

## *“May I Be Happy”*

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I once asked Ajaan Fuang, “What do you need to believe in order to practice meditation?”

He said, “All you need to believe is the principal of action, karma.”

Most of us in the West, when we get to the teaching on karma, freeze up. We start thinking about all the bad things we did in the past. We’re afraid that all those things are going to come back at us. This is why there’s so much resistance to this teaching.

But if we look more carefully at how the Buddha taught karma, we’ll see that he actually tries to allay those fears.

When he introduces the topic of karma, he doesn’t talk about the bad things you’ve done in the past; he talks about good things. The first topic he mentions in connection with karma is generosity. Generosity, he says, is something real. It’s a good thing to be generous. He even has you use it as a topic of focused contemplation. When things are going dry in your meditation and everything seems to come to a stop, remind yourself of the ways you’ve been generous in the past.

The other topic the Buddha uses to introduce the topic of karma is gratitude. Think of all the people who have helped you in the past—the ones who volunteered to help without you’re doing something nice to them first. They helped you out of the goodness of their hearts. That sort of action is worth appreciating, worth emulating. You realize how much you benefited when you were fed by them or clothed by them or taught or helped in whatever way they did. And this, combined with the principle of generosity, should inspire you to do good things for other people, to pass on the help.

So when the Buddha teaches karma, he doesn’t start with the negative side; he starts with the positive side to emphasize that that’s what you want to make the most of. As for things you’ve done in the past that were unskillful, he advises you not to get tied up in remorse about them. Remind yourself that they really were unskillful, but you can’t go back and undo what you did. Tying yourself up in knots with thoughts of guilt or remorse, however, is not going to help either. What you should do is simply resolve that you’re not going to make those mistakes again in the future. That’s all that any human being can be asked to do.

In order to strengthen that resolve, you develop thoughts of good will. This in itself is a form of generosity, and it leads to more generosity in the future. The

more good will you feel for yourself and for the people around you, the easier it is to be generous, to be helpful both to yourself and to them.

So you simply start with that thought: “May I be happy,” like we chanted just now.

I was once talking with one of the nuns from Chithurst and happened to mention that we also chanted both in English and Pāli here at the monastery.

And she said, “Oh, how do you chant?”

I said, “*Aham sukhito homi... May I be happy.*”

She practically fell out of her chair laughing. In her monastery they translate it in a much more refined way: ‘May I abide in well-being.’ I must admit I prefer ‘May I be happy. It’s straightforward and gets right to the point; it’s an unabashed thought. You’re not embarrassed to say, ‘May I be happy’ —because when you think about where true happiness comes from, it’s not a selfish thing. What you’re actually saying is, ‘May I find the resources inside to develop true happiness.’ If you can make yourself happy by being generous and developing thoughts of gratitude, it’s a perfectly harmless thing. If you can make yourself happy by thinking thoughts of good will for yourself and other people, that’s a harmless thing. So start with yourself and then spread thoughts of good will to people you love, people who are close to your heart, and then gradually spread it out to people you like but you don’t know so well, and then to people you’re more or less neutral about.

Then spread thoughts of good will to people you don’t like. Remind yourself that if everyone in the world could find true happiness within, if they could find happiness by being generous and developing thoughts of gratitude, the world would be a much better place; those horrible people that you really don’t like would be a lot less horrible if they could be truly happy.

Then spread thoughts of good will to people you don’t even know —and not just people: living beings of all kinds on levels you can see, on levels you can’t see. Be generous with your good will. If you find yourself resisting thoughts of good will for any particular person or being, ask yourself, ‘Why would I wish for anyone to suffer? What would I gain from it?’ Learn to reason yourself out of any stinginess with regard to your good will.

This requires digging down into a lot of your presuppositions. So when we’re doing this practice, we’re not spreading out nice pink clouds of thought to smother the world. We have to dig up places where you resist the idea of wanting someone to be happy. You can pose the question, ‘Why would I resist that idea? What would I gain from their suffering? What good would be served by their suffering?’ When you can dig out your resentments and realize that they’re not really worth carrying around, you can extend the gift of forgiveness to that person. Forgiveness doesn’t here mean that you’re going to forget the

wrong done by other people or you're going to love them; simply that you're not going to pose them any danger. You're not going to try to get revenge. That right there takes a huge load off the mind. The resentments you carry around really do burden you; they really do irritate the mind. So it's best to learn how to let them go.

