

Can All Beings Be Happy?

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“May all living beings be happy.” Sounds impossible. And in some ways it is.

As the Buddha said, all beings subsist on food. And the problem is that some beings are food for other beings. If we think of happiness in terms of pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, there’s never enough. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins we wouldn’t get enough happiness of that kind.

So it’s important to think about why we repeat that phrase. The first thing to remember is that we’re trying to get our own intentions in line with the Dhamma, in line with the practice. Part of right resolve is getting rid of ill will, developing goodwill. We keep repeating the phrase because it’s part of the motivation we want to develop when we act and speak and think. When we make choices, we want to make sure that the choices are harmless.

As the Buddha said, this is part of being a person of integrity. It begins with the first steps in the practice: to anticipate what the results of your actions are going to be and to resolve that you’re not going to act on any intentions that are harmful. If you don’t foresee any harm or you’re not sure, you can try it out and then check to see what the results are. If you see that you’re causing harm or that you have caused harm, then you stop and resolve never to repeat that mistake again.

And of course, what happens as you undertake this exercise and bring it into the meditation is that you begin to realize that things that originally seemed harmless actually do, on a more subtle or more sensitive level, cause harm. But this is how we grow in the practice. There’s no other way to learn. I don’t know how many people come and say, “How can I live a life without making mistakes? How do you know what the right thing to do is?” The only way to find out the right thing is to experiment, and that means living with the fact that you will probably make mistakes, and that you have to learn how to learn from them.

A bigger issue is apathy: when we know that some things are clearly unskillful and yet we still go ahead and do them. That’s what you’ve got to watch out for from the very beginning. The Buddha gives you some guidelines. We’re not reinventing the Dhamma wheel every time we act. He tells you to avoid killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants, and other forms of wrong speech in addition to lying: such as divisive tale-bearing, where you’re trying to break people up, break up a friendship because you feel threatened by the friendship; hurtful speech; idle chatter, the kind of talk that accomplishes nothing, that’s a lot of froth. In any social gathering you may need a little social grease to keep things going, but you have to remember that too much grease gums up the works. So the Buddha does give you some basic guidelines.

Beyond that, it's a matter of learning how to refine your sensitivity to what's harmful: That's why we develop more mindfulness, more alertness, try to be more concentrated, so that we can develop more discernment that can catch harmful actions on more and more subtle levels.

So when we wish that all beings be happy, part of the reason is that we're trying to develop the motivation that we don't want to harm anybody in our actions. Because that's all we're responsible for: our own actions. Then you also think about the fact that the happiness there—in “May all beings be happy”—has to come from causes. It's not that we go around with a magic wand to touch beings on the heads and say, “Okay, whatever you're doing right now, be happy.” Because a lot of activities that people do are harmful to themselves, to other people. Part of being truly happy—and that's the important part, that it's *true* happiness—part of being truly happy is to learn how to stop doing unskillful actions.

This is why part of the Karaniya Metta Sutta says, “May no being despise any other being anywhere.” Not simply, “May beings be happy,” but may they not act on the causes that would lead to unhappiness.

Then the question is, to what extent can you influence that? There are some people you can influence. As the Buddha said, when you become generous, it's also good to encourage other people to be generous as well. When you're virtuous and you see the rewards of virtue, you try to encourage others to be virtuous, too. As you gain more conviction in the Buddha's awakening and see in particular the results of holding to the principle of action, the principle of karma, you do what you can to encourage others to do that, too. Now, you don't become an unpleasant proselytizer. You're not an evangelist here. But in cases where you see that people are open and are receptive, you want to share with them the benefits of your practice. Say, “This works for me. It might work for you.” The same with wisdom and discernment: It's good to be able to share what you've got, to encourage other people to develop their wisdom and their discernment as well.

But, and this is where it gets difficult, there are limits to how much you can influence the behavior of other people. That's where equanimity has to come in. Remember, goodwill and compassion aren't just there on their own, they have to be coupled with empathetic joy and equanimity. Actually the goodwill, the compassion, and the empathetic joy all go together. Goodwill is the wish for true happiness. When you see beings are suffering, you want them to be released from their suffering—that's basically applying goodwill in a way that turns it into compassion. And empathetic joy is goodwill applied to cases where you see people are already happy, “May they continue to be happy. May they continue to develop the causes for happiness.” You're not resentful of their happiness; you're not resentful of their good fortune. But there are cases where you apply goodwill and still can't have any influence on things: That's when you have to develop equanimity so that you can focus on other areas where you *can* be of benefit.

