

Determined to be Happy

February 4, 2022

When you sit down to meditate, you want to make a determination that you're going to stay here with the breath—that you're going to *want* to stay with the breath. Then do everything that you can do to keep that desire alive, and to act on it wisely. In other words, focus on the causes—what's going to help you stay here—and keep reminding yourself, “Come back, come back,” when the mind wanders off. When you focus on the causes, the results will come. If you sit here simply hoping for the results but without doing the causes, without *wanting* the causes, it's not going to happen.

Everything is rooted in desire. The problem is we have so many desires, and they pull in so many different directions. This is why we have to make a determination to put our desires in order. This holds true not only for meditation sessions, but for life as a whole: You look at a lot of people's lives, and they're like dust motes in the air. When the sun shines through, you see the motes moving back and forth, back and forth, up and down, here and there—not going anywhere in particular. A lot of people's desires are like that: pulled a little bit here, then a little bit there, and nothing gets accomplished.

This is why determination is one of the perfections that lead to awakening. You try to put your desires in order: Decide which ones you're going to go with and which ones you're going to have to put aside. But before you make a determination, you have to stop and think: What do you really want out of life? And how do you go about it?

This is why the first quality of a good determination is *discernment*: figuring out what is a really worthwhile thing to aspire to.

And why another quality of a good determination is *stilling and peace*. In other words, you want to aim at something that, once it's attained, will bring real peace to the mind. This is where you have to bring your heart and your head together—in other words, thinking about what would be worthwhile, but also asking yourself, “What do you really want?”

And how do you train your heart so that it's in line with what you really want? When the Buddha talks about wisdom or discernment, it's a combination of right view and goodwill. Right view is understanding about how cause and effect work—what has to be done in order to gain what effect. But discernment also requires thoughts of goodwill, thinking about true happiness: What would truly make you happy? And what kind of happiness will last?

One thing you have to think about is other people's happiness, because if your happiness runs roughshod over theirs, they're not going to stand for it. They're going to do everything they can to destroy whatever happiness you're looking for. So you want a happiness that's harmless, that's in line with the true happiness of everybody else.

Fortunately, a happiness that comes from within, as when we're meditating, doesn't harm anybody. All the forms of goodness—generosity, virtue, meditation—are totally harmless and they're based on goodwill.

With generosity and virtue, that's easy to see: When you give to others, they're happy. When you abstain from harming them, they're happy. But *especially* meditation—getting the mind under control so that your greed, aversion, and delusion don't take over: That's a gift, not only to yourself, but to the people around you. So when you think about the goals you want to aim at, it's good to think about looking for a harmless goal, a happiness that's harmless.

As for the search for happiness, there's nothing wrong with it. Years back, I was asked to give a talk at a college on the Buddhist view about happiness, and the afternoon before I gave the talk I happened to visit an old college professor of mine who was living in a retirement home nearby. He had taught Christian ethics. He asked me what I was going to be talking about that evening, and I said, "How the pursuit of happiness doesn't have to be hedonistic." He said, "Gee, I wish I could listen to that talk."

Because for a lot of people that's what the pursuit of happiness is: hedonistic. When you look for your happiness, all you think about is what your pleasures are going to be. But the Buddha said that *genuine* happiness requires that you think about the happiness of others—that you think about the consequences of your actions.

And as you pursue true happiness, you develop good qualities: discernment, compassion, and purity. These are the qualities of the Buddha, and they're qualities we can develop within ourselves—we have this potential. These are very noble qualities. Some people find it strange that they would be developed by taking your search for happiness seriously, but that's precisely how it happens, how they get developed.

Here I mean "seriously" not in the sense of being grim, but seriously in the sense that you really think it through. The wisdom comes in choosing a good goal, something that really will bring peace to the mind. The compassion comes again, in choosing a goal that's totally harmless. And then the purity comes in, in how you carry out the determination.

The Buddha points out two qualities that are especially important: one is truth—you really stick with what you *see* is right. And if it turns out it's not right, then you make adjustments. But this quality of truthfulness is what will carry you through, because you're going to come up with a lot of conflicting desires.

You seem to notice them even more when you start to meditate, because when you don't have a particular desire in mind, or you allow the mind to wander among its desires, it's like a boat floating in a river with different currents coming in from different directions. You're not really sure which current is pushing the boat which way because there's nothing solid to compare things with. But when you put down an anchor, you can see very carefully, okay, now the boat is being pushed to the right, now it's being pushed to the left. In the same way, once

you've made up your mind on something that's really worthwhile, there will be *pushings* coming from different sides, and you have to maintain this quality of truthfulness.

That's going to require the other quality essential to a good determination, which is *relinquishment*: There are going to be things you have to give up. It's like winning at chess. If you're not willing to lose some of your pieces, you're not going to win. You have to decide which pieces are expendable—which things in your life, and sometime they'll be things you want very much—to which you have to learn how to say No.

There's a principle in one of the verses of the Dhammapada, where the Buddha says, *If you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, the wise person is willing to forsake the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one.*

There's a translation of the Dhammapada where the translator gave a footnote to this verse, saying that this could not possibly be the meaning of this verse because it seems so obvious. Well, it's obvious in the abstract, but carrying it through requires *truthfulness* and the willingness to *relinquish* what gets in the way of what you really want deep down inside. Those qualities don't necessarily come easily.

All too often we want to win at chess and keep all our pieces. But we have to realize, if you want something really important in life, there are a lot of things you'll have to say No to.

So these qualities of truthfulness and relinquishment help you develop your purity. For the Buddha, purity means, one, having pure intentions, and then, two, actually carrying them out in a way that's harmless. In his instructions to his son, when the son was seven years old, he said, *This is how you make your actions pure:*

- *Before you act, you ask yourself, "What are the consequences you think will come as a result of these actions that you're planning to do? And if you see there's going to be any harm, you don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead.*
- *While you're doing the action, you look at the results that are coming up—because sometimes the results come right away; you don't have to wait until your next lifetime. Say, you stick your finger in a fire—it's not going to hurt in the next lifetime, it's going to hurt now. *If you see something coming up right away that's harmful—you stop. If you see nothing harmful, go ahead with the action until you're done.**
- *And then when you're done, you reflect on the long term. If you see that there was a mistake that did cause harm, you go and talk it over with someone who's more advanced on the path—learn from that person's wisdom so that you're not reinventing the dharma wheel all the time— *and then keep on training. If you don't see any harm, take joy in the fact that your practice is advancing, and continue to practice in skillful qualities day and night.**

That was his instruction to his son. That's how we find purity. In other words, we don't simply go on *good* intentions—we try to go on *skillful* intentions, and that means we have to train them. And this is how you train them, by acting on what you think is the best intention. If it's not good enough, well, you've learned something, and you try to apply what you've learned the next time around. That's how your intentions become better.

You try to bring discernment to your choice of a goal—trying to choose a goal that's going to put the mind at peace—and then you're true in carrying out what you see as the most discerning path, and true in relinquishing whatever gets in the way. This is how you attain what you aspire to. This is how your determination becomes successful.

So, you look at your life: What do you want out of it? You get to choose. There may be some limitations coming in from past karma, but there's a range of skillful choices open to you.

The wise person wants to find something really solid—and not be pushed around by random desires, but have a clear sense of priorities in what's really important in life, and what's not. Then you try to develop the strength, the truthfulness, that allow you to carry through with that discernment.

This is how the Buddha gained awakening. This is how every good determination manages to succeed.