

No Happiness Other than Peace

October 9, 2009

N'atthi santi param sukham, there is no happiness other than peace. This saying of the Buddha has an interesting history. Over time, the translation turned from “there is no happiness *other* than peace” to “there is no happiness *higher* than peace,” which totally changes the meaning. Perhaps people thought that there are other kinds of happiness not related to peace at all—the happiness of winning out over somebody else, the happiness of sensual desire, even the happiness that goes along with being angry. People like to be angry. There’s a certain amount of pleasure with that and all the other defilements, and there’s certainly no peace there.

But if you look carefully, you’ll see that even in the defilements there is a moment of rest, a moment of certainty, a moment of settling in, even if just for a second. Sometimes it lasts longer. After all, the Buddha did recognize that it’s possible to get into very strong states of absorption based on greed, aversion, or delusion. They’re wrong concentration but they are absorption, and there’s an element of peace, an element of stillness there. Whatever pleasure those things contain, it lies in those moments of peace, those moments of certainty. Of course, the problem with those kinds of peace is that they don’t last very long and they’re very toxic, because they can lead to all sorts of disturbance afterwards.

This is why the Buddha said we have to search for the highest peace together with the highest happiness. They go together. This is why the search for the highest happiness is not a selfish thing. The Buddha honors our desire for true happiness. Everywhere he says that this path is for happiness, and we should take our desire for happiness seriously. It’s not something we should be ashamed of. We don’t have to say, “I’ll delay my own happiness to make other people happy first.” That’s not the Buddha’s approach at all. He says that if you take your search for happiness seriously and find a happiness that really is reliable, it’ll take you to peace—to the highest peace where you’re not harming anyone anywhere.

In the course of developing that happiness, we have to develop really honorable qualities of mind. There’s the wisdom that sees that long-term happiness is better than short-term, and that it has to depend on your actions. That’s why the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom or discernment is, “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The

wisdom lies in the long-term, and it lies in the fact that you recognize you've got to *do* something for that happiness to come about.

Then there's the compassion that comes as a corollary of that. You realize that if your peace is going to last, if your happiness is going to last, it has to depend on not causing any harm to anybody else. Otherwise, they'll try to destroy it. So you have to take their desire for peace, their desire for happiness into consideration.

There's a passage where the Buddha tells King Pasenadi that you can search the whole world over and you'll find no one you love more than yourself. But just as you have fierce love for yourself, everyone else has the same fierce love for themselves. So if your happiness gets in the way of their fierce love of themselves, they're not going to stand for it. There'd be no peace.

So you have to look for a happiness that doesn't depend on harming anybody. That requires purity in your actions: the purity of genuinely causing no harm. You have to look very carefully at your actions. What are you doing that could be causing harm to yourself, harm to other people? It's certainly not wise if you're doing that. And although there may be general instructions about which kinds of actions are harmful and which ones are not, there are a lot of little details that can't be put in books, that you have to learn to observe for yourself.

So you have to watch each action by watching your intention first, checking that out to see if it's an honorable intention, and then watching your action as you're doing it to see what immediate results it's producing. If it's producing harmful results, stop. If not, you can continue. After you're done, look at the long-term results. If you find out only afterwards that you've caused harm, then you have to make up your mind not to engage in that kind of action ever again or act on that kind of intention ever again. Then go talk it over with someone whose insight you trust.

This is an important part of the Buddha's instruction on what we now call self-knowledge. For him, self-knowledge doesn't mean knowing yourself as a *thing*, it means knowing yourself in terms of *actions*. And he provides a context in which you can do this effectively. This is why he set up the monastic Sangha, so that we'd have a group of people who are following the Buddha's teachings, and who anybody can come and consult with to ask, "I did this, and I got these results. What should I do?"

In other words, you don't have to reinvent the Dharma wheel every time you find you've made a mistake. You can tap into the knowledge and experience of people who are further along on the path.

This is how we develop purity. As the Buddha told Rahula, all those in the past who purified their thoughts, words, and deeds did it in this way. All those in the

future who are going to purify their thoughts, words, and deeds will do it this way. And all of those at present who are purifying their thoughts, words, and deeds do it this way.

