

## *Mature Happiness*

*April 2, 2016*

I was asked a strange question today. The question was, “The reason people are not happy is because they’re looking for happiness, right? If they didn’t look for happiness, they might be happy”—the implication being if you gave up hope for a better happiness than what you had, then you’d be content with what you’d got.

Which is a pretty miserable teaching. It wipes out all possibility of hope. And it suggests that our efforts to find happiness are totally doomed.

But that’s not the Buddha’s approach at all. One of the reasons we bow down to him so much is because he teaches us to have respect for something worthy of respect inside ourselves: our desire for true happiness. And he teaches us to find it in ways that are also worthy of respect.

You look at the different factors of the path: They’re all honorable things: virtue, concentration, discernment. They’re noble qualities of mind.

And the happiness we’re looking for is a happiness that’s mature. It requires mature wisdom to attain it.

As the Buddha said, wisdom starts with the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?” The wisdom there is, one, seeing that it’s up to your actions: in other words, happiness isn’t just going to come floating by. And two, long-term is possible and it’s better than short-term. It sounds pretty obvious, but most people don’t think about long-term at all. If they think about it, they dismiss it pretty quickly, going for the short-term instead.

And as the Buddha said, the way to develop wisdom is not only to ask that question but also to ask it of the right people, people who’ve contemplated life and developed good qualities within themselves in order to find happiness. In other words, you look for people who you’re convinced are reliable.

It’s ironic: Happiness is such a big issue in life, and yet the way a lot of people go about it is pretty haphazard. They see somebody who’s rich or famous, powerful: they think, “Well that must be where happiness lies.” And they don’t look carefully enough to see: Are those people really happy? When you really look carefully at the people who are rich and famous and wealthy in our society, you wonder. They may have an easier time of things than most of us, in some ways at least, but that’s not really the recipe for happiness.

So you look for the right people and you ask the right question, “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?” And then you think about long-term. One of the qualities of long-term happiness is that it not create suffering for other people. Because if it creates suffering for other

people—after all they love themselves and they won't be willing to give up their happiness so that you can have yours—it means they'll probably try to destroy your happiness if it depends on harming them. So from wisdom comes compassion.

And then from compassion comes a quality called purity. You actually check your actions for the sake of happiness—your thoughts, your words, and deeds—to see whether they actually cause harm or not. First, look at what you expect will come about from what you're planning to do. After all, your actions do make the difference. You're acting for a purpose one way or another, so be clear about what it is. What do you expect out of your actions? What do you expect to accomplish? And what will the side effects be? If you expect that something you do or say or think is going to cause harm, don't do it. If there's going to be harm to other people or harm to yourself or harm to both, you just don't do it. Find some way of talking yourself out of doing it.

If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead and do it. And then, while you're doing it, watch for the results that may come up. Because in some cases the results are pretty immediate.

This is in line with the Buddha's principle that the results of our actions can come either immediately or over time or both. So you check to see: What are the immediate results? If you see that you actually are causing harm, you stop. If you don't see any harm, go ahead with what you're doing.

Then when you're done, contemplate the long-term results of that action. If you see that in spite of your expectations and in spite of what you saw earlier, you actually did cause harm, then you resolve not to repeat that mistake and you go talk it over with someone who's more advanced on the path.

But if you don't see that you created any harm, take pride in the fact that you're advancing on the path, and keep on training in this way.

That, the Buddha said, is how we purify our actions: by examining them again and again and again like that. You might say that that requires an awful lot of attention. Well, if anything in the world is worthy of a lot of attention, it's your actions. You're the one responsible and you're the one who's going to be reaping the results, so you want to be very careful about what you do and say and think. And learn from your mistakes.

So by searching for happiness in this way, we're developing wisdom and compassion and purity. These are all good qualities. And the happiness that results is solid.

And you want to bring those qualities into your meditation. Because meditation is a very direct training in all three of them, raising them to a higher level. You begin by developing some wisdom and compassion and purity in your outside actions. It's interesting to note that when the Buddha first taught his son, these were the teachings he gave him. But then the teachings go from

outside actions into your actions of the mind. It's easier to see your outside actions and it's easier to see the harm of outside actions. But the training isn't complete until you take it inside, because the mind is the source of all these things.

