

The Intelligent Heart

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There's a book about Buddhism I saw one time called *The Intelligent Heart*. And that concept is a really good summary of why we respect the Buddha. You've probably noticed that we bow down to the Buddha a lot around here, show him a lot of respect. That's because he teaches us how to show respect to something really worthy of respect within ourselves, which is our desire for true happiness. That desire is an affair of the heart.

And he also teaches us to be intelligent about it. "Intelligence" here comes under the framework of seeing things in terms of cause and effect. In other words, you don't simply go by your desires or your urges in your search for happiness. You look to see which actions really do give rise to true happiness and then you adjust your behavior accordingly.

You might say that the Buddha has us take our happiness seriously—not in the sense of being grim about it, but you would think that with something so important to the heart we would look carefully at what really causes happiness and what doesn't. Yet so many people in the world simply go along with the crowd. They see other people looking for happiness in wealth, relationships, and status, and they figure that that must be where it is. They don't really look very carefully to see: Are these people really happy? You want to look through the PR, look beneath the surface, to see who out there really is a good example of how you find happiness, how you find genuine happiness.

That, in fact, is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom begins by going and finding people who look like they really know—in the Buddha's terms, contemplatives: people who have been contemplating their life and living a very deliberate life, living their lives wisely. Then you ask them: What can I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What can I do that would lead to my long-term suffering and harm? This question is wise not only because you're asking the right people, but also because you see that your happiness depends on your actions, that long-term is possible, and that long-term is better than short-term.

There's another principle that the Buddha teaches: that if you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, you should be willing to abandon the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one. It sounds like a no-brainer, but most of us are no-brainers when it comes to affairs of happiness. We have to learn how to put our head and our heart together and realize that happiness doesn't mean simply piling up as many pleasures as you can, because

there are pleasures there that get in the way of a really deeper happiness. You have to make a choice. There are some things you have to give up. It's like playing chess. If you want to win the game, you have to be willing to lose a fair number of your pieces. If you want to win at chess and keep all your pieces at the same time, you'll never get anywhere. So part of the wisdom lies in seeing which things have to be given up.

There are many things we don't want to give up because they give immediate gratification, and we're loath to give them up for the sake of what seems uncertain down the line. But you have to realize that many forms of immediate gratification are very uncertain in the long-run. They bring a lot of pain and suffering in their wake—either because they're so short-lived and you want to keep grabbing after them even as they're slipping away, or because you do a lot of unskillful things in order to get them to begin with. So you end up losing in both ways. You've got the karma and memory of the unskillful actions you did, together with the memory of the past pleasure that's gone away.

Wisdom is when you realize that long-term happiness—the happiness that doesn't harm you, doesn't harm anybody else—is worth a lot of sacrifice. But it's not just sacrifice in the sense of having to go without, go without, and then finally hope for a reward at the end. The meditation we're doing here—getting the mind to settle down, being at ease with the breath, finding a sense of well-being inside: That's our food that keeps us going on the path.

We find that simply by focusing on the breath in a way that's comfortable, allows the mind to settle down and feel at home in the present moment. That right there is a huge, huge thing. There are so many people who can't do even that, either out of regret for what they've done in the past, or just a simple unwillingness to look carefully at what's going on in the present moment. They're always running around, running around, running around, and having nothing to show for it really. So it's an important investment to take the time to get to know your breath, get to know the body in the present moment, in a way that allows you to settle down.

When the mind settles down, it has a greater sense of spaciousness. That sense of spaciousness is something you can't buy. So we work on this and we find that it enables us to give up a lot of other pleasures that we ordinarily would think that we couldn't do without.

So the training of the mind, as the Buddha said, is the primary requisite for a happiness that lasts: both because it gives you the strength to give up the other pleasures that would leave wounds on the mind, and because it allows you to see more clearly into what your own mind is doing.

When the mind feels an urge to go off someplace else, what's causing that? All too often we don't look carefully at it. We just go, go, go. But why? What's pushing us out of the present moment? If you can develop a sense of ease with the breath, it will put you in a position where you can see that happening, and you begin to understand: Oh, it's really very tiny things. And given the sense of space and well-being that comes with staying with the breath, you're less likely to get pushed off by those little, tiny things.

What it comes down to, as the Buddha said—what he calls the difference between a wise person and a fool—is that the wise person sees that true happiness has to come from training the mind. The pleasures you get when the mind is not trained can actually work to your own detriment, and you can get very foolish around them. You end up turning those pleasures into pain.

A much more useful skill is learning how to turn pain into pleasure. In other words, sitting here with a sense of well-being that comes from the breath, even though it may not be totally filling everything in your body and mind, at least gives you a toehold in the present moment. Then you can look at the things that otherwise would push you out, either pains in the body or uncomfortable thoughts that come up in the mind. When you develop this sense of space around them, you can watch them, you can step back from them, learn about where they're coming from, see how the mind creates a lot of suffering around them—and how it can learn not to do that.

We begin with a simple exercise with the breathing. Sit down and take a survey of your body. If you haven't been meditating before, you'll probably find that there's a pain here, a little ache there, this is not comfortable, that feels tense, that feels tight. But instead of running away from those things, you decide to let your awareness settle down around them. Let the breath gently work on them, and you find that you can dissolve a lot of that stuff away simply by being patient with it and watching it. Even though that's not the end of suffering, you gain more confidence that you can handle these things. You don't have to get pushed out by the pain. And because you're not pushed out by the pain, you don't go thirsting after little, minor pleasures. You learn to develop appreciation for the well-being of a spacious heart, a spacious mind—the kind of mind that's not pushed around by things, that it doesn't get blown away either by pleasure or pain.

The Buddha said that one of the most important skills that you can develop is to be not overpowered by pleasure, not overpowered by pain. The mind develops a solidity that enables it to stay right here and not get pushed around. Ordinarily, we would say, well, it doesn't matter about being overwhelmed by pleasure, that's a good thing. But, no, it's not. You get forgetful and get sloppy, and when you get

sloppy, then the pain comes in, and then you're totally at a loss. It's the simple fact that the mind gets pushed around by these things: That right there involves a lot of stress, a lot of strain. So you want to develop the ability to be here solidly as these things can wash around you, but they don't penetrate. There's a great sense of well-being that comes from that. You develop a sense that you can trust yourself, and that ability to trust yourself is priceless. That, too, is a kind of happiness that can only come by appreciating it and not letting yourself get pushed around by lesser pleasures and lesser pains.

So this is the nature of the intelligent heart that goes for the big prize: a true happiness that's totally unconditioned. What we've talked about here, the pleasure of concentration, is conditioned, but it's a lot stronger and a lot more reliable than the ordinary pleasures that are advertised at us all the time. And it provides the opening for us to see deeper into the mind, to see something that's not conditioned: another dimension entirely, outside of space and time in every sense. That's where the ultimate happiness lies, the ultimate well-being.

It may seem far away but it's really not. It's going to be found right here where you're aware of your body, where you have this awareness in the present moment. So try to cultivate your appreciation of the well-being that comes from this spacious awareness right here. In and of itself, it's a much greater pleasure than the ordinary pleasures around us, and in terms of its effect, it gives us access to something even bigger.

This is what comes with taking the issue of happiness seriously and sticking with your determination to not settle for anything less than a happiness that's totally reliable—and enables you to become totally reliable as well.