

The Noble Search for Happiness

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We practice the Dhamma to create a refuge. Primarily it's a refuge for ourselves, but it spreads around to other people as well. What do we need refuge from? Primarily, our own stupidity. Our own carelessness, our own lack of skill. We want happiness, everything we do is based on the desire for happiness, and yet we create suffering, over and over and over again. That's the danger. And of course it creates a danger not only for ourselves, but also for the people around us. So we have to learn to look inside to see why we're not skillful, exactly where the causes for our suffering are, and what we can do about them.

For a lot of us, this is difficult. We don't like looking at our own shortcomings. And it's a peculiarity of our modern educational system that we're very rarely taught how to develop skill in areas where we're not already talented. From a very early age, we tend to be channeled into areas where the teachers have noticed that we have some talent, we have some aptitude, and we learn to specialize in those areas. As for the areas where we're not very good, well, let somebody else take care of them: That's the attitude. But what happens is that we never really learn the basic skill of how to learn: how to develop an aptitude in an area where it doesn't come automatically, doesn't come easily.

This is one of the first things we run up against as we meditate. As Ajaan Lee once said, "When you practice, the first thing you learn to see is your own defilements"—your own greed, your own anger, your own delusion, all the unskillful qualities in our minds that we don't like to see. So we have to learn how not to get discouraged by them. Remember that everyone meets up with these things in their meditation. And it's not something you get out of the way so that you can really meditate. Getting them out of the way, working through them, is an important part of the meditation.

The other important part of the practice is learning to be very clear about your purpose. We are here for happiness. Notice: The Buddha doesn't say that the search for happiness is a selfish thing. We're not here to deny ourselves for the sake of others. We're here to take our own happiness seriously. When we do, other people will benefit as well. The Buddha discovered a path for how to take the desire for happiness and turn it into something skillful, something noble. This is a noble path we follow.

And as we learn to develop balance in our own lives, we help other people maintain their balance, too. The image in the texts is of two acrobats: one acrobat

standing up on the end of a bamboo pole, and the other acrobat standing on the first acrobat's shoulders. In the story the Buddha tells, the acrobat underneath tells the one on top, "Okay, you look out after me, and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll be able to perform tricks, come down safely, and get our reward." And the assistant standing on the first one's shoulders says, "No, that won't do. I'll look after myself and you look after yourself, and in that way we'll be able to come down safely." In other words, if you learn how to maintain your balance, it makes it easier for the other person to maintain his or her balance. The less suffering you cause yourself, the less of a burden you will be on other people.

So this is not a selfish thing, learning how to train your mind, taking your own happiness seriously. In fact, with this refuge we develop within, we talk about taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, as refuge, but the real refuge is when you take their qualities and develop them in your own heart.

And what are those qualities? The primary qualities of the Buddha are three: wisdom, purity, and compassion. As he explains them, each of these three is based on your desire for happiness. They're developed through taking your desire for happiness seriously.

Wisdom, as the Buddha says, starts with a question: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" What's wise about the question? Well, one, it makes you realize that your actions are going to make the difference. Two, there is long-term happiness. And three, you want a happiness that's long-term rather than short-term.

Everything in life requires effort. So you want to find the type of effort, the type of desire, the type of aspiration, that's really going to give you long-term benefits. There's a verse in the Dhammapada: "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." It's so basic and common-sense one Pali translator said it can't possibly mean this, there must be some other meaning to it, because it's so universal. Everyone knows that already. Nobody needs to be told that. But if you look at the way that people actually live their lives, everybody needs to be told that, again and again and again.

I have a friend who's a novelist. Every time one of her novels come out, she has to go to the alumni clubs of the university where she teaches and read passages from her novels. And in the last novel, the short scene she had selected was self-contained enough that it would make sense in a 10-minute or 15-minute reading. It was of a woman and her stepdaughter playing chess. The stepmother is telling her stepdaughter, while they're playing chess, "If you want to be happy in life, you have to decide that there's one thing you want more than anything else, and to be

willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing.” The daughter is half listening and half not listening, but she’s beginning to notice that her stepmother is a very sloppy chess player. She’s losing pieces all over the board. So the stepdaughter gets more aggressive—and gets careless as a result. And sure enough, she gets checkmated. Of course, the stepmother is illustrating her teaching by the way she’s playing chess. She’s willing to sacrifice some of the pieces so she can win.

My friend said that after reading that passage to two or three alumni clubs, she had to stop and choose another passage because nobody wanted to hear that message. Everyone wants to win at chess and keep all their pieces. But this is the basic principle of what the Buddha said lies at the heart of wisdom: seeing that the happiness that’s worth working for will have to be long-term, and you should be willing to sacrifice other things for its sake.