This is another reason why we bow down to the Buddha and show him a lot of respect, because he showed us that our minds have a lot of power and we should respect that power. So we need to train them.

We develop mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind—in other words, remembering that you want to gain some control over your mind and remembering what you've learned about how to do it. And you want to look at the mind in the right way so that you can step back from it and see it with some objectivity.

To gain that place to step back, we start with something simple like the breath. It's right nearby. It doesn't have too many features but it can be adjusted. You can adjust it to be long or short, deep or shallow, cool or warm. Notice how the breathing affects your experience of the body here in the present moment.

And if you don't like the effect it's having, you can change it. This is right in line with those principles on purity. If something's not going well in the meditation, it can be the result either of past actions or your present actions. You can't go back and undo your past actions, but you can adjust your present actions.

Your present actions include the way you conceive the breath and where you're focusing, how you're focusing, and how much pressure you're putting on it. If you exert too much pressure, the Buddha said it's like holding a baby quail in your hand and squeezing it: It's going to die. Not enough pressure: It's like holding it so loosely that it flies away. So you've got to find just the right amount to keep you here but not to put undue pressure on your blood vessels or your nerves.

There are lots of ways you can approach being with the breath in the present moment. As you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing, you begin to see that your actions in the present moment have a lot of power: They can create a sense of full well-being right here, right now.

In fact, in the Buddha's analysis, even though we may have the results of some bad actions coming in from the past that are going to influence the present moment, the question of whether or not we're actually going to suffer from those results depends on our present actions. Which is good news. Otherwise, we'd just be stuck with whatever comes up from the past and we'd have no way out.

But the fact is that our experience of the present moment is a combination of the results of past actions, our present actions, and the results of our present

actions. The present actions are the ones that can make us suffer, or not, so those are the ones we want to focus on.

We're here with the breath so that we get comfortably into the present moment and know we're in the frame of the present moment. And that's when you begin to see the mind in the present moment.

As I said last night, it's like seeing the mind behind the scenes. Or seeing it "from the side," you might say. You go into a movie theater: Either you can sit in a chair facing the screen, and it's pretty easy to get involved very quickly in the story. Or you can sit on the side of the movie theater and look across it. What do you see? You see a beam of light flickering and colors flickering on the screen and you see a lot of people sitting in the theater, laughing or crying or whatever in response to those colors. And you begin to see that this is pretty ridiculous. It's just flashes of color.

In the same way, staying with the breath gives you that perspective on the mind in the present moment so you can begin to see what the mind does with the flickering of its thoughts. What it doing right now that's causing it undue burdens, undue stress? What can you do to stop?

So you're taking responsibility for your happiness. And you're learning how to look for your happiness in a mature way, a way that develops wisdom, compassion, purity, all the good qualities of the mind. And this is a way of looking for happiness that actually does get results.

The Buddha was not the sort of person who would say, "Well, I'll just content myself with what I've got." As he said, you can learn how to content yourself with your physical surroundings—because otherwise, if you get too worked up about everything's having to be "just so" outside, it actually weakens you—but you don't rest content with the internal qualities of your mind. If you find yourself thinking in ways that are getting in the way of true happiness, you can't rest content with those thoughts. Or even if you've developed some skill in learning how to take charge of your happiness, if you haven't gone to the very end, he keeps saying not to be content with where you are. There's better. Things can get really good.

So this idea that just making yourself content will be enough to make you happy: The Buddha would have had no use for it at all. True happiness is possible. As he said, it's a happiness that's deathless. No aging, no illness, no death, no sorrow, no lamentation, nothing to criticize from any angle. It's there. It's possible.

And it can be done through this path, your search for true happiness: your search to understand what suffering is, why you're causing it, and the realization that you can abandon the cause by developing good qualities in the mind and so bring suffering to an end. It's a very hopeful kind of teaching.

And it's not just an empty hope. Many people, reliable people, have

followed this path in the past and said Yes, it does work. And they're amazed at the results.

So if you haven't gotten to the point where you're amazed at the results of your practice, there's more, there's better. Maintain that hope because that's something really worth holding to.