

The Noble Pursuit of Happiness

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Prince Siddhartha grew up in a household where the pursuit of happiness, the pursuit of pleasure, was given free rein. As Buddha, he didn't talk much about his youth, but what he did mention were the pleasures he had—and that he decided that the pursuit of those pleasures was something ignoble, so he left them.

He went out and ended up going to the other extreme: deciding that since the pursuit of pleasure was something not noble, he'd pursue pain. But he ultimately realized that that wasn't noble, either. It just ground the mind down. He realized he would have died and gained nothing from it.

So he cast around for other alternatives, and he finally landed on right concentration, which later became one of the factors of the path he taught. It was the first of the factors he discovered. He thought of the time when, as a young child, he'd spontaneously entered the first *jhāna*. The question arose in his mind, "Could this be the path to awakening?" And something inside said, "Yes."

So why was he afraid of that pleasure? He'd been fleeing pleasure for six years at that point, so why was he afraid of that pleasure? He stopped to realize: There was nothing blameworthy about it at all. It harmed no one, didn't intoxicate the mind, so he finally realized that this was a noble pleasure. And so he pursued it. He found that it was one of eight factors for the path that were needed for awakening—and it was a necessary part of the path.

There's another passage where he said that the other seven factors of the path are the requisites for right concentration, or *noble* right concentration. And the pleasure that comes from that concentration lies at the center of the path. So he realized the pursuit of pleasure in and of itself was not necessarily bad, it was just a matter of *how* you went about it, and the kind of pleasure you were looking for.

This is something we have to keep in mind, because it's so easy living in the world now, to think of our practice of meditation as being something small-minded and selfish, when so many people are suffering. But you have to stop and think: What's harmful about the way we pursue this pleasure? We're learning how to look after ourselves, we're learning how to be responsible in looking for happiness, looking for well-being.

There's nothing in the Buddha's teachings that says that you have to make yourself suffer for the sake of other people's well-being. After all, what does that do? It makes your search for pleasure go underground. In the meantime, you start wondering: "If their pleasure is so important, why isn't mine?"

Ideally, the Buddha said you work for the well-being of yourself *and* the well-being others. But you first have to start here, because if you don't know how to find true well-being, how are

you going to help others? As the Buddha pointed out, the reason we suffer is not so much from things happening outside, or even things happening to our bodies, it's from what the mind does to itself—which means that each person has to develop the necessary skills to find true well-being within.

So in your own pursuit of the necessary skills, you're actually being responsible. One of the things that the Dalai Lama noted about Westerners that he found very perplexing was that so many people have trouble feeling goodwill for themselves. Partly that's because we've indulged in so much in unskillful pleasures, and partly because of the cultural background we come from which places a high value on sacrifice for the sake of others. If you're not sacrificing enough, there's something wrong with you. We have to change our attitude.

Part of that also goes with an inability not only to have goodwill for yourself, but also finding empathetic joy to be something that's hard. You see other people who are prospering, other people who are happy, and there's a certain amount of resentment. So those are two areas where we really do have to do some work to change our attitude toward happiness. After all, if you resent other people's happiness, you're not going to feel right about your own. And if you can't feel right about your own happiness, it's going to be hard to see other people happy.

The two go together, which is why they're part of a set. The Buddha taught four brahmaviharas, he didn't teach just one. Sometimes you hear just nothing but metta, metta, or in some cases, compassion, compassion, but you need all four: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. That's one of the reasons why we have that chant at the beginning of every meditation to remind ourselves that all four of these form our motivation. And these are the implications of that motivation: that we want to be aboveboard about our desire for happiness, or true well-being—a happiness that lasts, a happiness that doesn't turn on us, a happiness that doesn't cause harm to anybody at all.

As for compassion, we have to start out with compassion for ourselves. That doesn't mean indulging every little wish, but it does mean looking for our true well-being: seeing wherever we're causing ourselves suffering, and trying to figure out how we can stop. Then, when it does work, and we can get the mind to settle down and be well, learn how to have some empathetic joy for that. Appreciate that. Remind yourself it's not a selfish thing.

We hear the Buddha's teaching on being a loyal friend, where you're happy when your friend is happy, and sad when your friend is sad. But that's not the ideal for a meditator: The ideal for a meditator is *not* getting tied up in other people's ups and downs. You're there to help them, but not you don't take on their sorrows. You can't really take them on anyhow. You can sympathize, and sometimes you can make yourself sorrowful—but that doesn't really help.

Sometimes we think, "If you don't feel sorry for other people, how are you going to help them?" Well, there are other ways of motivating yourself to want to be helpful. And if you want to be genuinely helpful, you need to have some skill.

Years back, I remember reading about a woman whose son had been killed in a gang fight. She'd gone to the trial, and, being a good Buddhist, she was spreading lots of compassion, lots of goodwill toward the guy who had knifed her son. But when she came back from the trial, she realized something was still missing. She had a huge amount of resentment for the guy who had introduced her son to the gang to begin with. So she decided to invite the gang members over to the house to sort of sort things out. She found that she felt really sorry for them, but she didn't have anything to offer them. She'd been meditating, she'd learned all about emptiness and all these big Buddhist concepts, but they weren't any use for the suffering of these kids.

If you're going to help other people who are suffering, you first have to learn how not to suffer yourself. Now, you don't have to wait until the very end of the path before you're helpful, but it's important that you learn how to treasure your happiness along the way. It's an important part of learning how to look after yourself. We see a society full of so many people who are careless in this area. They just do what they want and they don't really think about the consequences, which means that the consequences can be pretty bad. They don't know how to look after themselves. It's a kind of irresponsibility.

So here you're being responsible: You're learning how to find well-being inside, in a way that's harmless—and noble. There's so little nobility in our society right now. People tend to look askance at anything that presents itself as noble, so we feel embarrassed about it, but it's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's an important value: that you learn how to find happiness in a way that's totally harmless, totally blameless. And it's a skill that you can then share with others. You can't *make* them skillful, but you can give advice. And, through your example, you can show other people: This is how it's done. We need more people like this in the world.

So learn how to develop all four of the brahmaviharas as a way of adjusting your attitude toward happiness, realizing that it is okay to say, "I want to be happy. May I be happy."

Years back, I was talking with some nuns from another community. They also had their way of chanting the brahmaviharas in their chants, both in Pali and in English. I happened to mention that we had our translations as well. "Oh?" They wanted to hear the translation. So I chanted it: "May I be happy." One of the nuns almost fell out of her chair laughing: It was too direct. They had something like, *May I abide in well-being*, which is not the first thought that occurs to people.

The Buddha wanted us to be blunt and straightforward about this: We want to be happy—it's okay. But if you *truly* want to be happy, it has to be spread around: *May other beings be happy, too*. You want to make sure that your happiness doesn't cause any trouble, any pain, any harm to others. They may not like the way you go for happiness—that kind of pain you can't do anything about. You're not causing them any real harm, and you're certainly not getting them to do anything unskillful.

If you see that you're suffering, have compassion for yourself—and then have compassion for others. When you act skillfully, the Buddha recommends that you take *joy* in that fact, that you're mastering the skill.

As for things that you can't change for the time being, develop some equanimity—so that you can focus on the areas where you *can* make a difference.

So a large part of the practice is not just in the techniques of the meditation, but it's also in the values lying behind the meditation. And one of the primary values is gaining a proper relationship to the whole idea of happiness and the pursuit of happiness, realizing that there's something special about the way the Buddha teaches this: It's a *noble* way to pursue happiness. And that nobility is something really to be cherished.