

Virtue & Right View

October 23, 2020

Try to find a sense of well-being as you breathe right here. Take a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Then ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good?”

The long breathing is to air out the body, to make you sensitive to how the breathing feels, and to give you an anchor. Then, as you settle down a little bit more, you get more sensitive to what the body needs. Does it need to be energized right now? Okay, try long in and short out. Does it need to relax? Try short in and long out, or any combination of short, long, fast, slow, heavy, light that seems to be just right. You want to give the mind a place where it can settle down and find a source of well-being inside.

We live in a world that doesn't go the way we want it to often, but we *can* learn how to control our minds. That's an important distinction. Sometimes you hear it said that just wanting anything to be different from the way it is in *any* way at all is craving, is bad—but the Buddha never taught that.

Some things you accept; other things you don't. The things you don't accept are unskillful thoughts in the mind: thoughts that create suffering now, or even worse—create suffering down the line.

There are some forms of practice, the Buddha said, that can be pleasant now but will cause long-term suffering, so watch out for those. There are those that are difficult now but will create well-being further down the line. With those, he said you should be willing to put aside your preferences for pleasure right now, and put up with the difficulty, because the wise person looks for the long term. The greater sense of well-being you have here, right now, the easier it is to look objectively at the things outside where you're looking for happiness.

The Buddha identifies five means of happiness that are all very subject to loss. In some cases, the loss may be unpreventable. In other cases, though, it can be prevented. And it turns out that the areas where the loss can be prevented are the areas where the loss is most serious. Now, the world may not see things in that way. The three areas that are not all that serious, the Buddha said, are loss in terms of your wealth, loss in terms of your health, and loss in terms of your relatives.

Relatives here come in two sorts: There are your blood relatives and then there are what the Buddha calls relatives through trust, *vissasa parama-ñati*: Your foremost relatives, he said, are the people you trust.

Now, these three things are area where we look for support in our search for happiness, but they can let us down. But that, the Buddha says, is not that serious. It is possible still to find happiness without wealth. Even when you're not healthy, it's possible to train the mind so that it can be strong in the face of illness. And even if you lose relatives or people you trust, it is possible to learn how to trust *yourself*.

And that's where the other two areas come in. Two other ways of finding happiness are through *virtue* and through *right view*. Virtue is our willingness to say No to any thoughts in the mind that are unskillful—that would get us to do unskillful things. And right view is realizing the importance of our actions.

The two go together. If you didn't see the importance of your actions, it would be hard to talk yourself into being virtuous. But as the Buddha said, if you see that good and bad actions have good and bad results, and that they come from the quality of the mind—the quality of the *intention* that goes into the action, that's what determines whether they're good or bad—then you're more likely to act on virtuous intentions.

And if you realize that the results of actions don't last only for this lifetime but also go into future lifetimes, then you're going to be a lot more careful about what you do, and say, and think—and in that way you leave yourself protected.

So, if you see any impulses to do or say things that are going to be harmful, you know how to say No, and you're convinced of the importance of saying No. You don't say No only when you're in a good mood, and then throw the precepts out the window when you're in a bad mood. You can't let your moods determine what's valuable and what's not valuable in life. You have to have a strong sense of values, and that's what the right view is for.

Right view is matter of how you talk to yourself about what's worth doing, what's not worth doing. The things you may want to do that are going to cause trouble: You know how to talk yourself out of doing them. The things that you don't like doing that will lead to happiness: You can talk yourself into doing them.

The way the mind talks to itself is really important. And one of the lessons you've got to keep reminding yourself is that your really important possessions are your virtue and your right

view. These, of course, are part of the path. Right view is the first factor in the path. Virtue covers three of the central factors.

You may wonder why the Buddha didn't include concentration in here, too. It follows on right view; once there's right view, there should be right resolve, and from right resolve comes right concentration. But for people who don't have strong powers of concentration, it's still possible to hold on to right view and to your virtue.

These things actually come under the heading of conviction. When we talk in terms of the strengths and the faculties, you're convinced of the Buddha's awakening. What does it mean to be convinced of his awakening? You're convinced, one, that he did it through his own actions. And, two, he learned a lot about the power of human action as part of his awakening—that it is possible through your actions to make the difference between whether you're going to suffer or not.

