

The Intelligent Heart

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There's a book about Buddhism called *The Intelligent Heart*. And that concept is a really good summary of why we respect the Buddha. You probably notice that we bow down to the Buddha a lot around here. We show him a lot of respect. It's because he shows us the way to show respect to something really worthy of respect within ourselves, which is our desire for true happiness.

That desire is an affair of the heart. The Buddha also teaches us to be intelligent about it. The intelligence here means seeing things in terms of cause and effect, and not simply going by our desires, by our urges in our search for happiness. We look to see what really does give rise to happiness, and then we adjust our behavior accordingly so that we get genuine happiness as a result.

You might say the Buddha has us take our happiness seriously, not in the sense of being grim about it, but in the sense of seeing it as worth our full attention. You'd think that if something is so important to the heart we would look very carefully at what really causes happiness and what doesn't, yet so many people in the world simply go along with the crowd. They see other people looking for happiness in wealth, in relationships, in status, and they figure that must be where it is. They don't really look very carefully to see: Are these people really happy?

You want to look around, to look through the PR. Look beneath the surface to see who out there really is a good example of how to find genuine happiness.

That's the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom begins by looking for people who look like they really know. In the Buddha's words, look for contemplatives, people who've been contemplating their life and living a very deliberate life, living their lives wisely. Then you ask them, What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What when I do it will lead to my long-term suffering and harm? This question is wise, not only because you're asking the right people, but also because you see that your happiness depends on your actions. And that long-term happiness is better than short-term.

There's another principle the Buddha teaches: If you see that a greater happiness comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, you should be willing to abandon the lesser happiness for the greater one.

It sounds like a no-brainer, but most of us are no-brainers when it comes to affairs of happiness. We have to learn how to put our head and our heart together, and realize that happiness doesn't mean simply piling up as many pleasures as we can, because there are a lot of pleasures out there that get in the way of deeper happiness. You have to make a choice. There are some things you have to give up.

It's like playing chess. If you want to win the game, you have to be willing to lose a fair number of your pieces. If you want to win at chess and keep all your pieces at the same time, you'll never get anywhere. So part of the wisdom lies in seeing which things have to be given up. And with most of the things that we don't want to give up, it's because they give immediate gratification rather than a delayed gratification what seems uncertain down the line.

But you have to realize that a lot of immediate gratification brings a lot of pain with it, a lot of suffering, either because it's so short-lived, and you have to keep grabbing after it even as it's going away, or because you have to do a lot of unskillful things in order to get that short-lived happiness in the first place. So you end up losing in both ways. You're left with just the memory—and the long-term bad results—of the unskillful actions you did, together with the painful memory of the past pleasure that's gone away.

So you need to realize that the long-term happiness—the happiness that doesn't harm you, doesn't harm anybody else—is worth a lot of sacrifice. But this is not just sacrifice in the sense of having to go without, go without, and then finally hoping for a reward at the end. The path that we practice here—getting the mind to settle down and be at ease with the breath, finding a sense of well-being inside—that's our food on the path that keeps us going. We find that simply by focusing on the breath in a way that's comfortable allows the mind to settle down and feel at home in the present moment. That right there is a huge thing—because there are so many people who can't do it, either out of regret for

what they've done in the past, or just simple unwillingness to look carefully at what's going on in the present moment.

They're always running around, running around, running around, and yet they have nothing to show for it. So it's an important investment to take the time to get to know your breath, get to know the body in the present moment in a way that allows you to settle down. When the mind settles down, it has a greater sense of spaciousness. That sense of spaciousness is something you can't buy.

So we work on this and we find that it enables us to give up a lot of other pleasures that we ordinarily think we couldn't do without. In this way, the training of the mind right here, as the Buddha said, is the primary requisite for a happiness that lasts—both because it gives you the strength to give up the other pleasures that are going to leave wounds on the mind, and because it allows you to see more clearly into your own mind. This puts you in a position where, when the mind feels an urge to go off someplace else, you can see: What's causing that? All too often we don't look carefully at it, we just go, go, go.

Well why? What's pushing us out of the present moment? If you can develop a sense of ease with the breath, it puts you where you can see that happening and you begin to understand, "Oh. The reasons are usually really very tiny things." Given the sense of space and well-being that comes from staying with the breath, you'll be less likely to get pushed off by those little tiny things.

What this comes down to, as the Buddha said, is what he calls the difference between a wise person and a fool: A wise person sees that true happiness has to come from training the mind. A fool doesn't.

The pleasures you get when your mind is not trained can actually work to your own detriment. You can get very foolish around them. And what you end up doing is turning those pleasures into pain.

A much more valuable skill is learning how to turn pain into pleasure. Sitting here with a sense of well-being that comes from the breath, even though it may not be totally filling everything in mind, at least gives you a toehold in the present moment. Then you can look at the things that otherwise would push you out,

either pains in the body or uncomfortable thoughts that come up in the mind. When you develop a sense of space around them, you can watch them. You can step back from them, learn about where they're coming from, see how the mind creates a lot of suffering around them—and how it can learn how not to do that.

We begin with the simple exercise of breathing. Sit down and take a survey of your body. If you haven't been meditating, you'll probably find that there's a pain here and an ache there. This part of the body feels uncomfortable, that part feels tense, that part feels tight. But instead of running away from those things, you decide to let your awareness settle down around them, let the breath gently work on them. This way you can dissolve a lot of that tension and pain away, simply by being patient with it and watching it. Even though that's not the end of suffering, you gain more confidence that you can handle these things. You don't have to get pushed out by the pain. And because you're not pushed out by the pain, you don't go thirsting after narrow, minor pleasures. You learn to develop appreciation for the well-being of a spacious heart and a spacious mind—the kind of mind that's not pushed around by things, that doesn't get blown away either by pleasure or pain.

The Buddha said that one of the most important skills you can develop is not to be overpowered by pleasure or overpowered by pain. The mind develops a solidity that enables it to stay right here and not get pushed around. Ordinarily, one would say, "Does it matter about being overwhelmed by pleasure? That's a good thing." Well No, because when you're overwhelmed by pleasure you get forgetful and sloppy. When you get sloppy, more pain comes in, and you're totally at a loss.

The simple fact that the mind gets pushed around by things, whether pleasure or pain, involves a lot of stress, a lot of strain. So you want to develop the ability to be here solidly while these things wash around you but don't penetrate. There's a great sense of well-being that comes from that.

You develop a sense that you can trust yourself—and the ability to trust yourself is priceless. That, too, is a kind of happiness that can come only by appreciating it and not letting yourself get pushed around by lesser pleasures and pains.

So this is the nature of the intelligent heart—one that goes for the big prize, a true happiness that's totally unconditioned. What we've talked about here, the pleasure of concentration, is conditioned. But even it is a lot stronger and a lot more reliable than the ordinary pleasures that are advertised at us all the time. And it provides the opening for us to see deeper into the mind, to see something that's not conditioned, something that's another dimension entirely.

This dimension is actually outside of space and time, in every sense. That's where the ultimate happiness lies, the ultimate well-being. It may seem far away, but it's really not. It's going to be found right here where you're aware of your body, where you have this awareness in the present moment.

So try to cultivate your appreciation of the well-being that comes from this, because in and of itself it's a much greater pleasure than the ordinary pleasures around us. And it gives us access to something even bigger.

This is what comes from taking the issue of happiness seriously, and sticking with your determination not to settle for anything less than a happiness that's totally reliable—and that enables you to become totally reliable as well.