

A Greater Happiness

July 26, 2004

Why are we sitting here meditating when we could be out doing other things? It's because we've seen that some forms of happiness are truer than others, more long-lasting, they go deeper into the heart. And we want that deeper happiness.

We often hear that Buddhism is down on desires and wanting, but that's not true. The desire for true happiness, for long-lasting happiness, the Buddha said, is the beginning of wisdom. We've seen the kind of happiness that sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations can give to us. We sense that it's not enough. We want something deeper, more long-lasting. As the Buddha said, "If you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, be willing to abandon the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one." This is the principle that underlies all of his teachings.

Years back when I was in Thailand, I had to take a series of exams for monks. Part of the exam was to write a little Dhamma talk, and you were supposed to quote a few Buddhist sayings in the course of the Dhamma talk. They gave you a whole book of sayings that you could memorize if you wanted to, and you'd see little novices out memorizing the whole book. But instead of memorizing the whole book, I decided to take a few sayings that could be used in any situation. They would give you a topic to write on, and so if you could memorize just a few statements that would cover any possible topic, you'd be covered. That was how I thought. And one of the ones I memorized was just that: "If you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, be willing to abandon the lesser one for the sake of the greater one."

That's a principle that underlies everything in our lives. The Buddha once said that when you go to visit a wise person, that's the question you should ask: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What do I have to abandon to find that long-term welfare and happiness? What do I have to do?"

One of the things to do is learning to develop mindfulness and alertness, concentration, discernment in the mind, which is what we're working on here. But the principle applies in all areas of our lives. It's important to remember that, because often we get short-sighted. Events happen and we say, "Well, this is a special event, it's an exception." We know the basic principles of morality, we know the principles of generosity, and yet certain incidents come up and we say, "Well, this is a time when we can put those very nice teachings aside, because this is a more difficult situation." But it's precisely because of situations like this that the Buddha has us take the precepts seriously, to remind ourselves that there are no exceptions for the basic principles of morality: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. Ever.

It's like going into the wilderness. They give you a lot of things to memorize before you go out, "When you meet a bear, don't run." They keep it short and simple and they say, "No exceptions for that one." There are other principles that are sensitive to the situation, but there are a few that are true across the board. So they keep them short and simple. The last thing you tend to think of when you see a bear charging you is that you're not going to run, and yet that's precisely what you have to remember.

It's the same with the precepts. You keep them in mind all the time. And you live by them because you realize that following the precepts will lead to a longer-term happiness, a deeper happiness than can be found by breaking the precepts. After all, there are all kinds of arguments for breaking the precepts. You say, "Well, if I don't lie this time, then I might lose money, this might happen, that might happen." People say, "These are extenuating circumstances. Maybe this is the time to use torture, maybe this is the time to do this, do that," all the things we know we shouldn't do. But when we get scared, when we get concerned about our survival, we all of a sudden, say, "Okay, those precepts get thrown out the window." That's precisely the thing we should *not* do. That's taking a long-term happiness and throwing it away for the sake of a short-term happiness. It doesn't work to our real advantage. So we stick with the precepts no matter what.

This requires faith, because sometimes it's going to take a while for that long-term happiness to appear. But at the very least, when you do the right thing, the honorable thing, no matter what, you've got a sense of well-being right there. There's a sense of dignity, a sense of nobility.

Last month, when I was presiding at my father's funeral, one of the final points I made in my eulogy was that the whole purpose of a funeral is to remind ourselves that death does not negate the honorable and valuable parts of human life. Just because death can happen doesn't mean we should act in dishonorable ways. Just because death happens doesn't mean that life has no value.

When you come right down to it, there are four reasons why people would break the precepts or would go against the principles of what they know is right: four forms of bias.

Bias in terms of liking—people you do like and you're willing to break the precepts for their sake;

bias in terms of aversion, where you mistreat certain people because you don't like them;

bias based on confusion and delusion;

and the big one is the fourth one, bias based on fear.

Ultimately, fear comes down to fear of death. To protect ourselves from the possibility of death, our fear will cause us to do things that are really harmful for ourselves and other people. So we have to undercut the causes for the fear of death. This is one of the reasons why we meditate.