What this means is that if you take your search for happiness seriously, you have to develop wisdom, compassion, and purity: the virtues traditionally ascribed to the Buddha himself. This is part of his skill as a teacher to show that if you take your happiness seriously, you have to develop good qualities of mind. It's not a purely hedonistic pursuit, nor are you simply learning how to indulge in pleasure in a sophisticated way. You realize that happiness is something important, and if it really is important, then you have to develop important qualities of mind.

As we do this, we find that our actions become less and less harmful; there's less and less cause for conflict. On the one hand, that makes it easier for us to practice. On the other hand, it makes the world a better place to be in general—and in particular, in terms of our thoughts, the world of our own mind becomes better, too, because, of course, our actions and words come out of our thoughts. This is where the Buddha finds the source of conflict to begin with.

There's a sutta where Sakka, the king of the devas, comes down to see the Buddha with some questions to ask him. It's an interesting sutta. It starts out with Sakka trying to get the Buddha in the right mood to talk with a deva king. So he sends one of his musicians. It's one of the nicer pieces of humor in the Pali Canon. The musician comes to the Buddha, he sings a song about the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, and lust. The song is directed to his ladylove, telling her how he loves her as much as the arahants love the Dhamma, cataloging her body parts, the parts he loves as much as the arahants love the Dhamma.

You can imagine the Buddha smiling to himself with the thought, "This is a totally deluded little deva here." But at the end of the song, he compliments the deva on having written a song where the melody goes well with words, and the words go well with the melody. After all, the Buddha had been a prince, a connoisseur of music, so he would know.

Then Sakka comes and asks the Buddha questions about conflict. I don't know if you know the story, but Indian mythology has a story very similar to one in Greek mythology. There's a story of how the devas fought the asuras for control of heaven and finally beat the asuras—just as the Greek gods had to fight the Titans. So Sakka, having had to wage war even when he was a deva king, was very concerned about conflict. "What are the roots of conflict?" he asks. The Buddha traces them back—through acquisition, desire, all the way back to *papañca*, or objectification, the type of thinking where you turn yourself into an object and then turn everybody else into an object.

As an object or being, you need a place to stay in the world, a place to take the food that will keep you going as a being. So you have to stake out your territory in the world—whether it’s physical territory, material territory, emotional territory, even your views. This leads to conflict. After all, as you move into the world, you run into other people, other beings who are immersed in the project of objectifying themselves, and they may not like the role that you assign to them. There’s conflict right there.

Psychologists talk a lot about objectification, how we turn other people into objects, and the Buddha’s insight was that we start out by turning *ourselves* into objects first. To stop the process, we first have to change the way we view ourselves. This is why the path to peace and calm—*upasama*, as they say in the suttas—starts with right view. Instead of looking at your experience in terms of yourself and other people or the world, i.e., objects in the world, you look at things simply in terms of the four noble truths—as stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation—terms that don’t refer to people at all. But each of these terms carries a skill.

In the case of stress, you have to comprehend it, which means knowing it so thoroughly, seeing it so thoroughly, that you finally get dispassionate toward it. In the case of the origination of stress, you abandon it, which means not continuing to do it anymore. The cessation of stress is to be witnessed, or verified, and the path is to be developed.

Each of the four noble truths has three levels of knowledge: knowing the truth, knowing the duty or skill appropriate to the truths, and then knowing that you’ve completed the duty, mastered the skill. Three times four gives you twelve aspects of the knowledge of awakening, which is what the Dhamma wheel stands for. Back in India when they combined sets of variables and list all the possible combinations, they would call it a wheel. So this is the Dhamma wheel.

It’s interesting that the first sermon is the only place in the whole Canon where the Buddha mentions this. It’s his most important teaching. You’d think it would be all over the Canon. But it’s just in the context of this one talk. There are a few reflections on the topic in a few other places, but this is the only place where he sets it out fully and clearly. But it’s a teaching we have to keep in mind all the time.

