

Merit: Actively Happy

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For years it was believed that Buddhism was pessimistic, that the Buddha talked about nothing but suffering, suffering, suffering. Fortunately, people now realize that actually he was talking about happiness. Still, the common view of the Buddha's take on happiness is still pretty pessimistic: that causes and conditions are outside of our control, and we simply have to learn how to accept things as they are, and in that acceptance find some measure of happiness. But that's not how the Buddha taught about happiness at all. What that describes is more equanimity, and not even a good kind of equanimity. It's more resignation.

When the Buddha talked about happiness, he talked about ultimate happiness, absolute happiness, a happiness that doesn't change. He never said that things are outside of your control. In fact, the whole path is learning how to take control of your life so that you're able to achieve a happiness that's worth all the effort that goes into it.

The basic questions that lie at the foundation of wisdom take a worthwhile happiness as their theme. The questions are these: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" And notice here that the issue of *doing* is important. That's the beginning of the wisdom, realizing there are things you *can* do. From there, you're convinced in what the Buddha taught, that there is such a thing as long-term happiness, and that long-term is better than short-term. That's how these questions are wise.

But beyond the wisdom of the questions lies the wisdom of the answers that the Buddha gave to them.

The first list of answers has to do with the practice of merit: being generous, being virtuous, and developing a mind of unlimited goodwill. These are things that you do, and you change your life as a result. You're not just accepting conditions. You're changing the conditions. You're taking your life by the horns and turning it in a good direction.

Because the happiness that comes from these activities is not only good for you but it's also totally harmless—and it's good for other people as well. It teaches you a valuable lesson: that happiness doesn't necessarily have to be selfish, and it doesn't have to depend on your gaining and other people losing. When you engage in these three activities, you gain and other people gain as well. And as you

engage in them, you gain a sense of the freedom of choice you have to change your life and to change it for the better—to find a happiness that really is long-term.

For instance, with generosity: The Buddha always protected the idea that generosity should be voluntary. He never gave dana talks in the way they're given now. He never tried to put a squeeze on people or demand that they give to Buddhists. King Pasenadi once came to the Buddha and asked him, "Where should a gift be given?" And he was used to hearing brahmans saying that gifts should be given to brahmans, and the Jains saying that gifts should be given to the Jains, so he probably expected the Buddha to say, "Give to the Buddhists." But that's not what the Buddha said. He said, "Give where you feel inspired, or you feel the gift would be well used." In fact, that's a rule for the monks up to this day. If someone comes and asks, "Where should we give a gift?" you say, "Give where you feel inspired, where you feel your gift would be well-used or well taken care of."

That throws the responsibility of the gift back on the donor, but it also reminds the donor that generosity is an act of freedom. And this is what freedom really means: not that you're free simply to follow your moods. You're free to do something that's good for others at the same time feels good doing it.

And the gift here can be not only a material thing, but also a gift of your time, a gift of your knowledge, a gift of your strength, a gift of forgiveness. All of these things count as generosity. And they teach you a lesson: that if you want to gain some happiness out of life, you have to be willing to give first.

This lesson, of course, then carries on into your meditation. Before you think about what you're going to gain out of the meditation, you first have to ask, "What are you going to give?" You give of your time, again. You give of your energy. You give your full attention. And you give up the mind's desire to go wandering around wherever it likes.

Building on generosity is virtue, which is also a gift. As the Buddha said, when you make a vow and carry it through that you're not going to harm anybody – you're not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, take intoxicants, ever, at all – and you stick with that in all situations, then you're giving universal safety. It doesn't mean you're protecting everybody from all bad things, but from your quarter, at least, there is no danger. When you can give universal safety like that, you get a share in that universal safety, too. And the sense of well-being that comes with that – that there are things you might have done that would have been harmful but you were above doing them – that's giving yourself a gift: a genuine sense of self-esteem.

Here again, you gain and other people gain protection and safety. So it's a good happiness. A long-term happiness. It's not the same as pleasures of the senses – a nice sight, nice sound, nice smell, nice taste, nice tactile sensation – ythose things come and then they go. And the memory of them can sometimes burn – even if the sensation was nice, the memory can burn. Both from your missing the pleasure, and often also from the memory of what you did to get that pleasure. But the memory of being generous, the memory of being virtuous, is always a good memory, one that feels good.

