

The Pursuit of True Happiness

Thanissaro Bhikkhu
April, 2002

The practice of the Buddha's teaching can be called the serious pursuit of true happiness, with the emphasis on the *serious* and the *true*. *Serious* not in the sense of grim but in the sense of sincere, unwilling to settle for anything less than genuine. *True* here means a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that doesn't let you down. This is why so many of the Buddha's teachings focus on suffering, because most of the happiness—or the things that we take for happiness in daily life—really do end up causing suffering as they change. So many times the happiness we gain turns into something else. And of the happiness that turns into pain, the Buddha asked, "Is it a noble thing to search for that kind of happiness? Is it a wise, skillful thing to search for that kind of happiness as an end in and of itself? If you know it's going to let you down at some point, why put so much effort into it?" That's the question he asked himself. That's the question that led him to go off into the wilderness to find if there was a true happiness that could be gained through human effort.

This is why we regularly chant the chant on aging, illness, death, and separation. These four reflections are what led the Buddha to go out into the wilderness. They gave him a feeling of *samvega*, a sense of dismay over the way of ordinary life, the pointlessness of so many things that we do. *Samvega* also implies a sense of urgency in wanting to find a way out. If his reflections had stopped right there, though, they would have been very depressing, but there's also the fifth reflection that gave the Buddha the encouragement to go, that gave rise to a sense of *pasada*, or confidence: "Whatever we do for good or for evil to that will we fall heir." "Is there a skillful way of action," he asked himself, "that could lead beyond this constant wandering on, this constant gaining and losing, coming together and falling apart, that's so typical of our ordinary lives?" After the course of six years of earnest experimenting he found that, yes, there is a way. That way was what he taught for the rest of his life, the one message that was so important that it was worth giving his whole life to: that the search for true happiness is not a futile search.

He noticed that when we run up against suffering, when we run up against all the problems of our lives, there are two reactions. One is a sense of bewilderment: "Why is this happening?" Often: "Why is this happening to me?" And then there's a search: "Is there someone who knows a way out?" And because they go

together — the bewilderment and the search — oftentimes we look in the wrong places because we're confused about what happiness is, what suffering is. So when he taught the four noble truths, he said, "With regard to the first truth, this is the task you want to accomplish: to comprehend suffering, to understand what's creating such a burden on the mind."

He had discovered that there are two kinds of suffering: the stress in the changefulness in things in life, but also the unnecessary stress and suffering we cause ourselves over those changes. That's the issue, because once that second suffering is wiped out, the changes don't impinge on the mind at all. As in Ajaan Suwat's teaching that I've repeated many times: "The mountain over there on the eastern horizon, is it heavy?" he would ask. And his answer would be "If you try to pick it up, yes; if you don't try to pick it up, it's not heavy for you. It may be heavy in and of itself, but if you don't pick it up, it doesn't impinge on you. It's not an issue for you." The same principle applies to suffering in general.

As we sit here, what demands are being placed on you? All that's being asked is that you sit relatively still for the hour, breathe, and watch the breath, stay with the breath. When the breath comes in, know that it's coming in. When it goes out, know that it's going out. Breathe as comfortably as you can. There are several ways of working with this. Try breathing deep and long for a while and if you notice any parts of the body that are feeling tense with a long breath, try to relax them. Or you can change the rhythm of your breathing. Experiment to see what feels good right now. So often we allow ourselves to breathe in ways that are uncomfortable, and yet nobody's forcing us to do so. It's just that we're not paying attention. We don't usually think that there's anything there to pay attention to. Yet the energy of the breath is our basic energy in life. It stands to reason that if the breath energy is good, the body will be healthier, the mind will be more at ease. It will have a better place to stay.

That's all that's asked of us, and yet we manage to develop 108 problems around it. There's pain in the legs. Pain in the back. We can get all worked up about the pain, even though we know that as soon as we get up and change positions, the pain will go away. It's not harmful pain. It's not going to cause your leg to fall off or get gangrene or anything like that, and yet the mind can create all kinds of scenarios, torturing itself, tormenting itself. Or you can drag in things from the past, or worries about the future. Even this much can show you how clearly you create all sorts of unnecessary torment for yourself just sitting right here. The purpose of the meditation is to find out why, how it happens, and also how you can stop doing it, how you can drop these habits of the mind that cause so much unnecessary suffering.

The easiest way to see these things is to go off and be alone, to find some seclusion. The texts talk about three types of seclusion: physical, mental, and

seclusion from your mental baggage. For physical seclusion, you come out here to the monastery and you're basically alone. You don't deal with that many people. The burdens of constant social contact are cut away quite a bit. You're not totally alone, but during the course of the day when you're out under the trees, there you are, alone. That in and of itself lightens a lot of burdens on the body. That's just physical seclusion, though, because you find often that your mind isn't secluded. It's dragging in all kinds of events, past and future, to keep it company. Even when it's in the present, as the Buddha says, we live with craving as our companion. We want to feel this way, to think that way. Even if we don't want to think about these things, they come up and we grab hold of them out of habit.