Now, notice that wisdom doesn’t mean you ignore your own needs or your own happiness for the sake of others. It starts by taking your own happiness very seriously, and realizing that your efforts are the factor that’s going to bring that happiness about.

The second quality, compassion, comes from taking your desire for happiness seriously as well. There’s a story in the Canon. King Pasenadi is up in his bedroom with his queen, Mallika, and he turns to her in a tender moment and says to her, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” And of course, he’s expecting her to say, “Yes, your majesty, you.” And if this were a Hollywood movie, you know where the story would go from there. But it’s not a Hollywood movie, it’s the Pali Canon, and Queen Mallika is no fool. She says, “No.” Then she turns the question on him and says, “How about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” And the king has to admit that, no, there’s no one he loves more than himself.

So he leaves the palace, goes to see the Buddha, and reports to the Buddha the conversation they had. And the Buddha’s response is interesting. He says: “Yes, she’s right. You can search the whole world and you’ll never find anybody you love more than yourself. And it’s the same with everybody else. They don’t love anyone more than themselves.” And then his conclusion is interesting. He says that if you reflect on this, you would never want to harm anyone else.

There are two ways you can read that. One is the sense of sympathy we have for other people in a position like ours: We all have this in common, this love for our own happiness, this desire for our own happiness. And two, a more pragmatic approach is that, when you think about it, if your happiness depends on someone else’s suffering, it’s not going to be long-term. They’re going to do whatever they can to put an end to that happiness. So when you reflect seriously on your

happiness, you have to take other people's happiness into consideration as well. That's the basis for compassion.

So again, it's based on this principle of taking your own happiness very seriously. And it leads to a noble quality of mind: compassion.

As for purity, the Buddha says it starts by looking very carefully at your actions to see: Do they really benefit yourself and other people? In other words, it's a reality check. You say you want to be wise, you say you want to be compassionate, well, look at your actual actions. When you plan to do something, what results do you anticipate? Are they really wise and compassionate? Are they going to be harmful to yourself, be harmful to other people? If they are, don't follow through with that action. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead with the action. This can include mental actions as well as physical or verbal ones.

If, while you're doing the action, you see harm, then stop. Because in the Buddha's principle of causality, some causes give their results immediately. You don't have to wait for three lifetimes. When you spit into the wind, it's not going to take three lifetimes for it to come back at you.

But, then again, some results don't show themselves immediately. Which is why after you finish with the action, you look at the long-term results. If you see that, over time, that action did cause harm, then you resolve never to repeat it. If it didn't cause harm, then you can take joy that you're on the path and you keep on training yourself in this way. And the Buddha concludes by saying all those who become pure in their thoughts and words and deeds have developed purity in just this way.

So there you are, three very noble qualities: wisdom, compassion, and purity. And they all come from taking your desire for happiness very seriously, realizing that happiness is not something that's just going to float your way. It comes from your actions. So you have to take your actions seriously. Be careful about what you do. Be heedful about what you do.

This is why we spend so much time trying to develop mindfulness, alertness, and discernment in our practice, applying them to our actions, with the realization that our actions are the deciding factor. They make all the difference in the world between whether we're going to be happy or are going to suffer, whether we're going to cause happiness for ourselves and others, or suffering for ourselves and others.

As the Buddha says, his teaching is the karma that leads to the end of karma. It's a very special kind of karma. It requires all your powers of observation, all your ingenuity, to ultimately lead to that point where you don't need to do anything more for the sake of happiness.

We were talking today about the sense of self that develops as you practice. It originally gets thwarted in the course of the practice, but the Buddha's not asking you to totally drop your sense of self right away. You learn how to develop a more skillful sense of self by working on the skills of the practice. This sense of self is a type of karma as well. It's something you create. As you get a sense of your talents, your abilities, and you develop those talents and abilities, it's inevitable that a certain sense of self will develop around that skill, which is perfectly fine, because it's part of the karma that leads to the end of karma. You develop that sense of self, a healthy, responsible, capable sense of self, because it's part of your strategy for happiness. But when you reach the ultimate happiness, you don't need it anymore. You don't have to create it anymore. You can drop it. As Ajaan Suwat once said, "Once you've tasted the ultimate happiness, you don't care if there's a self experiencing it or not. It's no longer an issue because the happiness is there and doesn't need anything else." And it's a totally harmless happiness. It doesn't take anything away from anybody else, because it's totally unconditioned.

So this is a noble path and it leads to a noble destination. That's when the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha show that they really are a refuge. They remove the dangers from the mind and provide it with genuine safety, genuine security. There's nothing else in the world that can match it.