

The Search for Happiness

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Ajaan Suwat once commented on how there are people who don't like the Buddha's emphasis on suffering and stress. They complain that it's pessimistic. But, he went on to say, look at people's behavior: Everybody's looking for happiness, which shows that they're suffering. So the Buddha's providing us with something we need and are already looking for: guidance in our search for happiness.

I was teaching up in Canada a couple years back and happened to mention that the Buddha saw the search for happiness as a good thing. Someone in the audience came up afterwards, saying that she was surprised to hear that—and I was surprised that she was surprised. But when you look around and listen, you find a lot of people who say that the main thing that's keeping us from being happy is the fact that we're searching for happiness. If we gave up on the search, they say, happiness would come.

It's like a cat. If you go chasing after a cat, the cat runs away. If you sit down, make a lap, the cat will come. But that's playing games with happiness. Maybe one of the reasons we think we should be playing games with happiness is that it sounds like it's fun. Happiness should be fun. If you search for happiness, we think, you're taking it too seriously, and that takes some of the joy out of happiness.

There's part of the mind that likes the element of serendipity in happiness, that it can come without your having to do anything to earn it. But that may be because we've searched for happiness in the past and haven't been satisfied. If we feel that happiness is playing games with us, we might as well play games with it. But suppose there were a path that really led to an unending happiness. Wouldn't that change things?

That's precisely what the Buddha offers. He was the sort of person who did take happiness seriously. After all, it's what we all want most in life. Instead of taking a cavalier attitude toward it, he wanted to study it, understand it, think it through, explore, to try different approaches. We admire this attitude in people who, say, are scientists or researchers. But somehow, when we apply that same approach to happiness, it seems cold.

But here again, look at the reward. Happiness is what we want more than anything else. Often scientists are pursuing things that are total dead ends, questions that don't solve any real problems even when arrive at the answers. But

the Buddha found that the path to true happiness is not a dead end. It goes there and it delivers. So it's not that your search for happiness is getting in the way of happiness, it's simply that you're searching in the wrong way. There's a right way to do it—and it doesn't have to be a selfish endeavor. In fact, if your search for happiness is a selfish endeavor, you're not going to find it.

As the Buddha said, to do it right, you have to develop wisdom and discernment, along with compassion and purity. After all, wisdom begins with the question: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" There are two value judgments right there. One is that the search for happiness is a good thing. The other is that long-term is possible, and it's better than short-term. There's wisdom also in the realization it's going to depend on your actions. This is why we have to be heedful, because our actions do make a difference.

And because our actions come from the mind, this is why we're here meditating. You have to meditate with a goal in mind. Here again, you get people who say that meditation is better when you have no goals. They pride themselves on the fact that they're doing it without any purpose in mind, without trying to accomplish anything. But that's an act of dishonesty. If you weren't hoping to get something out of it, why would you do it? If you think it's cool to say, "Hey, I'm beyond having a purpose like that," that's your purpose right there: to show that you're cool. So it's better to be honest: We're here for happiness.

Then we look at our actions. Here again, there's a resistance, because we want to have happiness without thinking too much about it, but the Buddha's saying that we have to think. In fact, in thinking about the actions leading to genuine happiness, we teach ourselves the right way to think.

For example, one of the actions that the Buddha says leads to happiness is generosity. He starts out by saying, "Give where you feel inspired," which emphasizes the freedom of generosity. But then he talks about how generosity can be practiced with relative levels of skill. Some motivations for generosity are higher than others. Some ways of giving are better than others. You give with respect; you give with a sense that something good will come of it. That's better than just tossing the gift away. If you think improving your motivation to be generous, you're more likely to get happiness out of it.

The same with the precepts: If you simply obey them, that's one thing. But if you see that you're living a relatively harmless life, that yields more joy in of the practice of virtue. You see that you're principled: that people could give you rewards for breaking the precepts but you wouldn't accept those rewards. That gives you a sense of self-esteem, a higher level of happiness.

Then, of course, there's goodwill. Here again we like to think of goodwill as a spontaneous goodness of the heart. But there are skillful and unskillful ways of developing goodwill. You want to think it through. The unskillful way is to say, "I expect everybody to be happy because I wish them to be happy." That's not going to happen. I remember after 9/11, one Buddhist teacher complained that his complacent Buddhist bubble had been burst, thinking that by spreading goodwill to everybody, everybody would be happy to have happiness. Well, there's nothing Buddhist about that attitude. As the Buddha said, you develop goodwill because it's good for you. As for whether other people are going to be happy or not, that ultimately lies with them. You just want to make sure you don't get in the way. If there's anything you can do to help, you're happy to help. But as to whether they're actually going to be happy, that's going to depend on their actions.

You have to think in these ways, think through what it means to be generous, think through what it means to be virtuous, think through what it means to have goodwill for all beings. Then you get more happiness out of these acts of merit. You realize they yield a higher level of happiness—not just more happiness, a higher level, because it's blameless, harmless.

And it teaches you skills. As you come to the breath meditation when you're practicing generosity, virtue, and goodwill, it's a lot easier to deal with the difficulties you're going to face. A greater sense of your own competence will see you through a lot of those difficulties. You've learned that if you talk to yourself in the right way about how you do your practice of generosity, virtue, and goodwill, it's going to make a difference. That teaches you to talk to yourself in a good way as you meditate, with directed thought and evaluation.

Some people think that when start practicing concentration, they have to do something brand new call directed thought and evaluation. Actually it's what the mind's been doing all the time as it talks to itself: You direct your thoughts to a topic and then you pass an evaluation on it. When we practice concentration, we're taking this habit of the mind, which we've been doing willy-nilly, and using it for a happier purpose.

So it's good to be open and aboveboard about the fact that, yes, you are searching for happiness. And be very clear about how the fact that you're searching is not getting in the way. The only thing getting in the way is a lack of skill in the search, and that's something that can be overcome. You do it by being more observant, more reflective.

After all, this is *your* happiness we're talking about. If anything deserves using extra powers of observation, the search for happiness certainly does. If anything

deserves reflection on your actions, as you try to figure out what you're doing wrong so that you can learn how to do it right, the search for happiness does.

The more open you are about the fact that, yes, you are searching for happiness, the more skillful the search is going to be. The more skillful the search, the more rewarding the outcome.