In fact, as the Buddha likes to say, generosity is good as you plan to do it, good while you do it, and good after you do it. The same with virtue: You make up your mind you're going to observe the precepts, you actually do it, and then you reflect back on it. It's happiness all the way through: before, during, after; past, present, future. It doesn't go sour, it doesn't go rotten – unlike the ordinary pleasures of the world.

And, building on the practice of generosity and virtue, when you then develop the meditation of goodwill, it's not hypocritical. It's simply an extension of what you're already doing. You're spreading it out in all directions – realizing if you want to be able to trust your virtue, you have to be able to trust yourself not to have ill will for anyone, not to wish them harm.

Now, this doesn't mean simply wishing that they be happy whatever they do. As the Buddha explains, the causes for happiness come from actions. So you're wishing, "May this person, may all beings, understand the causes of true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." That's something you can wish for even the most vile people, which is why goodwill can be universal.

And here again, you give. There are cases where people may have wronged you in the past, or wronged your family, wronged your friends, wronged the weak and helpless, but you're not going to let that be an obstacle to your goodwill. You're going to give up the desire for revenge.

There's a story in the Canon of a young prince whose parents are taken away from him. They're executed, a king and a queen, by the king of another kingdom. And the young prince vows vengeance. So he works his way into the other king's confidence. He goes to the king's palace, starts working in the elephant stables, playing the flute – I think that's a nice touch, playing flutes for elephants – but the sound of the flute goes throughout the palace and the king says, "He really knows how to play the flute." So he wants the young man in his chamber playing the flute at night. Eventually the prince becomes a servant to the king, then becomes a trusted servant. And one day he's in a position where he could kill the king. But he doesn't. What holds him back is the memory of his father who,

before he died, said to him, “Don’t look too far, don’t look too close. Because animosity is not ended by animosity, it’s ended by lack of animosity.” So he decides not to kill the king. This is after threatening the king, and the king having said, “I beg my life of you.” But the young prince says, “No, I beg my life of you.” So they decide that each is going to swear off vengeance.

As the Buddha tells this story, he says he was that prince in a previous lifetime. And he tells the story to a group of monks who’ve been quarreling, saying that even if kings who live by violence can swear off the desire for revenge, we as practicing Buddhists should be able to do so, too. So you don’t let past wrongs get in the way of your goodwill, because if you have ill will for someone, you can’t trust yourself to behave skillfully around that person. And that’s then going to become your bad karma.

So thoughts of goodwill are nourishment for your generosity and nourishment for your virtue. The Buddha also calls them a kind of restraint, in the sense that if you have goodwill for someone it will restrain you from harming them. The Buddha also calls goodwill a resolution and a form of mindfulness. It’s something we have to make up our mind to do and to keep in mind. Because usually, goodwill is something we have for some people but not for everyone. So it requires an act of will that you remember, which is what mindfulness means. You remember that you’re going to have goodwill for everybody, even the worst people. You don’t have to like them, you don’t have to hang around them, but you’re not going to harm them. You wish them well.

This, too, is a form of happiness. When you can look at your mind and say, “There’s nobody for whom I have any ill will,” it makes the mind more expansive. This can actually protect you from some of your past bad actions, in the sense that the results come from your past bad actions but they don’t have as big an impact on the mind in the present because the mind is so much larger.

All these forms of merit – generosity, virtue, universal goodwill – enlarge the mind, make it a roomier mind to live in. And because your happiness doesn’t create boundaries, it can spread around and the sense of happiness shared in common allows it to be large. At the same time, you’ve taken control of your life. You’ve taken your life by the horns and steered it in a really good direction. A direction that you can be proud of and happy with.

So when the Buddha’s talking about happiness, it’s not simply a matter of making peace with the fact that things are beyond your control. It’s the realization that certain things are *within* your control and you can turn those things to a really good and noble kind of happiness, a happiness that prepares you for your concentration practice and for discernment practice.

It's nothing to be looked down on, the practice of merit. It's a type of happiness that forms the foundation for everything else. And the quality of goodness that comes with your happiness will permeate the rest of your practice as well, to make sure that it stays on course.