

Unparadoxical Happiness

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Psychologists studying happiness have found what they think is a paradox. People want to be happy. They want to maximize their happiness. It only makes sense that when you find yourself being happy about something, you want to look into it to figure out why, so that you can learn how to maintain that happiness or find it again. What they found, though, is that when people look at what exactly made them happy, it doesn't stand up to scrutiny. As soon as the mystery around it gets dissolved, they see that there's not much there.

There are two ways you can look at this. One is that it's a genuine paradox that we want to understand happiness and yet the more we try to understand, the less happiness we have, in which case the message would be: Don't try to understand your happiness. That's one way of understanding the issue, and in fact that's the way psychologists understand it.

The other way of understanding it, of course, is that you're looking in the wrong place for happiness. The reason that happiness doesn't bear scrutiny is because it's not genuine happiness. That's the Buddha's understanding.

He started out his teaching career talking about how being committed to finding happiness in sensual pleasures is not happiness. It's stress. There's pain there because that happiness is dependent on conditions, which means, on the one hand, that it's not going to last. Conditions change. And two, because it's dependent on conditions, you have put a lot of effort into it. The more you try to maintain that kind of happiness, the more stress you find yourself entangled in.

So the Buddha's question was: Is there a happiness that's not dependent on conditions? Is there a happiness that's deathless? It was in quest of that happiness that he left home. He realized that staying at home, with all the responsibilities of a household life, he wouldn't be able to find that kind of happiness. He wouldn't have the time, wouldn't have that peace of mind to really look into himself. More than that, there was no one to show him the way. It's a lot easier now that we have the path set out for us, because he did actually find that kind of happiness. It's a happiness that's not a feeling. It's simply the happiness there in the unconditioned. That's what we're practicing for.

Part of our path includes a type of happiness that is conditioned, but it's a lot less stressful than sensual passion. It's the happiness, the pleasure and ease, that comes when the mind is concentrated, when it's focused on one thing and can stay there. As the Buddha said, there is no happiness other than peace. Whatever

happiness we get from things outside comes because the mind is able to rest with them for a moment. But what always happens is it gets forced to move on. It's like a person loitering on a street who wants to stand in front of the Tiffany store windows. A policeman sees him, grows suspicious about him, and forces him to move on. In the same way, we can't stay with that kind of happiness. We keep getting pushed away.

But the happiness that come from a concentrated mind is something that doesn't depend on anybody else, doesn't dependent on outside conditions. In the beginning, it depends somewhat on outside conditions because you haven't mastered the process enough. You have to go to a quiet place with as few impingements or responsibilities as possible, so that you can work directly on the skill. But as the skill becomes more and more second nature, you find you can carry that sense of ease, that sense of well-being, fullness, and refreshment, into any situation. It goes deep down inside. As the Buddha said, once you gain a sense of ease from a concentrated mind, a sense of ease from, say, staying with the breath, you can allow that ease to permeate and suffuse the whole body. When you get really skilled at it, you can tap into it whenever you need it.

This, he says, is not only a more independent kind of happiness, but also blameless. You're not taking anything away from anyone else at all. That old saw about the path of the arahant being selfish: What's selfish about a happiness that doesn't deprive anybody of anything? If you could go out and concentrate people's minds for them, that would be a noble activity, but you can't. What you *can* do is get into a concentrated mind state yourself and be an example to other people. People around you will pick up a sense of ease, a sense of peace, from the peace that you develop in your mind, the sense of happiness that comes when you can stay longer and longer and longer in one place and realize that you don't have to get pushed out. No matter what happens, no matter how loud the noises around you are, how insistent outside stimuli maybe, they don't destroy the breath. They don't destroy your ability to stay with the breath.

This is a kind of happiness that comes with practice. So it's worth working on. It's a happiness that does withstand scrutiny.

Yet even this is not the ultimate. It's not the happiness the Buddha went in quest for. He found teachers who taught him concentration, all the way to the state of nothingness and the state of neither perception nor non-perception, yet he realized that that wasn't what he wanted. But when he realized that he could use that kind of happiness as part of the path, that's when he finally discovered a happiness that's not constrained by space or time or anything at all. There's no place there. There's no time there. A happiness that's totally independent of

conditions. There's nothing you have to do for it. You clear away the obstructions and there it is. No matter how much you look at it, you can't find anything lacking in that happiness. This is the one happiness that does withstand scrutiny, the one happiness that repays all your efforts to attain and understand it.

So that paradox of the psychologists is not really paradox at all. It's simply an important lesson that the happiness of the world, the happiness in sensual pleasures, doesn't withstand scrutiny, which means you have to look someplace else for genuine happiness. And the Buddha shows you where to look. To see the happiness he taught requires effort, takes time, but when you attain it, you find that it's more than worth the time and effort you put into it. As Ajaan Lee once said, the affairs of the world are hard because they require so much effort to maintain, but nibbāna is easy because it doesn't require any effort at all. Once you get there, it's there, period. You don't have to maintain it. There's nothing you have to do for it at all. Ajaan Mun even said that it lies beyond the four noble truths, because each of the four noble truths has a duty. Even the cessation of suffering is something you have to realize. But once it's realized, there's nothing more that needs to be done.