The Buddha outlines four basic causes. One is attachment to sensual pleasures, thinking that they're our only real source of happiness in life, so we've got to hold on to them as much as we can. The second one is attachment to your body, thinking that if the body goes, that's the end. Third is knowledge that you've done something cruel and there's the possibility that after death you may be punished for doing things that are cruel. And the fourth one is not having seen the true Dhamma, not realizing that there is a deathless element in the mind that's not touched by aging, illness, or death—the part of the mind that has nothing to fear.

So we work on these four issues in the meditation.

First, we do it by developing a sense of ease that doesn't depend on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. It depends simply on the stillness of the mind. You focus on the breath in such a way that you relate easily to the breath. It feels comfortable being with the breath coming in, with the breath going out. Allow yourself to stay there.

After all, stillness is the essence of happiness. There's another passage where the Buddha says, "There is no happiness other than peace." What he means is that the mind will know no happiness unless it can settle down and be still. So you give it a good place to stay. The longer you stay here, the more solid this inner sense of stillness becomes, then the more you can detach yourself from your fierce attachment to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, all the sensory things outside that everybody likes, everybody's afraid to give up. It's because of that fear that they do all kinds of evil things, short-sighted things, selfish things, things that are to their long-term detriment. So that's one issue we work on.

The next one is attachment to the body. Learn how to contemplate the body you've got here. What does it have that's really worthy of attachment? Take it apart section by section by section. You come to realize that you can't take the body as an end in and of itself, because after all it's going to die. In the meantime, it's going to get sick. You have to look after it, because it is a tool. But our attachment goes beyond that. We have some strong sense that it's *us* or it's *ours*, and that we could not survive without it.

But as the mind gets more and more still, there's a sense of awareness that separates itself out from the body. Even just that level of understanding, that level of awareness in your concentration practice is enough to show you that you don't have to identify with the body. It's habitual, we tend to do it, but it's not necessary. So we're not contemplating the body because we're trying to bad-mouth it, simply that because learning to detach yourself from it brings so much more happiness, so much more peace. It undercuts one of the major causes of fear.

As for the third cause of fear, the Buddha says that if you know you've done bad things in the past, *don't dwell on them*. Simply resolve that you're not going to do them again and develop an attitude of goodwill for yourself and for all beings around you. If you can maintain that goodwill, then it gets harder and harder to say hurtful things, to do hurtful things. You wonder: What are you going to get out of being hurtful to other people? It only comes back at

you. It's like spitting into the wind. When you spit into the wind, who gets spat upon? You get spat upon. It all keeps coming back.

But again, it does no good to dwell on past mistakes, aside simply from remembering that they were mistakes and that you're determined not to do them again. In the meantime, developing an attitude of goodwill can also help mitigate the karmic effect of past mistakes. We talked about this yesterday: the crystal of salt. You put it in a glass of water, you can't drink the water. You put it in a large lake or river, you can still drink the water because there's so much more water than salt. Try to make your mind like a lake, like a huge river, through enlarged goodwill, and you find that there's less and less to fear.

The final issue is seeing the true Dhamma. What this means is that, as you work through all the attachments of the mind, as you peel them away one by one by one—attachments not only to the body but also to feelings, to your mental labels, your thought-constructs, even sensory consciousness—then things open up in the mind. You find that there's a deathless element or a deathless dimension that's touched at the mind. When you see that, you realize that there's really nothing to fear, there's no need to identify with any of the things that die, because there is *this* as well. In fact, this is something special. It's not touched by anything. And it's not annihilation. The body can die, but this doesn't.

It's in this way that meditation overcomes our fear. Because if you're not afraid of death, what are you going to be afraid of? The only thing that's left is being afraid of doing the wrong thing. But you've undercut all the reasons for doing the wrong thing. Bias based on desire, aversion, delusion, or fear: These all get undercut. In this way, there's no reason to do anything that goes against your long-term welfare and happiness.

It's in this way that you no longer have to go on faith. You see that what the Buddha said is true: If you stick by the precepts, stick by his teachings, the results will have to be a true happiness. Until you can see that for yourself, it's wise to take it on faith and to hold to that. This is what's meant by taking refuge: You place your trust. And what are you placing trust in? The principle that what's good and noble is going to lead to happiness. That's a good thing to trust. There's a sense of rightness about that trust. It's simply when we let ourselves get carried away by our fears and our other biases that we let ourselves get pulled away from our rightness. There's a sense of being lost when you do that.

So no matter what happens, always hold to what you know is good and right and noble. There may be hardships in the short term, but they're more than made up by the truth and the depth of the happiness in the long term.