

## *True Happiness Starts with Giving*

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Giving lies at the beginning of the path and it underlies everything we do as we practice all along the way. Mundane right view begins simply with, “There is what is given,” which basically, at the time of the Buddha, meant two things. One, that when you give something, you actually have the choice to give or not to give, and so there’s merit in making the choice to give. And two, the recipient is not nothing. It’s not the case that we die and just disappear and that’s the end of everything. Every being keeps on going and going and going. As long as you’re a being, you’re going to keep on going. And so helping other beings as they go along is actually a worthwhile thing to do.

For millennia, the Brahmans had been teaching that giving was good, but specifically when giving to Brahmans. You can imagine that after a long period of that, people started getting cynical. There were people who actually said that there was no virtue to giving at all. The argument was that everything you do is predetermined by either the stars, or some creator, or your past karma, so that when you actually give something, you didn’t have any choice in the matter, which means there’s no virtue in it. Another argument was that people, when they die, just disappear or are annihilated. So if we’re going to be annihilated anyhow, what virtue is there in giving anything to someone who’s going to be annihilated?

So the Buddha, when he started his statement of mundane right view, started with that principle—“There is what is given”—to emphasize that, Yes, we do have freedom of choice. And it is worthwhile to give to one another. When he gave the graduated discourse, which basically takes you from mundane right view and prepares the mind so it’s ready for the transcendent right view of the four noble truths, that, too, starts with giving. The Buddha would talk about the joy that comes with giving because, after all, it’s a quality of the mind. The virtue of giving doesn’t lie in the gift so much as in the attitude you bring to the act of giving.

You realize that you could have taken that item or taken the time or taken the knowledge—whatever the object is, or whatever the quality is that you’re giving—and you could have kept it to yourself and enjoyed it. But it wouldn’t have provided nearly as deep an enjoyment as the enjoyment that comes from giving it away. You’re making a statement about the value of the mind and the pleasures of the mind and the integrity and character of the mind, as opposed to the mere taste of pleasure.

From there, the Buddha would talk about the value of virtue, which is another kind of gift. You give safety to yourself and other beings: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. You're protecting yourself; you're protecting others. And if you stick with that precept consistently—in other words, you don't hold to it only when it's convenient or when you feel like it; you hold to it no matter what: That means your gift is universal. You give it to everybody. And because it's universal, you have a share in that universal safety yourself.

From there, the Buddha would go on to talk about the rewards of heaven that come from generosity and virtue. We have very few of his teachings on heaven, aside from his saying that if you can imagine a king and all the pleasures of the king, they're not one sliver of the pleasure that comes from being in heaven.

But then he would talk about the drawbacks of all that. After all, you would gain the pleasures of heaven, but then you'd lose them. You'd come back down—and you'd come back down hard. He says it's very rare that a deva passes away from a deva realm and goes to another deva realm or to the human realm. More likely, they go down to the lower realms. They've used up all their good karma and now they've got to start all over again.

When think about even divine sensual pleasures, you have to realize that they, too, are there but then they're gone. Well, think about your human sensual pleasures. The pleasures you had last week: Where are they now? They're gone. What's left is the karma you made as you were trying to find and keep those sensual pleasures—which may have been skillful, but sometimes was not. So then you're stuck with that kind of karma. And the process just keeps going around and around and around. As the Buddha said, it's like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on one end. Sometimes it falls on the other end. Sometimes it falls splat in the middle, without much rhyme or reason.

Karma is what drives all this, but the workings of karma can be very complex. And they can come out in very unexpected ways. We've been through this so many times, the Buddha said, that it's very hard to meet someone who has never been your mother or your father or your sister or your brother or your daughter or your son at some point in time. And he said that not to make you feel lovingkindness or goodwill to all the people of the world. He said it to give rise to a sense of terror. Just how long has this been going on, and how much suffering has been involved? If you think about this, at that point, then, he said, the mind's ready for the four noble truths: once you see that there is rest in renunciation.

