

Happiness as a Skill

January 21, 2018

Close your eyes and watch your breath. This is a skill. You can watch your breath for a few seconds, that doesn't take much skill. But to watch it for long periods of time does take skill. So when the breath goes in, know it's going in. When it goes out, know it's going out. And just keep at it, each breath coming in, each breath going out.

This requires that you develop mindfulness—to remember what you're going to do, in this case to remember to stay with the breath—and alertness, knowing what you're actually doing while you're doing it. Then there's ardency: You want to do it well. You want to do it as a skill.

If you find that the mind is slipping off, you've got to find some way to bring it back. It slips off again, you bring it back again. Try to make the breath as comfortable as you can, so that you're more likely to want to come back. Try long breathing, short breathing, deep, shallow, heavy, light. See what's just right for the body right now.

Everything the Buddha teaches is a skill. Even simple things like being generous, being virtuous: These are skills. Learning how to get along with one another is a skill.

When you try to be generous, you want to look at your motive: why you're giving to this person, and why you're choosing what you're giving? Is it that you're giving just because you want to show off? Or because it's actually going to meet that person's needs? And is this the right time for that? Is this the right person for that? You want to look at the act of giving very carefully from all angles. So when you give anything at all—even, as the Buddha said, if you throw leftover food into a puddle of water for the crows to eat—that's meritorious. But you get more merit if you're more careful about looking at yourself, your motivation; looking at the recipient, what is this person going to do with what you're going to give them; and looking at the actual gift.

The same with the precepts. You need to learn some skill in observing them. There are times when you might want to say a little white lie, but then you realize, "Okay, if I say anything at all that's not really true, then my precept is broken." That puts up a net, so you have to learn how to play with the net instead of without the net. In that way, you develop your discernment.

Learning how to get along with one another also requires skill. You don't just do what you feel like doing. You have to think about, "When I act, what are the results going to be? How is this going to impact the people around me?" And then try to have the best kind of impact you can think of.

The Buddha gives four things to think about in this area. One, be generous with the people around you, in other words, if you have something nice, share it with them. Don't just keep it for yourself.

Second, be very careful about what you say, how you say things to the people around you. The Buddha says you have to speak in a way that's soothing, that shows respect for the other person. In other words, even when you have to criticize the other person, show that you're doing it with respect. You don't do it with contempt, as that destroys the relationship.

Then when you help the person, help them in a way that really is in line with their needs. Again, you don't do it just to show off. You do it because you see, "This person really needs this. This is something I have that I can do to help." You give your time, you give your knowledge, you give your forgiveness. All of this helps create a bond, as the Buddha says, a bond of friendship.

Finally, there's consistency. The way you act in front of that person is the same way you act behind that person's back. The way you act behind the person's back is the same way you act in front of them. You've helped them in the past, so you want to continue helping them consistently. In this way, you develop a sense of harmony and trust in the group, so that we all live together happily.

So there's a skill to everything you want to do in order to find happiness. For the most part, we approach happiness simply doing what we want to do, thinking that that's going to make us happy. But as the Buddha said, if you take some care about how you're going to search for happiness, then you find that the happiness gets multiplied many times over. Approach it as a skill, something you can learn from.

It's like cooking. You try something and it doesn't quite work, so you figure out what to change so the next time around so that it does taste good. If it doesn't taste good the second time, you try something new the third time. Keep at it. If you begin to notice, "Okay, when I do this, it comes out well. When I do that, it doesn't come out well": Regard that as a skill.

The same way when you're getting along with other people. You find that if you do just what you want, it's not going to work. You've got to figure out, "Okay, what's going to work in this particular case?" That way, you can find happiness in living with other people.

Because we all have our defilements, and if we just keep our defilements running up against each other, as Ajaan Lee said, it's like going around with your wires exposed. You've got the current running, your anger's running, and they've got theirs running, and as soon as you meet them, there's a short and everything goes dark. But if you learn how to protect your wires—not going around with your wires exposed, and learning how to approach your relationships with other people as a skill—you find that your happiness is something that becomes solid, something you can begin to depend on. Because you yourself become a person you can depend on. Why is that? Because you're taking the qualities of the Buddha and bringing them into your own behavior.

That's what it means when we say we take refuge in the Buddha. We've got a good example to follow, an example we can trust. When we follow his example, we find we develop a happiness that we can trust, too.

So try to approach your happiness as a skill, not just as something hit or miss where you do what you want to do when you want to do it. You do things when they're going to give the best results, and you do the things that do give the best results. That's how your happiness becomes secure.