

The Duties of Happiness

May 7, 2016

Focus on your breath. To see it clearly, you may want to take a couple good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths to notice where you feel the breathing process. Wherever it's most prominent, wherever it's easiest to focus your attention, settle your mind right there.

Now allow the breath to become comfortable. Notice that statement: *It is* a matter of allowing; but it's telling you something you should do. Yet it's also something that, at the same time, should be very comfortable right in the present moment, and you should have a sense of well-being as you do what you can. The Buddha's "should" are all based around the proposition that what we want, true happiness, is something we should not be embarrassed about. It's something we shouldn't feel ashamed about. It's a noble goal because true happiness is not just hedonistic, it's not selfish. It's something that requires noble qualities in the mind: things like wisdom, compassion, purity, discernment, and integrity. These are all good things.

As we stay with the breath and we get it comfortable like this, we're providing a safe space right here in the present moment where all the parts of the mind can come together. And particularly, the parts that we tend to identify with, the head and the heart, which often seem to be at cross purposes. You think about Freud's analysis of the mind. He said, on the one hand, that there's the id, which is just your basic raw desire for pleasure. And then there's the super ego, which tells you what you should and shouldn't be doing. And then you've got the ego in between, which is negotiating between these two. And the poor ego is faced with the fact that the shoulds of the super ego have very little to do with what's making you really happy. So there's always going to be a conflict.

But the Buddha's shoulds are different. Freud was raised in a religion where your true happiness was basically shoved off to the side, and lots of the duties placed on you had nothing to do with your happiness. But here the Buddha is recommending that you take on duties that are directly connected to your genuine well-being and your genuine happiness. In other words, there's not necessarily a conflict between your desire for happiness and the shoulds of his path.

The conflict that does exist comes from that fact that you have lots of members of your mind who have some pretty strange and narrow ideas of what happiness is. And you've got to train them. You've got to show them that the happiness they

propose is not the genuine article, but there is a way to find a true happiness. And to whatever extent they can be converted over to that goal, they're welcome to the safe space. Only the totally unreasonable members of the mind have to be pushed out. But you find that the extent to which you identify with those members is based on the fact that you don't really know them well, and you don't really have a good sense of what true happiness can be. This is why an essential part of the safe space here in the present moment is that it be very comfortable.

In the beginning it may not seem like much. You're simply breathing in and breathing out, and it feels fairly ordinary. But if you pay really careful attention to the breath, you can notice: At what point does the in breath start to feel uncomfortable? Well, stop. And then you can breathe out. At what point does the out breath feel uncomfortable? Well, stop. And then, in between, does it feel better for the breath to be heavy or light? Fast or slow? And how far should it go down in the body? And where is the boundary of the breath?

As you get to know the in-and-out breathing process, you begin to realize that there's an energy flow existing on many levels in the body, and it can fill the whole body. The more you can get all those different types of energy working together, with a sense of ease and well-being, then the stronger the pleasure—even a sense of rapture, fullness, refreshment—that comes from the breath.

So this does become a really good place to be. And the parts of the mind that want instant happiness can be convinced: Here's a way of experiencing pleasure very directly. The Pali word for pleasure, ease, happiness, well-being, bliss, is all the same word, *sukha*. *Sukha* can be experienced on fairly subtle levels, or much more blatant levels. What they all have in common is a sense of well-being, that it feels good to be here. So this pleasure makes the more difficult members of your mind more willing to talk, more willing to listen to reason, because the reason here is basically devoted to your well-being.

When the Buddha set forth his main teaching, the four noble truths, each of the truths entailed a duty. The duty in each case is designed to lead you to true happiness. In other words, you can take on the duties or not, as you want. The Buddha is saying, though, that if you want true happiness, then this is what you have to do. It's not that he designed the duties. These were things that he discovered in his own practice.

The first truth, stress or suffering, is something you should comprehend. Particularly, here, we're talking about stress and suffering in the mind, the stress and suffering that the mind inflicts on itself by hanging onto things, by feeding on things that are actually going to lead to more misery, sometimes on subtle levels, and sometimes on blatant levels. Our ordinary reaction to that kind of suffering is

that we don't want it. You sit down to meditate and you find you're feeling miserable. You want to get up and run away. But if you do that, you're never going to learn anything about those states of mind. You're never going to understand them. You have to be able to sit with them.

This is why we have the other truths. In other words, you look to see what's arising together with the suffering. And the Buddha said it's going to be craving in one form or another. Either sensual craving, the idea that you're fascinated with thinking about sensual pleasures; or what they call craving for becoming, in which you want to take on a particular identity in a particular world of experience; or craving for non-becoming, in which you don't like the identity you've got and you want to destroy it. These are the things that accompany your suffering, and these are the things that cause it. And we engage in these things out of ignorance. But if you can comprehend the suffering, you begin to see, at the same time, that there is this companion to suffering: the cause. And if you abandon the companion, the suffering goes away.

So this gives you encouragement that you're not just going to be sitting here with suffering all the time. Once you see the cause, you can let it go.

