

Happiness – Yours & Others'

July 22, 2020

Many of us, when we were brought up, picked up a message from our parents that our role in life was to make them happy. And from there, we drew a larger conclusion: that we shouldn't be happy unless we're making other people happy.

Now, there are two ways you can respond to that conclusion. One is to rebel against it and go in the opposite direction, thinking, "Why should other people be happy if they're not making me happy? Especially if I don't get any joy in trying to make them happy." You decide you don't care about making other people happy. You don't care about their happiness at all. And that's an unskillful reaction. The other unskillful reaction is simply to accept the idea that, "Yes, we do exist to make other people happy." That's what lies at the basis of a lot of Mahayana thinking, which is a domesticated version of Buddhism: You have to put any idea of your own happiness aside and devote yourself to the happiness of others. You refuse to gain awakening until you've brought everybody else to awakening first. But, I must admit, when I hear that, I think about people in a movie theater on fire. People are trying to get out. There are two people in the door, and one says, "You go first." And the other says, "No, you go first." And, as a result, neither gets out. The other people in the theater don't get out. Everybody dies in the fire.

The Buddha's way was to go out the door. But in going out the door, he didn't trample on people. He actually showed them where the door was, and showed them the way out.

That's the responsible attitude toward happiness. In other words, there's nothing wrong with the pursuit of happiness, because as we say in that chant that we repeat so often, "There is no one in charge." There's no one to tell us that we have to sacrifice our happiness or our well-being for some larger purpose.

But even though there's no person in charge, still karma's in charge. What you do to pursue your happiness is going to determine whether your happiness is long-term or short-term. If you're wise, you'll go for the long-term. And one of the principles of long-term happiness is that you can't harm other people in your search for it. Now, what does that mean?

Harming doesn't mean displeasing. After all, look at the Buddha's life—the fact that he left home was displeasing to his wife, to his father, and to his stepmother. Harming also doesn't mean causing inconvenience, because there are times when people are set on an unskillful course of action, and you're not harming them if you get in their way. "Harming," as the Buddha said, means two

things. One is trying to give rise to passion, aversion, and delusion in other people. The other is to get them to break the precepts. In other words, you take seriously the principle that each of us is suffering because of our own actions, and each of us will find happiness because of our own actions.

But that doesn't mean we just leave others to fend for themselves. We're happy to help. We're going to do our best, one, not to get in the way of their skillful intentions. And two, if there's anything we can do to encourage them in the right direction, we're happy to do it. Think of the Buddha's statements about how you would repay your parents, how you make them happy: not by entertaining them, not by giving them money. He said even if you were to carry them around on your shoulders and wipe up their urine and excrement as they left those things on your shoulders, you wouldn't fully repay your parents at all. You repay them by teaching your stingy parents to be generous, your unvirtuous parents to be virtuous, and your parents who don't meditate, how to meditate. Now, parents don't want to be taught by their children, which means you have to go about this in a very diplomatic way. But the best way to make your parents happy is to encourage them to be generous, to encourage them to be virtuous, to encourage them to train their minds. This is the best way you can make anybody happy. And that doesn't have to eat into your own pursuit of happiness because if you're going to be influential in getting others to behave well, you have to behave well yourself.

Here again, we follow the Buddha's example. He didn't teach until he had found what he was looking for, and knew that what he'd found was really good, worth sharing with others. One of the meanings of "Tathagata"—one who has become true or become authentic—is that he acts in line with his words, and he speaks in line with his actions. So in your desire to pursue the true happiness of others, you've got to pursue your own true happiness first, because it's only when words are backed up by actions that they have power.

At the same time, you have to remember that when you practice, you're developing merit. You have something good to share with others who have died. The better your practice, the more merit you have to share. That's another way you can help your parents and friends when they're really in need.

So as you're sitting here meditating, remind yourself it's not just for you that you're doing this. And you're not the only one who's going to benefit. You're trying to see if what the Buddha taught was true, that we gain happiness by training the mind. And you do it the only way you can do it: by training your own mind, by putting his teachings to the test. This, of course, puts you to the test as well, because if you're going to give a fair evaluation of the Dhamma, you have to give the Dhamma a fair test. And you have to develop the dhamma of

mindfulness, alertness, all your powers of observation to make sure that your actions actually do fall in line with what the Buddha taught. This is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. It starts out as a gift to yourself, and then it spreads out to be a gift to others. And it's not a gift only after you've gained awakening, because all along the way, you're acting in ways that are harmless and you have good things to share.

When you're generous, people are happy to receive the fruits of your generosity. When you observe the precepts, people can learn to trust you. They have a sense that they're safe around you. And when you train the mind to bring some control over its greed, aversion, and delusion, these things don't go prowling around and biting the neighbors. So in your own pursuit of happiness, you're helping others. It's good to remember that when the meditation seems like a lonely process. Even though you get advice from others, it's something you have to do on your own,

But the fact that others are giving advice, and are setting a good example, means that they have goodwill for you. They would be happy to see you succeed. So in this way, we're all in this together. It may be a very select group, a very small group, but to know that there are people in the world who are practicing the Dhamma, and they have goodwill for everybody, and they take joy in seeing other people practice: Let that thought encourage you in your own pursuit of happiness.