So the first step in gaining mental seclusion is to cut away past and future and just be with the present moment. You use the breath as your anchor. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present and you have the tools for dealing with whatever discomfort arises there. You can breathe in ways that minimize suffering or actually become actively refreshing, satisfying, absorbing. You find with this simple act of staying with the breath—as you stay with it longer and longer, trying to keep yourself as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels, making a little adjustment here, a little adjustment there—that a sense of ease comes without your having to think about giving rise to it apart from what you're doing with the breath. It's just there from the continuity of your focus, the sensitivity of your focus. There can even be a sense of rapture, a sense of fullness. You breathe in feeling really refreshed, breathe out feeling really refreshed. And the more you get absorbed in the present moment like this, the further away the past and the future seem to be.

This is a step above simple physical seclusion, because you find that once you've learned how to recognize this centered spot and how to maintain it in this secluded place, you can test whether you can maintain it in other contexts as well. Get up and walk around. Can you maintain that same sense of being centered as you're walking, doing other work around the place, as you're talking with other people? This is where you see a lot of the tricks the mind plays on itself, worrying, "What is that person thinking about me? How can I impress this person?" Nobody here wants to be impressed, and yet everybody's trying to impress everyone else. When you learn how to drop those thoughts, how to stay centered while you're with others, you find that life is lighter both for yourself and for the people around you.

You work step by step to try to maintain this same steady sense of center whatever the context, whatever the situation, so that even when you're not in physical seclusion, the mind is secluded. It's no longer running after the future, running after the past. But it still has craving as its companion. That's the final level of seclusion: when you can get rid of your companionship with craving. The

commentaries call this *upadhi viveka*, being secluded from the mind's acquisitions, or the mind's baggage: your cravings, your clingings, your conceits, your ignorance. Dig into the present moment and find out exactly what's happening here. How is it that the mind can still create suffering and stress even when you're centered in the present moment? It's very subtle. At that point it's hard to call it suffering; it seems more like simple stress. But as you focus on what's happening, you begin to see: You're doing *this* that's unnecessary, you're doing *that* that's unnecessary, creating needless burdens for the mind.

It's like a little child learning how to walk. When it first tries to walk, it moves not only its legs but also its arms, and sometimes its head, stiffens up its neck. It gets all kinds of unnecessary muscles involved because it doesn't understand what's necessary and what's not. But as it gets more skilled at walking, more and more observant, it begins to see that it doesn't have to move its arms in that way, doesn't have to stiffen up its head in that way. It can begin to relax different parts of the body until walking is not such a major effort.

The same with the meditation: As we center the mind we realize after a while that we're doing all kinds of unnecessary things to keep it centered. To keep the mind strapped down in the present moment, we sometimes force it too much, sometimes thinking that we have to pull the breath here or pull the breath there or force the mind here, or tense this here or tense that there. When you begin to realize that these things aren't necessary, you begin to let go. As you let go of those activities, the act of centering the mind becomes more natural—you're more at ease in the present moment—and you get clearer and clearer about what you're doing.

It's through peeling these layers away that you get to a point where ultimately you can let go of that companion here in the present moment, so that the mind is truly secluded. At that point it goes beyond even time and space. It touches another dimension. That's when you learn what it's like to be truly free of the stress and suffering you create for yourself. That's when you have your first taste of what it's like to find true happiness, true ease, true wellbeing.

So the practice takes you step by step by step from all your entanglements and all this unnecessary suffering you cause yourself, peels them away, strips them away, layer by layer by layer, until you find that what the Buddha taught was true. Yes, through your own efforts, you *can* come to the spot where the mind opens up to this other dimension that he calls deathless, free from aging, free from illness, free from death, free from separation.

So even though the Buddha may often talk about stress and suffering— it's his first noble truth, it's the starting point for all four noble truths— these truths are aiming in the direction of true happiness. The four noble truths are there to test anything that's false. Like the touchstones they used in the past to test for true

gold: You hold onto your stone to test everything that comes your way because you want the gold. Once you've got the gold, though, you can put the stone aside.

So this is what we're here for. We have that chant, "May I be happy, may I be free from stress and pain." We chant that every night before the meditation to remind ourselves of why we're here: for true happiness. And it reminds us to look at all the things we do throughout the day that get in the way of that wish. It's one of our most sincere wishes, and yet we're always doing things to block it, to get in its way. So try to keep this in mind. Keep checking, "What are you doing that's getting in the way of true happiness? What are the unnecessary things you feel you just can't do without, that are a built-in part of your personality?" They don't have to be. They may have deep roots, but they can be uprooted, these habits we have.

We're working on the skills right now that can uproot them until we reach the point where we're not causing ourselves or the people around us any unnecessary stress or pain. It may sound simple. It may even sound small-minded and small-hearted for a spiritual goal, but if you actually follow the process you see that it takes you beyond what you might have imagined.

How true is true happiness? Well, follow the process, be sensitive, be observant, be ingenious in the practice, and you'll find out.