

Responsible Happiness

November 10, 2018

Focus your attention on the process of breathing in the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? There's the passage of the air through the nose. There's the movement of the abdomen, the movement of the chest. Focus less on the air and more on the movement of the body. It may be subtle, but it's there. In fact, the more you get to know the process of breathing, the more you realize there's an energy flow that not only goes through the stomach and the chest but through all the nervous system. To whatever extent you can sense that, focus there. And then ask yourself if it's pleasant. Does it feel good? Does it feel nourishing?

If the in-breath is too short, you feel like you're not getting your full ration of breathing energy. If it's too long, it becomes tight towards the end. The same when you're breathing out. If your out-breath is too short, you feel there's more that needs to get out of the body that's not getting out. If it's too long, it begins to feel like you're squeezing the last little bit of toothpaste out of the tube. So try to find the point of just right. How long is just right coming in? How long is just right going out? At first, there may be a sense of simply "just right," nothing particularly impressive, but if the mind can settle in there and not keep jumping around, the sense of well-being grows deeper.

So see how steadily you can stay with the breath. Any other thoughts that come in right now into the mind, you're not responsible for them. You don't have to worry about them. You don't have to check them out to see whether they're good or bad or indifferent. You're giving the mind a chance just to be in the present moment and find a sense of well-being in the present moment in a way that's totally harmless.

There are lots of ways you can find pleasure in the present moment that actually are harmful. They develop bad qualities in your mind, or they can have a bad impact on other people, or both. But here we want to find a sense of well-being, a sense of happiness, a sense of ease, pleasure that's going to be long-lasting, and one of the aspects of happiness that's long-lasting is that it has to be harmless. If it's harmful, it's not going to last.

The happiness you're trying to develop inside here is one that doesn't need to take anything away from anyone else, which means that your true well-being here doesn't conflict with anyone else's true well-being. So it's a good place to base your happiness. Otherwise, the mind goes out and it's hungry for all kinds of things,

and when it's really hungry, it doesn't really care about the long-term consequences of its actions. So in the Buddha's terms, we're looking for a happiness that's skillful and blameless, one that doesn't develop bad qualities in the mind, doesn't impose unfairly on other people.

When the mind has a sense of well-being right now, then even the idea of acting in an unskillful way becomes very unattractive. So you're changing the balance of power in the mind. The mind is like a committee, as I've said many times. We have all kinds of members in there. The members you're proud of. The members you're ashamed of. The members that are thoughtful. The members that are thoughtless. You might think of them as all the different desires you've had in the past, and they've gotten lodged in there and they'll speak up again every now and then.

So of course, it's going to be a real cacophony in there at times. You just take that as simply a fact. Don't get worked up about it. Just realize that you've got to strengthen the skillful members, and this is one of the ways you do it: by developing a harmless sense of well-being here in the present moment. The mind is less hungry for whatever little pleasure may come its way. It can step back and look at the long-term consequences of going for particular pleasures. As the Buddha said, there's nothing wrong with pleasure in and of itself. He says he doesn't reject pleasures that are in accordance with the Dhamma, but that means pleasures that are harmless.

Certain pleasures, though, come only when you act in unskillful ways, or when you try to hold onto them you're going to do unskillful things: Those are the ones you've got to watch out for. But here you're developing good qualities of the mind, both in the doing of the meditation and in the results that come out of it. You have to exercise your mindfulness, your ability to keep something in mind. You exercise your alertness, your ability to watch what's actually going on right here, right now—and particularly, what are you doing right here, right now? And what are the results that you're getting?

You're also developing another quality the Buddha calls ardency. You want to do this well. After all, it is your happiness, it is your well-being that's at stake here. But not only yours, but also, through the ways you act, the well-being of others is going to be affected as well.

The more you have control over your own mind, then the better you're going to be able to handle things like aging, illness, and death as they inevitably come. We see people who have trouble handling these things, and they're a burden to everybody else, especially at the point where nobody else can do anything for them

yet it still is obvious that they're suffering. It really tears at the heart: the people you want to help but you can't help them.

And we don't want to be like that. We want to be the sort of people who can handle whatever comes up. That way, we're less of a burden on ourselves and less of a burden on others. And one of the ways to develop that ability is to get the mind more mindful, more alert, more skilled in finding a sense of well-being even in the midst of difficulties: aging, illness, death, and any other difficulties there may be. We want to be the kind of people who can look after ourselves with ease, as the phrase said just now.

So this is one of the ways in which you look after yourself, providing happiness, but also making it easier to look after yourself by strengthening the good members of the mind, the members that don't want to harm anybody else but still want true happiness. The Buddha never said that the quest for happiness was a bad thing. Sometimes you hear it said that you shouldn't be selfish, looking after your own happiness, but what that comes down to is that people start looking for happiness by trying to make other people happy and end up trying to straighten out other people. And you know where that tends to lead. Straightening out works much better when we're trying to straighten ourselves out.

As the Buddha said, we can develop good qualities in the mind. We develop wisdom, we develop compassion, purity in our minds, by looking for happiness in skillful ways.

The wisdom comes from realizing that happiness isn't just going to come floating our way. It's going to have to come from our actions. Also, long-term is possible, and long-term is better than short-term. It's basic common sense, but a lot of us don't live our lives using much common sense.

The compassion comes from realizing that if our happiness harms anybody else, it's not going to last and so it won't be long-term. So we have to take other people's well-being into consideration.

And then purity: Keep looking at your actions to make sure that they really are in line with your values. In other words, it's not enough just to mean well, but you have to look at when you act in body, speech, or mind, to see what the real results of those actions are going to be, and then you learn from your mistakes. If you didn't mean to cause any harm but you ended up causing harm, you've got to go back and look at your intention, look at what you did to see what you can change. That, the Buddha said, is how purity gets developed. It doesn't mean that you have a mind that's totally free of any unworthy thoughts, simply that you

know which ones to act on and which ones not to, and *how* to act on them. That's a skill we can all develop.

So the quest for happiness is not necessarily selfish. If you do it with wisdom and heedfulness—in other words, thinking about the long-term—it can actually become a happiness that spreads around. After all, we're not going to become happy meditating and then being mean and stingy in daily life. Part of the practice is also being generous and being virtuous. This is the kind of happiness that helps to erase boundaries. The happiness that comes from material gain and status and praise and physical pleasures creates boundaries, because when you gain something, someone else has to lose, or vice versa. But here everybody wins. You're generous, virtuous, well settled inside, and that's a happiness that doesn't have to have any boundaries.

That's why we try to develop those attitudes of unlimited goodwill, because the happiness we're looking for is an expression of unlimited goodwill, and it starts with simple things like this: learning how to get your mind under control with a sense of well-being so that the mind doesn't chafe at the control. That skill can actually strengthen the good members of your committee inside so that they take over.

So when there's a sense of well-being with the breath, allow it to permeate the body. Allow it to permeate the mind, because it's all for the good.