Think about the King Bhaddiya, who left his kingdom and became a monk. He'd sit under the tree and exclaim to himself, "What bliss, what bliss!" The other

monks were concerned. They thought he was reminiscing about all the pleasures of his time as a king. So they reported this to the Buddha. The Buddha sent for Bhaddiya and asked him, “What do you have in mind when you say, ‘What bliss, what bliss!’?” Bhaddiya said, “Before, when I was king, I had to have guards posted inside the palace and out, inside the city and out, inside the country and out. And still I couldn’t sleep, for fear. But now I can sleep anywhere, with my mind like a wild deer.” That’s the bliss. There is bliss in renunciation—when you don’t have to be tied down to sensual pleasures, when you find a pleasure that’s better than that. So you always want to keep that in mind.

This is what all the practice is all about—the practice of giving, the practice of virtue, the practice of meditation. It’s all for the purpose of finding that bliss that takes you out of the cycle, that doesn’t require that you keep coming back and back and back—a bliss that really is satisfying. The teachings of the Buddha are all about true happiness.

One of my students was leading a workshop recently at a Buddhist temple in Taiwan and she asked the monks and the nuns to say in a few words on what Buddhism is all about. And they kind of looked at one another and said, “Well, it’s all about being a good person. It’s all about self-sacrifice—things like that.” So she asked them, “What about true happiness?” They said, “Ah, ah... yes.”

That’s what it’s all about: the happiness that doesn’t let you down; the happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. And it can be found by training the mind to higher and higher levels of standards for what counts as genuine well-being; what counts as something worth doing because deep down inside it feels right. It starts with generosity. It feels right to be generous. It’s a higher level of pleasure, a higher level of happiness than simply consuming pleasurable sensations. What you’re doing is becoming a connoisseur of happiness. What does real happiness consist of? What is it like? It’s not just pleasures. It’s not power; not money, wealth. It’s a quality of the mind. And what activities foster that quality of the mind in a way that’s really stable? The Buddha lays it all out.

All too often, it’s easy to get distracted by the details of the teaching and to forget that this is about happiness—true happiness. But it’s a happiness that requires a fair amount of discernment to find it, to take on the duties of the four noble truths and, to see that, yes, the problem with the suffering that we’ve created for ourselves really is the big problem in life and that’s what we’ve got to tackle. A lot of people ask, “Can’t I just be happy, without having to tackle problems like that?” You can, but you get only a superficial happiness that way.

And this tendency of the mind to keep on creating suffering for itself is always undermining all our other attempts at happiness. So we’ve got to focus on this

tendency and look into our cravings. We don't really like to look into our cravings. As Ajaan Suwat once said, we get things backward. We think that suffering is our enemy and cravings are our friends. But, actually craving is the enemy because it's what's causing the suffering.

As a part of the strategy of the practice, we learn how to become friends with suffering. In other words, we get familiar with it. We don't try to push it away. We don't try to run away from it. We try to comprehend it: "What's going on here? What's happening in the mind?" This requires that we put more effort into training the mind than we might have otherwise. But, when you consider the alternatives—just falling back to the old cycles of gaining pleasure and then getting heedless about the pleasure and then losing it and then trying to find it again and getting heedless about it again: Once you see that you've had enough of that, then you're ready to move on to something deeper and better. You're becoming more and more discerning; more and more of a connoisseur of your happiness.

But it's all basically the same principle: that when you have an object and you see that you could either enjoy it yourself or you could give it to somebody else, you realize that the pleasure, the sense of well-being that comes from giving it away is better. The path starts with that observation and then it refines.

It'll take it into some unexpected places. But it begins there. And, of course, the final act of the path is letting go of everything. Yet when you let go, you're not impoverished. You let go in such a way that you find more wealth in terms of a genuine happiness than you could have had otherwise.

So even though we get to the goal not by focusing on the goal, but by focusing on the path, still, it's good to remember every now and then where this practice is taking us so that we can practice the path with more energy and find more delight in letting go all along the way.