

Strategies for Happiness

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Those chants are often juxtaposed just before we meditate: “The world is swept away.” “This body is filled with all sorts of unclean things.” And then: “May I be happy.” The purpose of this juxtaposition is to make you stop and think: Given this swept-away world, this unclean, decaying body, where does true happiness lie? Where does a safe and secure happiness lie? This is the big question we have to ask ourselves, because everybody wants happiness. As the Buddha said, all things, all phenomena that you can experience are rooted in desire. And what is the desire? It’s the desire for happiness.

The body, events in the mind: They all come from our desire for happiness. And we act on that desire, sometimes in skillful and sometimes in unskillful ways. That’s why the situation we’re living in is such a mixed bag, in terms of being satisfactory or not. You have to look carefully at your actions to see which ones really are conducive to happiness and which ones are not. You can’t rest secure in the notion that there’s somebody out there taking care of everything, and it’s all going to turn out all right in the end. *We* are the ones who are shaping our experience, and if we’re not careful, we’re going to shape things in an unskillful way.

The Buddha saw that all of our activities are aimed at happiness. And what was especially interesting is that he saw how much of what we experience is an activity. Even our sense of self, of who we are, is an activity. It’s a fabrication. We fabricate the decision to identify with certain things. The thought that “I am,” the thought of identification, is an act of putting things together. It’s a fabrication, an activity, aimed at happiness.

And to some extent it works. People who have a very poorly formed sense of self have trouble managing their lives. A certain level of identification is needed, a certain sense of self is needed, just to function properly. And so, in learning to be more skillful, the Buddha has us take that sense of self and try to make it more coherent, so that it can promote your desire for true happiness, a happiness that lasts.

Then you ask yourself, “What am I doing that’s actually leading in that direction? What am I doing that’s leading in the other direction?” This involves maintaining a sense of what in Pali is called *hiri* and *ottappa*: shame and fear of evil. In other words, shame at the idea of doing something you know would be harmful, and fear of the consequences of doing harmful things. This type of fear, the Buddha said, is a useful kind of fear. It’s what keeps us on the path. And it requires a certain sense of self, a certain sense of self-esteem, and the opposite of apathy – realizing that what you do is important, for it’s going to have

consequences down the line, and you don't want to suffer the consequences of unskillfulness. This is what keeps you on the path: the sense that there are dangers out there, and that the dangers lie in your unskillful actions.

But this training also implies trust: trust that you can do things in the proper way, trust in the principle that your actions really do matter, and trust that the quest for happiness is a good quest, if you do it properly. If you take your quest for happiness seriously, the Buddha says, you actually end up developing qualities that are the opposite of selfishness: compassion, wisdom, and purity.

First, compassion: You realize that if your happiness depends on the suffering of other people it's not going to last. Other people want happiness, too, and they're not going to sit around and allow you to maintain any happiness that oppresses them. They're going to destroy it. So if you're really sincere about happiness, you also want to include their happiness in the equation. You develop the quality of compassion, taking the happiness of other people into account.

As for wisdom, the Buddha said that the sign of a wise person is realizing that sometimes the things you like to do are going to cause suffering, and the things you don't like to do are going to cause happiness. It's a measure of your wisdom to realize that and to act accordingly. In other words, you have to appreciate the principle of causality, for it's going to affect your happiness. That way you get wiser and wiser about causes and effects. If you're wise, you'll look for a happiness that's secure and long-term, rather than just simply what you can grab at any moment.

And as for purity, as the Buddha told his son Rahula, really paying careful attention to your actions and their results, and resolving not to repeat mistakes that cause suffering for yourself or for other people: That's how people attain purity.

So compassion, wisdom, and purity – the qualities we associate with the Buddha – come from taking our quest for happiness seriously. Good things come from this sense of self that wants to find a long-term happiness.

Ultimately though, as we all know, the Buddha also teaches not-self – in other words, showing us that the things we tend to identify with can get in the way of a higher level of happiness. But always keep in mind that even here the quest for happiness lies in the background. It's the overriding issue. You first have to become skillful in the way you manage your happiness, realizing that being generous, being virtuous, training the mind are things you have to do; that you're responsible for your happiness, and have to develop these qualities that are harmless both to yourself and to others.

Once you've got that principle firmly in mind, then you can start turning to the teaching on not-self. You see that the various things you identify with leave you open to all kinds of dangers. If you identify with things that are impermanent, things that can be changed by causal conditions beyond your control, you're putting yourself in a weak position, an exposed, dangerous position. And this is where the teaching on not-self comes in.