To do this, you develop the path—which starts with right view and ends with right concentration—to give you the strength to deal with these things. In other words, you've got this safe space here, and you can ask the right questions: What's causing the suffering? If we focus on the extent to which we're suffering because of things outside, things that other people did, we're asking the wrong questions. You have to ask yourself: What am I doing right now that's contributing to this? That's right view.

And the concentration, the mindfulness: These are qualities that enable us to stay here with a relative sense of well-being, so that we're not totally sucked into the suffering. We have a safe place to stay. We begin to notice that, when there's any kind of craving and we let go of it, there is, at least for the moment, a cessation of suffering.

You want to pay attention to that because it gets you more and more inclined to want to let go of other kinds of craving, too. As your concentration gets more and more solid, you're able to see even more subtle levels of craving that are causing subtler levels of suffering. You let them go as well.

So all these duties work together. They enable you to sit with the suffering and not feel like you're overwhelmed by it. You begin to understand. After all, understanding the suffering is the only way you get past it. And, as the Buddha said, to understand these things there are five steps.

First you want to see them arise. Second, you want to see them pass away. Say, for example, you've got a feeling of guilt or remorse about something you've done. It's not the case it's going to be there 24/7. It comes and goes. Even if you're having an hour where you're mainly preoccupied with remorse, it's not continuous. It'll come for a bit and then it will go, and then come back again, and it'll go. And so you ask yourself: When does it come? When does it go? That allows you to step back from it a bit so you're not totally sucked in. You're looking at the process.

Then, when it comes, you ask yourself: What's coming along with it? In particular, what makes the mind want to grab onto it? The Buddha calls this the allure. Even though there may be mind-states that we really don't like, there's a part of us that actually does like them. Remember, the mind is not a single, monolithic, thing. There are lots of parts, lots of voices, lots of opinions in there. When the sense of guilt comes, part of the mind actually likes it. And you want to see: What does it like? Does it feel like it's going to pay off the debt by inflicting more and more guilt?

That's one thing the mind does. The idea is that if we make ourselves suffer enough, then we'll repay whatever debt we feel that we're guilty for. But if you look at that idea, you realize that it doesn't really make any sense. A lot of these parts of the mind have their power because they stay in the shadows. And they're able to stay in the shadows because they keep saying, "Well, I can't be brought into the discussion because I'll be immediately pushed out." But if the discussion isn't held in a skillful way, and some of the voices refuse to participate, nothing gets resolved.

Here, though, we're creating a safe space where these different voices in the mind, these different members of the heart or the mind, can say their piece. It's interesting: In Buddhism, they use the word *citta* to mean both heart and mind. They don't divide it between heart and mind because all our mental processes are working for the same purpose: happiness. So when you've got the safe space, you can get the whole committee to sit down around the topic of what kind of happiness is genuine. That's when you can compare the allure of, say, the guilt or the remorse, with the drawbacks that you've seen: that at the very least, you weigh yourself down.

I mean, it's one thing to recognize you've made a mistake, but, as the Buddha said, remorse doesn't go back and change the past. It actually makes it harder to learn from your lessons in the past, to learn from your mistakes in the past, so that you don't repeat them in the future, because remorse and guilt usually lead you to not want to think about your mistakes. And if you don't think about them, how

can you avoid them the next time? There's nothing virtuous about feeling a lot of guilt. You learn to recognize a mistake, you make up your mind not to repeat it, and then the Buddha says, you extend thoughts of goodwill to yourself and all beings. Extend goodwill to all beings so that you don't mistreat them again. You extend goodwill to yourself to remind yourself that, okay, you're doing this for your own well-being. The fact that you've recognized a mistake is not meant to tear you down. It's actually meant to help you.

So these are some of the dialogues you can have as you see the drawbacks and compare them with the allure. You begin to see that the allure is not worth it, that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure. That's when you develop some dispassion for that particular mind state. When you develop dispassion, that's when you can let it go and you're freed from it.

Back in the Buddha's time, they felt that fire burned because it was clinging to fuel. This is why they had the image of the nibbana, which literally means the fire's gone out. It goes out because it lets go of the fuel. It's freed because it lets go. It's not that the fuel traps the fire. The fire is trapped by its own holding on. There's a message there, that you've been clinging to things that cause you to suffer. And it's not that they're holding you there. *You* are the one who's holding onto them. If you learn how to gain some dispassion for them, you let go, and then you're freed.

And what are you freed into? The Buddha said it's the ultimate happiness. That's at the end of the path, when you've taken care of all the members of the mind, and the mind gets more and more unified in its agreement that this is the way you want to find happiness, based on this path of virtue, concentration, and discernment, with concentration the big middle ground that gets the mind right here in the present moment with a sense of well-being. This is where the parts of the mind that tell you what you should and shouldn't be doing are telling you that you should work for true happiness, and where all the other parts of the mind learn what true happiness means. Everything comes together. The mind becomes a much more unified mind, with a lot less conflict inside.

So take some time to work on this safe ground, this safe space in the present moment where all the different parts of the mind can come to the table and their conflicts can be resolved. And, in their resolution, you find that a true happiness really is possible. What the Buddha said is true: There is a deathless happiness, and it comes from bringing the mind together like this. The heart and the mind, all their parts, they come together as one, and then they go beyond the oneness. But the sense of oneness, in the present moment, is where the dialogue can begin.