Seriously Happy

August 5, 2025

We all want happiness. We want it so much that you think that people would be more systematic about trying to find it. In other words, trying to get good advice. Looking around to see who might be qualified to give that advice. But for the most part, people just go by their feelings. Random thoughts come into the mind. Something that occurs to you in childhood can take over the whole rest of your life. The Buddha’s recommendation is that you find somebody who really knows. Those who really know, of course, are those who have attained Awakening. And you go and you ask them, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The question in and of itself, as the Buddha said, is the beginning of discernment. And it shows some discernment in itself. You realize that happiness is going to have to come from your actions. That long-term is possible. And it’s better than short-term. That requires that you step back a little bit from your immediate wants and desires. Step back from your hunger for instant gratification. Because that hunger can cloud your vision. And Barbie will say, “Who cares about long-term? I want what I want right now.” There was a question in yesterday’s Zoom group from someone who said she knows what’s for her long-term welfare and happiness. But when she sits down at night, all she wants to do is scroll through her iPad, and something inside her will realize, “OK, this is not going to lead to long-term welfare and happiness.” And there’s another voice that comes up and says, “So what? That’s what you’ve got to watch out for. That’s what you’ve got to train.” This is one of the reasons why we practice meditation, is to give some immediate gratification. There has to be a sense of well-being that comes as you settle down. Breathe comfortably. Allow the comfortable breath to spread through the body. Or whatever topic of meditation that attracts you right now. It’s one of the reasons why it’s good to have a stable of practices, or a whole repertoire. Or something that the mind is happy to do tonight. It may not be happy to do it tomorrow morning. But you can change the flavor, change the appearance of the food. Put something that’s related to the dharma. You’ve got a certain amount of satisfaction that way. Then you can start stepping back and saying, “OK, how about long-term?” This is where the wisdom comes in. Those awakened people that you ask, I’ll tell you, just start with them. Start with generosity, virtue, and meditation. In other words, look for happiness in ways that are harmless. Because if you want your happiness to last, you don’t want it to harm anybody. Because they’ll try to destroy it. Look for happiness in ways that you’re sharing with other people. And they’ll be happy to see you happy. So start with generosity and your virtue. And development of meditation will take a longer time. And it won’t be so immediately obvious. The meditation that the Buddha recommends right at the beginning is the development of the Brahma Paharas. Developing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity for all beings. These are basically expressions of goodwill. Goodwill itself is a general wish for happiness. Compassion is what goodwill feels when it sees people who actually are suffering. You want them to be able to escape from their suffering. Empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when it sees people who are already happy. And those three are expressed with me. May all beings be happy. May they be released from suffering. May they not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained. Equanimity, though, is more a statement of fact. All beings are the owners of their actions. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir. Years back, I was teaching in France, and a group had a chanting book which had passages in Pali and French translations. And they made the mistake of expressing equanimity as saying, “May all beings be the owners of their actions.” Which, when you think about it, sounds like a curse. Equanimity is more a statement of fact. It’s the reality check. Because even though you wish for all beings to be happy, you have to realize you can’t make them happy. They’re going to have to act in ways that are skillful themselves. And that’s something you can’t force on anybody. This is why when the Buddha was asked, “Would all beings ever attain awakening?” He wouldn’t answer. Half the world wouldn’t answer. A third of the world wouldn’t answer. Because he had no control over what beings would choose to do. He did know the path that they would have to follow, but he couldn’t make beings follow the path, and he couldn’t follow it for them. And the same principle applies to us. We can see that all beings are going to reap happiness or reap pain because of their actions. But we can’t make them change their actions. Sometimes the more you force them, the more recalcitrant they become, the more resistant and stubborn they become. But you do have to make sure that you take care of your own intention towards other beings. And you take this as an opportunity to learn about happiness. A sad part of it is seeing that happiness comes from actions. And as you look at what you’re doing, to see what actually causes true happiness, this is where the teachings of the Bodhidatta Rahula come in. You actually see what the results are, and then you can learn from those results. Again, you’re taking your happiness seriously. And the Buddha says, “Look at what you’re planning to do, and if you see that it’s going to cause any affliction, you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any affliction, you act on it. While you’re acting on it, if you see any affliction coming up, you stop. If you see no affliction, you continue. Again, you look at the long-term results. And if you see that you did cause affliction, you go and talk it over with someone who knows more than you do about the path. And then you resolve not to repeat your mistake. If you don’t see that you’ve caused any harm, you take joy in the fact that you’re progressing in your path. I know a lot of people are saying,”That’s an awful lot of thought putting into your actions.” But if you’re serious about your