Ajaan Maha Boowa compares this teaching to a stick that you use hit the hand of a monkey that's always grabbing at things. It's a warning to yourself that if you reach into fire, it's going to burn you, so you have to slap your hand away from the fire.

Many people resist the teaching on not-self and all the teachings that are preparatory for that, like the chant we had just now on the body. They feel that these teachings are going to deprive them of the strategies they use to find happiness. But these teachings are meant to protect you from suffering. They're there to remind you that if you latch onto the body as yours in a really strong sense, you're going to suffer. If you can see it as a tool that you use toward happiness, that's a different issue. But so many of us don't see it in that way. The body is us. It's ours. But what happens to the body? It gets old, and it can get sick in all sorts of horrible ways even before you get old. And it's not the case that these things happen only to people who don't take care of their bodies. They happen to everybody and can happen at any time. If you identify with the body, you're leaving yourself exposed to all sorts of problems, to all sorts of dangers.

The same holds true for feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness. But the Buddha doesn't have you just drop and abandon these things – he has you turn them into the path. In other words, you take these things you identify with and you turn them into tools. Once they're tools, it's possible to get a sense of distance from them and yet still get some use out of them as well. In this way, the strategy of not-self, instead of depriving you of your strategies for happiness, actually provides you with a wider range of strategies.

As we're meditating here, what are we focusing on? We're focusing on the body, focusing on the breath. We're learning to maximize the feelings of pleasure that come from the breath. We're learning ways of perceiving the breath energy in the body that create stronger and stronger states of concentration. We're learning to direct our thoughts and evaluate the breath – that's fabrication – and to be consciously aware of all this. So you've got all five aggregates here turned into a path. There will be a sense of identification with the path, but it's different from just plain old straight identifying with these things. There's a more skillful use of them so that they lead to a greater and greater sense of wellbeing and security. As you get more identified with the path in this way, the other things outside that you used to identify as you and yours – that if they changed were going to cause big trouble in your life: You can pull away from those attitudes, because you have a better place to be.

You try to focus all of your desires around maintaining this sense of peace and wellbeing in the mind. At some point, when that peace and wellbeing is really secure, you can undercut those desires as well, seeing that even here in this state of concentration, there's still inconstancy, there's still stress. In seeing that, you can let go entirely. You've seen that it's possible for there to be a dimension where there's no sense of "I am," no sense of identification, and yet it's not

annihilation. In fact, it is just the opposite. The only thing that gets annihilated there are stress and suffering. That's what we're aiming for as we learn to take our desire for happiness seriously and to follow it through in a consistent way. Then, as Ajaan Suwat once said, when you reach the ultimate happiness, who cares if there's a self or not a self, or whether you can find someone who's experiencing this or what? It doesn't matter, for what *is* there is the ultimate happiness.

Even though the Buddha talks a lot about suffering and stress, the unattractiveness of the body, the lack of control you have over things, it's not for a negative or pessimistic purpose. It's to focus your desire for happiness in another direction. In effect he says, "Look, you can't find true happiness in these places. You've got to look someplace else." This is the theme underlying all of his teachings: that true happiness really does matter. It's important. It's worth giving yourself over to. The desire for true happiness is worth taking seriously because it actually leads to true happiness if you follow through with it skillfully.

So although sometimes we may resist his teachings – because they seem to threaten our ideas about what we need to do and to believe in order to be happy – it's good to step back and question our assumptions. There are many, many people who have followed the Buddha's way and found that, yes, it does lead to a true happiness – and that the happiness you get from following other paths doesn't nearly compare.

When you see fear in your practice, remember: There is skillful fear and unskillful fear. Skillful fear focuses on the harm and suffering that comes from doing unskillful things. Unskillful fear comes from holding onto things that you know are going to change. Once you understand this, you can work on refining your sense of self and ultimately learn to adopt the teaching on not-self as well. When you learn how to use these teachings skillfully – at their appropriate times, in the appropriate places – and you find they really are conducive to happiness, then you see that there's nothing to criticize in the Buddha's teachings. They're there to help us find the happiness we want. He's not forcing them on anybody. There's no power play involved here at all. He offers his teachings out of compassion. He's found that these practices work for him, and they work for other people as well. It's simply a question of whether we understand them properly and learn how to use them skillfully. When we do, there are no more issues.