

Investing Your Happiness

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

August 3, 2004

One of the purposes of meditation is to sensitize yourself to the fact that you're not simply a passive observer of what's going on. Life isn't a television show that you simply sit and watch. It's an interactive video game. You're actively creating the characters, designing the plot, in addition to watching it.

The Buddha's teachings on *sankhara*, fabrication, point to this fact. He defines fabrication as intentional acts. There is an element of intention in all your experience. Everything you sense, whether in the physical world or the mental world, has an element of intention. That's what makes it an experience. Without that intention you wouldn't experience anything. Because our intentions aim at happiness, what we're living with right now is the result of our attempts at happiness, pleasure, wellbeing. That's a sobering thought. You look at what you're experiencing and some of it's happy and some of it's not. And to think that this is the result of every act you've done to achieve happiness: It gives you pause.

When you think in this way, you begin to see the areas where you've fallen short. But at the same time you can focus on the areas where you've had some success. After all, if you hadn't had some success, you wouldn't be here meditating. You wouldn't be a human being. You'd be prowling around as a common animal, a hungry ghost, a prisoner of hell. So when you practice concentration, the Buddha has you focus on the sense of wellbeing you've already got here. What you need to do is to learn how to maximize that wellbeing—because one of the reasons we're so careless in the way we approach happiness is that we get serious about it only when there's a lot of pain. We focus on the pain. We've got to fix it. And there's a sense of desperation about trying to fix our pain, fix our sufferings. Yet when things get easy, we get lazy. Complacent. All we want to do is just wallow in that sense of wellbeing. And of course wallowing in it is not a cause for more happiness. It just eats up what we already have.

So the trick is to learn how to develop a sense of wellbeing and then not to be heedless—to see what further good we can get out of that wellbeing. Ajaan Lee gives an example. He says it's like having a tree that gives coconuts. If you want, you can eat up all the coconuts, but that's all you get—a stomach full of coconuts, and soon you're hungry again. But if you take some of the coconuts and plant them, you get more trees and then more trees because you're willing to take what you've got and invest some of it. In the same way, when you meditate, you take what sense of wellbeing you have and invest some of it in creating more wellbeing.

So you start by focusing on where the breath feels good coming in, feels good going out. If you can't get a good sense of ease with the breath, start with thoughts of goodwill. Wish goodwill for yourself, goodwill for other beings. That's a comfortable thought because it's not fighting with the wishes of any being anywhere. Everybody wants to be happy. So you wish them happiness. And then from that sense of harmonious wellbeing, you focus on the breath.

There should be at least some spot in the body where the breath feels good. Look for it, and then keep watch over it in such a way that you don't spoil it. Sometimes when you focus on the body you tense up around the part where you're focusing. That makes it tight, uncomfortable. Part of this comes from envisioning the body as something very solid. Remember that what you're experiencing here is an energy field, the energy flowing through the body. Some parts of the energy field may seem to feel more solid than others, but if you think about the whole thing as the flowing of an energy field, then if there are areas where it seems blocked or squeezed, you can think of opening up a new channel so that the energy easily flows in, flows out, without your having to pull it or push it or exert any pressure on it at all. It comes in, comes out on its own. All you have to do is keep tabs on it. Allow it to be comfortable. Think of it that way: Instead of *making* it comfortable, you're going to *allow* it to be comfortable. And then allow it to stay that way.

Don't interfere with it. Don't mess with it. In other words, as long as you're going to be shaping the present moment, try to be sensitive to how you're doing it. If things are going well, don't mess them up. Be alert to what you're doing, because every action, as the Buddha said, aims at happiness. Be alert to that. What you're experiencing has an element of your intention for happiness built into it. Be sensitive to that and also to whether it's working or not. If it's not working, you can change. Change the way you breathe, change the way you focus, change the way you conceive of your experience of the present, the experience of the body sitting here right now. Allow for some more possibilities. This is what a lot of the meditation opens up: seeing the possibilities of what can be done with the present moment. For example, a thought comes into the mind. Our tendency is then to just jump with the thought, and go into the thought-world, and ride with it wherever it goes. Or in other words, we get taken wherever it's going to take us.