happiness, this is what you’ve got to do. Again, a lot of people are too lazy to really want happiness. You’ve got to think about the Buddha. He was someone who sincerely wanted happiness. And look what he had to do. He had to train himself. He had to try different things. Try different paths. And when he saw that they were dead ends, he’d move on to another path. And if that was a dead end, move on to another path. He never gave up. He’s an example of someone who really wanted happiness. So you have to realize it’s going to take work. Again, if it’s long-term, you’re willing to put in whatever energy, whatever sacrifices you need to make. It’s one of the lessons you learn about happiness. You learn about the gradations of happiness. It’s good for a while, then changes. Happiness, it stays longer. This reinforces the lessons you’ve learned about action and its relationship to happiness. You realize you have to be responsible. In other words, in your search for happiness, you have to realize that it will have some other consequences as well, affecting both you and other people. And we want to be really careful about what those consequences are. And then as you’re developing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, you can contemplate what you’re doing and the people for whom you’re wishing happiness. This is where empathetic joy is really instructive. It’s of the various brahmavaras, often the hardest. You feel good about yourself for having goodwill. You feel good about yourself for having compassion. You feel good about empathetic joy, you realize there’s some people out there who’ve got much better good fortune than you, in worldly ways or in the ways of the dharma. And all of a sudden you don’t feel so large and compassionate anymore. Sometimes you feel reduced by their happiness. So you’ve got to look into that. Why should their happiness make you feel like anything less? And you also look at the ways in which people make themselves happy. This is a really good lesson in seeing that there are some very foolish ways of being happy out there. People gain good fortune and they squander it. And in squandering it, they often harm other people. So this should confirm you in your desire that you want a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody and it’s going to last. In other words, you’re looking for the deathless. That’s the only secure happiness there is. Because when people gain other forms of happiness, they gain power, they have beauty, they have wealth. Often it goes through their heads. They abuse their power, they abuse their beauty, they abuse their wealth. They abuse the people around them. So this is what happens when you aim for happiness that’s not that last. For happiness that’s unsafe. So even though the practice of generosity, virtue, and the brahmaviharas may seem like just the very beginning steps, if you really focus on doing them well, you gain a lot of wisdom. It teaches you lessons about where you’re going to look for happiness, what kind of happiness you’re going to allow yourself to be satisfied with. Because that’s the big problem. The Buddha himself said he had to overcome by his desire to do whatever needed to be done, and not to satisfy himself even with skillful qualities. He had to be discontent with his skillfulness. As long as it hadn’t reached the ultimate level, he wouldn’t rest. He would appreciate what he had gained. As the Buddha often says, you have to enjoy the results of your good actions, but the enjoyment should be what should make you complacent. It should be food for further progress. Or as the Chan Fuang would say, you have to reinvest your goodness. The good things that come from your good actions are when you use the strength you gain, the well-being you gain, to practice higher and higher. So if you’re looking for happiness, if you’re looking for the short term, if that’s what you’re thinking about, you’re looking in the wrong place. There are things you have to give up, there are things that you have to… strong virtues you have to develop, the virtue of being responsible, the virtue of being heedful. It’s work. And a part of the mind says, “Oh no, more work.” You have to go and look at it. Reason with it. Argue with it. And find joy in the practice. In other words, you don’t tell yourself you have to wait till the very end for the happiness to come. There are ways of finding happiness all along the way. But you have to monitor them. Adjust them, so you don’t get satisfied there. It’s like knowing that you’re going to a really good dinner. Now to get to that dinner, it’s going to require strength, so you have to have some food to take with you. Now the food isn’t the best food, but it’s enough to keep you going. That’s the encouragement you give to yourself. Think of the Buddhist style of teaching. He said he would urge, rouse, encourage, and instruct. One part information, three parts encouragement. So learn how to give yourself pep talks. Keep your energy up. And whatever difficulties you have, remember the Buddhist image of the spears. He said if you could make a deal, that you’d be speared every morning with a hundred spears. At noon, another hundred spears. In the evening, another hundred spears. All together, three hundred spears every day for a hundred years. With no time out for weekends or holidays. But you’d be guaranteed at the end of a hundred years that you’d gain your first taste of the Dhamma. In other words, the Dhamma-I. The Buddha said if you could actually have a deal like that, it would be good to take. And when you finally realize the Dhamma, you wouldn’t think that it had been done with pain. The joy that comes from finding the ultimate happiness, and realizing that it is true. Would blot out all the suffering of those spears. It’s that impressive. So use thoughts like these to encourage yourself. To remind yourself that the quest for true happiness is really worthwhile, whatever sacrifices have to be made. And the world that tells you that true happiness is not possible, you’ve got to learn to ignore it. In your own mind, you’ve got to learn how to ignore them too. Because they don’t know what they’re talking about.

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