

Long-term Happiness

October 1, 2017

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Watch it all the way in, all the way out. Try not to go running off someplace else. Try to stay right here with the sensation of the breathing, right here in the present moment, because you want to settle in here.

If you want to see what's going on in your mind, you've got to be here while it's happening. All too often, we're off someplace else. Then we come back and we see the results and we don't know how to compensate for them, because we don't know what we really did to cause them or why. But if you're right here, you can see your intentions as they come up and then you can decide what you're going to do with them.

As the Buddha said, show some respect for your concentration, which means showing respect for your mind. We bow down a lot to the Buddha here and sometimes people wonder why. It's because he teaches us to respect something worthy of respect in ourselves, which is our desire for true happiness. It isn't just a hedonist desire to have all the pleasures you want. It means thinking very seriously about what truly makes you happy, and then doing whatever is needed to find that kind of happiness.

The Buddha talks about generosity, virtue, meditation. These are the ways of finding happiness that don't cause any trouble. In fact, this is the beginning of wisdom: looking for true happiness. As the Buddha said, wisdom begins with the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" All the other Buddha's wisdom teachings come from this one.

The teachings on how things change: It's not simply, "Well, things change. You have to learn how to put up with change or accept change." It means that, given how things change, you have to look for something that doesn't change in the mind if you want to be truly happy. At the same time, you have to watch out for the way the mind can change very suddenly. As the Buddha said, it can change so quickly that there's no good analogy for how quick it can change its direction. Of course, we hope to change its direction in the right direction, but all too often it goes off in the wrong direction. So you have to be prepared for that. This is why we meditate.

This is why we also develop other good qualities in the mind, to strengthen the mind's resolve that you don't want just immediate pleasures; you want pleasures that last, which take effort and take time. And as the Buddha said, it's a sign of a person's wisdom that if you know that something leads to long-term happiness but it's not something you like to do, you know how to talk yourself into doing it. Or if something leads to long-term pain but you know it's something you like, well, you know how to talk yourself *out* of doing it. That's wisdom.

Wisdom is very basic in Buddhism. Everything else you've heard about Buddhist wisdom comes out of these principles.

So the Buddha's simply asking you to be serious about your happiness. Not grim, but think seriously about what truly does make people happy. All too often, we look around and we see somebody with a fancy car, a nice relationship, and think, "Well, that must be a happy person. I want to be like that person." But that's not looking deep enough. You want to look deep inside. The mind that's truly happy is one that can depend on itself in all situations, that has the strength and the well-being and the wisdom not to get knocked off course by changes outside or in.

That takes time to develop, which is why we meditate. You need mindfulness, you need alertness, you need a quality called ardency in order to get the mind to be solid like that. And this is how we develop it: You're mindful to remember the breath; you're alert to what the breath is doing; and you're ardent in making the breath as comfortable as you can and keeping the mind with the breath and making good use of that sense of comfort. That's how wisdom develops inside.

Then you're in a better position to decide what really is in your long-term interest and what is only in short-term interest, remembering that there are certain things you have to give up if you want to find true happiness.

Back when I was taking Dhamma exams in Thailand, we had to memorize passages of the Dhamma. They would give us a topic and then you'd have to write a Dhamma talk on it. I wasn't all that good at memorization, so I figured that what I needed was a passage that I could quote in relationship to all topics. And I found one that really worked, which is, "If you see that there's a greater happiness that comes from giving up a lesser happiness, the wise person gives up the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one."

That's a principle you can use in all situations, because that's often what our choices are: Do you want a short-term happiness or a long-term happiness? Often you can't have both. So the wise person goes for the long-term and trains the mind so that it can stick with that determination: that the long-term is what you really want, and you're not going to sacrifice long-term for short-term gains. You're always going to keep the long-term in mind.

That's the sign of wisdom. And the meditation is how you can carry out that wisdom in your daily life.