What does ease mean to you? What does bliss? In English, we talk about blissing out, with the emphasis usually on the "out," in that the pleasure is making you oblivious, which is the problem with that kind of bliss. But what would true bliss mean where you're not blissing out, but just blissing—where there's just bliss and awareness, and no feeding at all? Your dealings with the world are entirely pure: What would that be like? Happiness that doesn't involve any feeding: It's hard for us to imagine, because all of our happiness involves feeding one way or another, and it's good to become sensitive to that fact.

So even though a totally pure happiness may be a long way off, we can be more and more pure in our dealings with the world as we try to find happiness, and figure out what happiness is, realizing that certain types of happiness that we've enjoyed in the past—when you really start looking at them carefully—are really not worth it. Happiness that comes from gain, status, praise: You want to be able to see through that, so that you don't go trying to grab it from the world. Instead, you want to turn inside and see what it is about the way the mind relates to itself: What are your dealings with your own mind, and to what extent are you honest with yourself about what happiness is and in what you're doing to get it? And what the results of the way you're getting it? How do these things all balance out? It's in sensitizing yourself to these issues that you get a better and better sense of what a pure happiness would be.

These are some of the reasons why the Buddha doesn't define terms like happiness and suffering, because all too often if you think of the term as defined, and you assume you know it—where actually, you don't.

Happiness is an undefined term that's really important in our lives, and yet all too often we don't really look carefully at the experience of happiness. We don't think seriously about happiness. We just see other people going for this happiness or that, and we think that what they're doing looks like fun, so we follow their example without really looking at what we're doing. The Buddha wants you to look very carefully inside yourself: What are your dealings with the world? What are your dealings inside over the issue of happiness? To what extent do you lie to others? To what extent do you lie to yourself? To what extent do you harm others, to what extent do you harm yourself in your search for happiness? Can you clean up your act?

This is something we all have to look at deeply within ourselves in order to answer properly. But the proper answer is, Yes, you can do it. You can clean up your act—if you see that it's important enough.

So try to nurture that sense of its importance. After all, we live for the sake of happiness. Everything we do is for the sake of pleasure, so let's make it a pure pleasure, a pure happiness, a pure bliss that involves no harm, no feeding at all.