But if you're really observant, you begin to notice that it's possible for a thought to arise without your going with it. It doesn't have to pull you away from the breath. After all, the breath is still here, going in, going out. If thoughts destroyed our breathing, we would have died a long time ago. Thoughts come in, thoughts go out, and the breath is still there. And there's a part of your awareness in touch with that. We tend to block that awareness out so we can get into the thought, but the trick here is to allow it to stay open so that when a thought comes it doesn't pull you away the way it used to. That possibility you may not have noticed before. And as you meditate you find other possibilities as

well.

We're experimenting with the potential for finding happiness, so always keep that experimental attitude in mind. What *is* experiment except for the belief that maybe not everything is already known? Maybe some of the knowledge that has been passed on from other people, or that we've cooked up ourselves, isn't right.

Someone once defined science as the belief that the experts can be wrong. Meditation serves the same function, allowing you to question the things you thought you knew for sure. They may be wrong. Check that out. You've got the breath and the mind here in the present moment as your laboratory, so work on these things to create a more stable, more satisfying sense of pleasure right here and now. Even though this pleasure is fabricated, it's part of the path. It's the pleasure part of the path.

People often complain about how the four noble truths focus on suffering, but if you look at them carefully you see that the most important of them is the fourth truth, the path to the end of suffering. It's the first one the Buddha taught. It's the one truth that contains all four noble truths right there in Right View. At its heart, though, is Right Concentration. If you look at the definition of Right Concentration, that's where you find the pleasure. The first jhana starts out with a sense of rapture and ease, or rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. In other words, you pull the mind away from its outside objects, outside distractions, and just stay right here. Then as you create a greater sense of pleasure, a greater sense of ease in the present moment, that's the heart of the path. It's something you develop. So we're here trying to maximize the pleasure we've got, not simply to bliss out – although it's nice to be able to bliss out – but also to be alert, to be mindful, to still have a sense of heedfulness.

What's the use of this bliss? That's the next step. When you have this sense of pleasure born from seclusion, you can see things more clearly – if you handle the pleasure right, if your attitude toward the pleasure is right. When the mind has a sense of ease and wellbeing, you can look at your attachments, you can look at all of the other mistakes you've been making, with a much greater sense of fairness, a much greater sense of objectivity, with less sense of being desperate. It's like the difference between people who have to worry about where tomorrow's meal coming from as opposed to those who don't have to worry about that at all. When you don't have to worry about your next meal, you have a lot more time to think about things, to look at things, to ponder them objectively.

So when we meditate, we're developing a skill that gives us a sense of ease right now that we can begin to trust, that we can tap into again and again and again. We don't have to worry about where our next hit of happiness is going to come from. That changes the way the mind approaches its experiences, its pleasures and pains. It becomes a lot less desperate. Of course there's always the danger of complacency when you figure you can tap into the breath at any time, but if you can overcome that complacency, you begin to realize that this is an extremely useful state of mind – a very skillful way of approaching happiness,

and a very skillful way of providing a foundation for yourself so that you can find greater happiness.

As the Buddha said, the noble path is fabricated. It's the highest fabrication of all. So when we know it's fabricated, we should do it mindfully, with a sense of alertness to what we're doing and to the results we're getting. This is what makes it a skill. And we see the results not only in the immediate present, but also over time.

As I said earlier, what we're living with is the results of our attempts at happiness. And as we practice, we find that the results get better and better because we're clearer and clearer about what we're doing. All of the Buddha's teachings are meant to help us in this quest for a true happiness, the ultimate happiness, nirvana. That's where they're all aimed. It's a happiness that isn't fabricated, but the only way you can get there, the only way you can get beyond fabrication, is to learn how to fabricate well.