If you really are convinced of that principle, then you're going to have virtues that the Buddha said are *pleasing to the noble ones*: virtues that you don't break, virtues that you aren't "spotted" or "torn," in the words of the Canon—virtues that are solid; virtues that you follow not for the sake of being proud of yourself, but because you know that, for the sake of your true happiness, you *need* to follow them.

Now, of these five sources of happiness, as I said, three of them can be lost in ways that you have no control over. If your health is going to go, there are some cases where you can make the body healthier through medicine or exercise, but there are other cases where you've got a disease that, no matter what the medicine is, it's not going to cure it.

The same with your wealth: You can try your best to make sure you maintain your wealth, but there can be circumstances where suddenly it just goes. If there were social collapse right now, all the money we have in banks would be useless.

As for relatives, they have minds of their own. And they, too, are subject to aging, illness, and death, just like we are. So there are times when you have no control over losing them.

But you do have control over your views and your virtue. And yet, so often we abandon control to our moods. Today you feel like being virtuous; tomorrow you say, "I'm tired of this." But what right does your mood have to dictate things like that?

The same for your views: You don't want your views to be skewed by your moods. You have to realize that regardless of your moods, there are certain things that are true.

We were talking today about how the principle of karma is not always fair. Well, the Buddha didn't design the principle of karma. This is not a designer Buddhism. He *discovered* these truths, that this is the way things act. And it was because he was willing to submit to the way things act that he was able to manipulate cause and effect so that he could gain awakening.

So there's a certain element that we have to submit to, especially in understanding the principles of cause and effect. We may not like them, but this is the way things are. This is the way things act. Still, we can *use* these principles. It requires some patience, because sometimes our actions give immediate results and sometimes they don't give results for a long, long, time.

Sometimes we do a lot of good things and we don't seem to be getting good results. It may be because we've got some old karma from the past that we can't remember at all. It may seem wrong that we're still held responsible for things we can't even remember—but that's the way cause and effect work.

So you have to put aside your impatience, put aside your moods, and just say, "Okay, how can I learn how to live with these principles in a way that would really work for my true long term well-being? And how can I maintain my virtue? How can I maintain my right views?"

This is one area where determination really is appropriate. Sometimes we hear, especially from Thailand, that you can make a determination and it's like a prayer. Part of the confusion is that when Christianity went into Thailand, they took the word for determination—*adhitthana*—and they used that for the word for prayer. That got everybody all confused.

Genuine determination is when you make up your mind you want to *do* something good, and you want to stick to that determination. You can't determine, "May my wealth not go away, may my health not go away, may my relatives be all safe, may my relatives all have right view." You can't determine that. But you can determine, "May I not lose my virtue, may I not lose my right views." Because you lose these things only through your own choices—and you have to realize how serious that would be.

You could still have your wealth, your health, and your relatives and be able to find all kinds of happiness with them, but if there's no right view, and if there's no virtue, or if these are spotty, they come and go, then the way you look for happiness—using your wealth, using your health, trying to depend on your relatives—could come back and destroy you.

So realize the seriousness of determining on virtue, determining on right view. And how important it is that you're not going to let *any* incidents in the world change your attitude toward these things. You're going to protect them at all cost.

Just as the Buddha said a mother would defend with her life her only child, in the same way you should defend your goodwill. Well, goodwill is a part of right view, so defend right view with your life, defend your virtue with your life, because they're more important than your life. They're for your long-term welfare and happiness, and that term *long-term* means not just for this lifetime.

So take the large view. We're living with the results of many past actions. We're trying to plant the seeds for happiness now and on into the future. Some of the seeds may sprout right now, some of them may take a while, but we have to learn patience—that we're okay with that.

Think of your patience as being large like the Earth, as broad as the River Ganges, as free from marks as space is—in other words, no matter what happens, it doesn't hang on in the mind. This is one of our big problems: the way we talk to ourselves about this injustice, that injustice, how this person mistreated me, and that person mistreated me. It's as if things are scribbled all over our minds. No wonder it's hard to see anything clearly.

So try to make your mind like space. No matter what you write on space, there's nothing left. The ink doesn't stay there. When you can develop that kind of attitude, then your determination is going to have a chance for success.