When the Buddha teaches how to deal with thoughts of hatred, he gives the analogy of a man going through the desert—hot, thirsty and tired. He comes across a little bit of water but, the problem is, the water is in a cow's footprint; not much water at all. He knows that if he scoops his hand down to get the water, the water will become muddy and he wouldn't be able to drink it. So he very carefully has to bring his lips down to the water and slurp it up.

The water here stands for what little goodness those other people may have. It may not be much, but you look for it because you need it. You treat it with care. Notice that your position is not that of a judge passing judgment on other people. You're hot and thirsty and tired and you need to see their goodness to nourish your own heart. If you look around the human race and all you see is all the selfishness and cruelty, your heart begins to shrivel and dry. You decide that you don't want to help anyone, for everyone seems unworthy of help. In that way your own goodness dies. So you've got to view the goodness of other people as water for your own heart.

Now, in the case where you look at people, and you look and look and look and you can't find any goodness at all, then you've got to feel compassion for them because they're creating a really bad future for themselves. Again the image is that as you're walking across the desert, you find someone who's sick and incapacitated far from any human habitation. Your immediate reaction is, 'This person needs help,' and you do what you can to get that person to help. Even if you're not in a position to offer help, you do wish for that person to end his suffering, even when the suffering is self-inflicted. And as often happens when people inflict suffering on themselves, they have a little extra left to spare so they inflict suffering on other people. It would be a lot better if they learned how to stop suffering in this way. If they could learn how to find true happiness inside, they would stop inflicting the suffering on others.

So when you spread thoughts of good will, it's not just like a good will sandwich spread. The purpose here is to examine your thoughts about happiness, realizing that in this world where action really is important, actions of generosity, good will, and gratitude are especially important. They enable us to live. They're our water as we try to get through this desert alive.

So learn to focus on your good actions; *caganussati*, recollection of the times you've been generous, *sīlanussati*, recollection of times you've stuck to your principles even in the face of the temptation to throw them out. Reflect on these

things and remember that your strength lies there. The happiness that comes from these reflections is not like the happiness that comes from recollecting a movie you once saw or a relationship you once had, because those recollections can turn very bitter over time, especially when you realize that the relationship is ended. Whatever the happiness was, it's gone and you can't bring it back. The memory of that kind of happiness burns. But the memory of the happiness of when you were good or the times when people really helped you or were good to you out of the goodness of their hearts, is like cool, refreshing water. It provides a happiness that doesn't end. Each time you reflect on it, it's a happy thought.

And it helps to make you want to be more generous, to stick to your principles whenever the going gets tough. This is why we think thoughts of good will. They make it easier for us to be generous, to stick to our principles to be harmless. As you think about these things, they bring nourishment to the mind. When the mind is nourished, it can settle down more easily here in the present moment because you've changed your attitude about happiness. You're willing to look for your happiness here because it's the ideal kind of happiness: clear-headed, harmless, and lasting.

Just sitting here breathing, the way you relate to your breath makes all the difference in the world. You can make yourself miserable; you can put yourself in a straightjacket—but you don't have to. Think of the breath coming in and out all the pores of your body. Think of the breath energy untangling; work up from your toes, up through your feet, your legs, up through your torso. You can learn to relate to the breath energy in new and different ways. You find that the less suffering you cause yourself here—and it's totally needless suffering—the easier it is to be good to other people.

So think about these things. Develop the right attitude toward happiness, the right attitude to the principle of karma. Karma can be a means to happiness if you understand how to use it properly—the principle of action and result. It all comes down to developing good qualities of the mind. You notice that certain ways of thinking are skillful. They take burdens off the mind. They help nourish the mind. So encourage those ways of thinking, because if you don't, you'll develop other habits in the mind. It may seem artificial to focus on these habits, but then the construction of the present moment is always something artificial.

There's a large element of intention in every experience, so you might as well intend to do it well. Construct healthy and nourishing thoughts. You have it within your power to do so. So try to make the most of that opportunity.