So again, it all comes back to your motivation. You keep reminding yourself again and again, “May all beings be happy.” And then you ask yourself, “Are my actions in line with that wish?” In that way, it becomes a test, a standard for you to measure yourself against as you go through the day. So that even though—given the way that the world is, with beings feeding on other beings and given their limited resources, and the kind of happiness that comes from wealth, status, praise, physical pleasures, where the more some people get, the less other people are going to get—you realize that it’s not likely that the world is going to find true happiness, you still want to make sure that your motivation is right, because that’s what you’re responsible for.

And in doing this, you’re giving a gift to others. As the Buddha said, if your determination not to kill, not to steal, not to break any of the other precepts, is without exception—i.e., you don’t make exception for ants or termites or white lies or anything; you say, “No, I’m not going to do any of these things that are unskillful”—you’re giving unlimited safety to others. In other words, at least they’re safe from you and the harm that you could cause them. As a result, then you have a share in that unlimited safety yourself: Other beings, not being harmed by you, are not going to come back and harm you.

Of course, we all have our mixed bag of past karma. But when you decide that right now, from now on into the future, you want to make sure your motivation is right, that’s all you can really be asked to do. As the Buddha said, even given the fact that we have past karma, it’s not determined that we’re going to have to suffer. The state of mind that we develop in the present moment is going to play a huge role in how we experience the results of past bad karma. If you develop an unlimited mind state—unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, unlimited equanimity—that helps to lessen the amount of suffering you’re going to experience. In some cases, the Buddha said you’d hardly even notice it at all.

It’s like a person who suddenly incurs a debt or has to pay a fine. If you’re wealthy, the fine is hardly going to make a dent. You’ll hardly notice it at all. If you’re poor, though, they might have to throw you in prison, because you don’t have the wherewithal to pay the fine.

So you’re developing this wealth of the mind. And even further, when you train the mind so that it’s not overcome by pleasure, not overcome by pain; as you’re able to maintain your mindfulness, alertness and maintain your steadiness even when there’s pain in the body, even when there’s pleasure in the body, pain in the mind, pleasure in the mind: You have a solid place which is *your* spot, your safe spot, your source of strength inside. When you develop this limitless mind, then you’ve given yourself protection from your past bad karma.

These are the reasons why we develop that thought, “May all beings be happy”: We want to make sure that we don’t harm beings. And by creating our own more limitless state of mind, we develop the ability to deal with whatever negative things happen. In other words, we learn how to take responsibility for ourselves. We take responsibility for the decisions we’re making now about what we want to do and say and think, and we’re also taking responsibility for

how we respond to what comes up as a result of our past karma. So this phrase, “May all beings be happy,” is a phrase of taking full responsibility. Once we make that intention, we try to act in line with it.

This is one of the reasons why we’re meditating right here, right now, to develop that ability not to be overcome by pain, not to be overcome by pleasure: so that the mind can continue being responsible even in the face of great pain or great pleasure. You hear of some people who develop an extreme sense of pleasure in the meditation and they get carried away, they get irresponsible. Sometimes they get depressed: The meditation is so good and when they leave it they feel disappointed that that great pleasure has to end. That’s called being overcome by pleasure. You have to realize we’re not here just for the pleasure. We’re here to use the pleasure for a higher end, to train the mind, to develop more discernment, to develop more intelligent ways of dealing with pleasure and pain.

And the same with pain: A lot of people will excuse harmful behavior because they were under great psychological stress or great physical pain. And there are cases when the pain really is debilitating and you can’t do much. But there are other times when, if you develop more mindfulness and alertness and discernment, you’re still capable of more than you might have been otherwise, even in the face of pain.

So we have to be very clear about our motivation, because that’s all we can be responsible for. We can’t be responsible for the whole world. After all, the way the world runs is all a matter of eating and eating and eating. Even if you help poor people to get a better break in life, they can continue eating.

It would be nice if the world were like Kurt Vonnegut’s vision of Mercury, where all the beings feed off the vibrations of the crystal. He saw Mercury as a big honeycombed crystal that was set into vibration because one side, exposed to the Sun, was hot and the other side was cold. And the beings simply had to latch onto some part of that honeycombed crystal and feed off the vibrations. They didn’t have to feed off one another. So for them, it was a lot easier to be happy as they were and to be happy for everybody else simply as they were. “Here I am! Here I am!” “So glad you are! So glad you are!” Those were the messages they were continually sending to one another.

But here we live in a world where beings have to feed, and they feed on one another. So the wish for happiness has to take a different form, “May all beings eventually find true happiness.” That means, “I don’t want to do anything that’s going to harm them now and I don’t want to do anything that’s going to get in the way of their ultimately finding true happiness—or of my ultimately finding true happiness. If, within those parameters, I can help them, I’m happy to. If I can’t, then I have to accept the fact that that’s the way karma goes.”

Those are some of the implications of repeating again and again, “May all living beings be happy.” We’re trying to keep our motivation straight and in line with the path.