This is why he has us divide our experience into the four noble truths: so that we can know what to do with whatever comes up. If we still think in terms of selves and the world, our duty is to stake out our part of the world that we claim for the self, and then to defend it. But here he has us look at things in other terms, with other duties. For instance, with stress: If you think of yourself as a self, you

don't like having the stress in yourself. You try to get rid of it. But getting rid of it is not the duty under the four truths. The duty is to comprehend it, to know it. That requires you to develop the path—with the mind in good strong concentration, mindful and alert, imbued with right effort—so that you can develop the skill needed to comprehend stress. Because each of the tasks is actually a skill. This is why the path is a gradual path, because it takes a while to develop the skills. After all, nibbana is very, very subtle. Even though it's immediately present, and the possibility of reaching it is theoretically available at any moment in time, our powers of perception are not up to it, our skills are not skillful enough, not subtle enough.

So we have to raise the subtlety of our mind as we develop these skills until finally we reach the level where we can have that sudden awakening into the ultimate peace. The image the Buddha gives is of the continental shelf off of India: a gradual, gradual slope out and then, all of a sudden, a sharp drop. The reason the path has to be both gradual and sudden is because nibbana is both present and subtle.

So we have to gradually develop the subtlety of our minds so that we can then see, "Oh, it's right here." As the Buddha said, it's something you touch with your body, see with your body. The synesthesia there is interesting. There's no more division among the six senses. There's just an awareness that's outside of the six senses, but it's known right where you had your sense of the body.

And that, he says, is the ultimate peace. It causes no harm to anyone. It's a dimension of no objectification at all. Even the question of what happens to you when you reach that doesn't occur anymore, because the "you" that you created as an object, or the world that you created as a place for objects, applies only as far as the six senses. The concept of there being nothing, no objects, also applies only as far as the six senses. When you move beyond the six senses, those concepts have no more meaning.

But right now we still live in the six senses. We're still objectifying. So sometimes the Buddha would answer in an objectifying way the kinds of questions he ordinarily would not answer, such as, "What was I in the past? What am I going to be in the future?" Ordinarily he would put those questions aside. Yet there are occasional passages in the Canon where he talks to people about what they were in the past. But he speaks in ways that are designed to give rise to the sense of dispassion that comes with comprehension, i.e., you see that this really is a lot of suffering. Going through this process of samsara-ing is pretty miserable.

You've probably heard the comparison of all the water in the oceans as being less than the tears you've shed. Well, there's a sutta where the comparison is even more dramatic. He says that all the blood you've lost by having your head cut off is greater than the water in the oceans. The water in the ocean is less than the tears you've shed, and it's less than the blood you've lost.

He goes through all the different ways you might have lost blood by having your head cut off—for example, when you were a cow, the number of times you've been a cow and have your cow's head cut off—the amount of blood you've lost from just your cow lives is still greater than all the water in the oceans. The number of times you've been a sheep and had your sheep's head cut off: The blood you lost then is greater than all the water in the oceans. And so on through different beings, different kinds of animals.

Then he goes into the times that you were a thief and had your head cut off, the times you were an adulterer or adulteress and had your head cut off. It's an awful lot of blood and an awful lot of miserable existences. Just thinking about the fact that you've been equipped with a cow's head that many times, or a sheep's head that many times, is overwhelmingly dismaying.

So he answers the question of what were you in a way that really does lead to dispassion, a comprehension of suffering—this is enough. The sutta states that all the monks who listened to that particular Dhamma talk became arahants right away—because they saw that in objectifying yourself, these are the kinds of objects you come up with. You become a thief, you become a highway robber, you become an adulterer or adulteress, you become cows, sheep, goats, what not. There are constant opportunities to objectify yourself in really awful ways. There's constant conflict.

The Buddha's insight is that if you learn how to stop objectifying yourself, then you don't turn other people into objects. You can live with them with a lot greater peace. And once you find the peace of nibbana, you've found a happiness that doesn't require that anybody suffer at all.

So this is where we find the ultimate happiness, because it's also the ultimate peace. It's a gift not only to ourselves but also to everyone else, which is why this is such a good path to be on. There is some stress on this path, there are some difficulties in following this path; we haven't totally gotten to the place where we're not placing a burden on other people; and we have to make the effort to be as unburdensome as possible. The simple fact that we're here with a body that needs to be fed, clothed, sheltered, given medicine does place a weight on the world.

So there's no real reason why we should want to come back, even if we have altruistic reasons, for it still imposes a weight, a burden on other people just to maintain this body. Which means that a happiness that doesn't require that kind of weight or that kind of burden is a very precious thing. And the path leading to that happiness and the peace that comes with it is precious as well.