

## *Seriously Happy*

*May 11, 2018*

The Pali word *sukha* can be translated in a lot of ways. Its range covers everything from simple ease and pleasure to happiness, well-being, and bliss. The whole purpose of the teaching is to find true happiness—in other words, to take your desire for happiness seriously. You have to ask yourself, are the ways you're looking for happiness giving you true satisfaction? And if the answer is No, then you're ready to practice.

Now, part of the mind will say, “Yes, I'm satisfied. It's good enough for me,” then there's going to be a battle inside.” But you have to realize, when the Buddha's talking about the bad sides of certain kinds of pleasure, it's not because he's down on pleasure. It's simply because he wants you to raise your sights higher. He says that the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness—the things out of which we create our sense of self—have their pleasures and their pains. He says that it's because of their pleasures that we get stuck on them. It's because of their pains that we look for a way out. So when you find yourself missing a particular pleasure, you have to focus back on the drawbacks of that pleasure, which may seem harsh.

But again, are you serious about your happiness? Do you really want to be happy? As the Buddha said, it's through our experience of suffering or stress, *dukkha*, that we look for a way out. Like *sukha*, *dukkha* has lots of meanings: suffering, stress, pain. This is what motivates us and gives us the conviction to practice. So you have to learn how to focus on the downsides of your old friends—the pleasures you had once and that part of the mind would like to go back to again—and see that they don't really measure up. Sometimes this is hard when your meditation seems to be going nowhere. You feel that anything would be better than where you are right now.

There's a passage in the Canon where a monk is in the forest and his meditation is not going very well. Off in the distance he hears the sound of a village festival. He tells himself, “Oh, those people, they know how to find happiness.” A deva comes to see him and says, “Do you know how many people envy you, you here practicing? You're following the path that leads out. Most people in the world are following a path that doesn't lead anywhere in particular. Or if it does, it tends to lead down to unskillful things, and from unskillful things to unhappy consequences.” And so the monk comes to his senses.

It's interesting that there's a similar story in Ajaan Maha Boowa's account of his own practice. He was in the forest one night. Off in the distance he heard a village festival. And again, it was during a time when his own meditation was not going well. In this case, he doesn't say that a deva appeared to him. But he was able to come back to his senses, thinking about the people in the past, those who found true happiness: the Buddha; his noble disciples. They were noble not only in the fact that they did admirable things, but also in that they found a noble happiness—noble in the sense that it really was worth whatever effort went into gaining it.

So when you think of the happy people in the world, think of them. As for the unhappy people, you don't have to search very far. They're all around us. But there are lots of people who like to put a good face on things.

Years back, when I first came back to the States, Ajaan Suwat and I were riding in a plane coming back from Texas. The third guy in the row sized us up immediately. He could tell we were Buddhist monks. And before he even said Hi, he said, "You know, I don't have any suffering in my life." He probably heard that the Buddha talked about how life was suffering—although the Buddha never really said that life was suffering. But, at any rate, the guy started in about how he wasn't suffering. As he told us about his life, it sounded to me pretty miserable. He lived in Blythe, which was bad enough, out in the middle of the desert. He had a son who was in jail. He had a daughter who'd gotten involved with a junkie and had a cocaine kid but couldn't raise it. And so the grandparents had to raise it. The kid was very sickly. The man kept on insisting that he wasn't suffering at all. It's that kind of thinking that allows people to bear up with what they've got. But it also keeps them trapped.

We're on a path that releases us from the trap.

So when you think of the pleasures that pull you away, think of the peanut butter that we put in a Have-a-heart trap. It pulls you in and then zap: You're stuck. But the life of the practice is a life in which people are not stuck. This is a path in which we're not stuck. It's a path that leads out.

So it's through our memory of having suffered that we should try to keep nurturing our conviction that there really is a way out and this is it, so that we don't let ourselves get pulled back so easily by memories of old pleasures, old friends.

Ajaan Fuang would often say that your past pleasures, if they really were that good, would still be here. They wouldn't have left you. And as for the the sensual pleasures that we pine for, that we would really like to have in this lifetime, he says, "Remind yourself, that you've already had them in the past. That's why you long for them again. You want them back." Now, think about that. If you work

hard enough, you'll get them again, but then you'll lose them again. And you'll want them again. You'll do whatever you can to get them back again, and it doesn't end. That, he said—if you think about it—is enough to give rise to a sense of *samvega*, the desire to get out of this.

There's a similar reflection in the Canon. The Buddha said that if you see someone who's enjoying all kinds of fame and wealth and beauty, popularity, whatever, remind yourself: You've been there. But, at the same time, if you see somebody who's really poor, sick, and miserable, with not enough to eat, not able to get any medicine: You've been there too. The two are tied to each other, because as King Pasenadi noted, when people get wealthy and happy, they tend to get really careless and do things that'll pull them down. And you have to ask yourself, do you want to stay in this back and forth? Do you want to keep going back to that again and again and again, back and forth, back and forth, going nowhere at all? Or do you want to go someplace, to a happiness that doesn't disappoint?

Unfortunately for us as we're practicing, that happiness is just a word we've heard. It's news we've heard. It's not yet anything tangible in our hands or tangible in the mind. Still, the people who teach this are reliable. And you ask yourself, are your pleasures, your old friends, reliable? Can you really trust them? How many times do you want to be let down again? Or do you seriously want to be happy—seriously happy? The possibility is there and it's open to us all right now.

So if you find yourself flagging, learn how to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on going. And a large part of dusting yourself off is learning to see the flip side of all your old pleasures. It may seem harsh because, after all, we tend to identify ourselves with the way we've found pleasure in the past. They define the kind of person we are. When people put out personal ads, it's always about how they like to find happiness: the taste they show in their pleasures. That's how they identify who they are. So you'll be digging into a lot of the ways you identify yourself.

This is one of the reasons why it's good to look at the mind as a committee or as a corporation. There are lots of you's in there. You have to figure out which ones you can trust and which ones you can't. Learning how to step back from all the different voices in your mind helps you to look at them with a little more objectivity and to be willing to see the drawbacks of the old ways in which you found happiness, pleasure, ease, well-being, or bliss in life. Keep reminding yourself that there is something better, so that you'll want to stick with the path.

It's all about training our desires and pointing them in the right direction.

