

Understanding Happiness

November 3, 2007

Focus your mind on the breath. Try and be on good terms with the breath. After all, it's the energy of life. And if the energy feels healthy and nourishing, it's going to nourish both the body and the mind.

It's probably *the* most important thing in life, and yet we very rarely look at it. We're always concerned about other things: people, places, work responsibilities. So it's good to have some time where this is our only responsibility. And for the time being you can be the only person you have to worry about. Look after yourself.

It may sound selfish but it's not. The better you look after yourself in the right way, the less of a burden you are on other people, and the more you can actually help them.

You've probably seen that little video they have on airplanes where they say, "When the oxygen masks come down, always make sure you put your own mask on first and then put the mask on people around you who need help." In the same way, if you're coming from a position of strength, it's easier to help other people. And when you can find strength from inside, you're less of a burden on them.

So here's an area where there are a lot of untapped resources: the energy of the breath in the body. Think of it going through the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out—massaging every cell of your body, energizing every cell of your body. The areas that are tense: Think of them dissolving away in the breath, so that every part of you can be nourished by the breathing.

This is a very important principle in finding true happiness. In the Buddha's analysis of suffering, he says that if you breathe in ignorance, it's one of the causes for suffering. If you think in ignorance, if you label your perceptions, label your experiences in ignorance, it all leads to suffering.

So here's an opportunity to do all of this with awareness. You breathe with awareness, think about the breath with awareness, and label the different sensations in the body as they relate to the breath with awareness. This cuts back on the causes of suffering.

And there's so much unnecessary suffering in our lives.

Years back, during one of the commemorations for Ajaan Lee's passing, on the very last day of a three-day event they had invited a monk from Bangkok to come out and give a sermon, but because of traffic he couldn't get there in time. So they grabbed a forest ajaan to give the sermon in his stead. And so the ajaan who was

pinch-hitting gave a long talk on how the Buddha's teachings were all about suffering, understanding suffering.

Then, just as he finished, the original monk arrived. So he got to give a sermon too—we had a long marathon that afternoon. And his talk—he hadn't heard the first talk—was all about how the Buddha's teachings were all about happiness.

And they were both right. The Buddha focused on suffering because if you want to be happy, you have to understand suffering. And if you want to be happy, you have to understand happiness. We have so many misunderstandings around these things. But if you understand them, then you can find true happiness in the midst of all the aging, illness, and death in the world.

The causes of suffering, the Buddha said, come from within. We can also make the causes of happiness come from within. And when happiness comes from within, that means that your happiness doesn't have to conflict with anybody else's.

For most of us, happiness means gaining wealth, gaining power, gaining status, grabbing at beauty. And there's only a limited amount of these things in the world. There's not really enough to go around. If you gain wealth, someone else is going to lose. You gain power—other people lose their power. You gain status—somebody else is pushed out of that status. And so on down the line.

If your idea of happiness depends on gaining things like that, then it's going to inevitably lead to conflict. It's going to be unstable, because if your gain means someone else's loss, they're going to do what they can to get what they've lost back.

But if you understand that happiness comes from within—from developing your own inner resources, things as simple as the breath—that puts in you in a very different position with regard to the people around you. Your happiness doesn't have to conflict with theirs. In fact, your happiness can actually help theirs. If you know how to find true happiness inside—how cultivate your breath, how to cultivate your thoughts in the proper way—then you can be a good example to them. And you can actually share your knowledge with them at the appropriate times.

You've probably noticed: People who have that kind of glow from an inner happiness—you pick up some of that glow just being around them. So you create a better environment for the people in your family, the people at work as you're cultivating good things inside.

There are three basic principles: generosity, virtue and meditation. And all three have to work together.

It is possible to be generous and not be very happy about it. Especially when

you think you're being generous in hopes of getting something back from the people that you're benefitting. You start getting impatient about, "When are the results going to come?"

This is what the meditation is for: to remind you that you're being generous because, in and of itself, it's good for the mind. That's the reward right there. It helps to cleanse the mind of its greed and to develop a sense of the needs of other people and how good it feels to help other people when you have something and they lack it, and you're able to fill up the lack for them.

And it so happens that when you're generous, other people will tend to be generous with you. But the prime purpose of the generosity is to cleanse the mind, to open up the mind, to make the mind broader.

It's like living in a house. If you're living in a very narrow room, it's very confining. But if you're living in a wide-open room with lots of sunlight and lots of space, you're very comfortable.

It's the same with the mind. If your mind is greedy and acquisitive, it's narrow, it's confining. All you can think about is how little you have and how much more you want and how you're afraid that what you've got is going to get taken away. That's a very confining, very narrow place to be

But if you realize that the goodness you've done by being generous doesn't get taken away, then you can live in a world where they have fires and floods and storms, but your good inner possessions are not affected by the fires or floods or storms.

At the same time, you've found a way to connect with other people. So not only do you have a wide-open house inside your own mind, but other people are also happy to open their houses to you. So the mind gains a greater sense of spaciousness by cultivating the virtue of generosity.

Then there's the virtue of the precepts. This, too, is a kind of a gift. The Buddha says that if you make up your mind not to kill anybody at all, not to steal anything from anybody at all, not to engage in illicit sex with anybody at all, and so on down the line: You're not going to lie to anybody, you're not going to take intoxicants at all—when you do that, he says, you're giving universal safety to other beings. Nobody out there has to be afraid of you—and you're going to get a share in that universal safety as well.

So you begin to see the power of your own actions. By being generous, by being virtuous you create a different world around you. Spacious. Secure.

It's also a world that gives you the opportunity to focus directly in on the mind, so that you can see what the mind is doing that's causing suffering, the kind of suffering that goes deep down inside. The mind has the opportunity to sit here

and meditate to get quiet. Once it's quiet, it can really see what's going on. You begin to see the movements of the mind: the ways in which you create unnecessary suffering and stress simply by the way you think about things—even by the way you breathe.

What it comes down to is looking at things in terms of cause and effect, and what's skillful and unskillful—what actions, what words, what thoughts are skillful, in the sense of not causing harm, not causing a sense of burden. This is the important set of criteria to use.

As the Buddha once said, the beginning of wisdom is when you ask the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The focus is on the power of your actions and the results you get from them—and then learning from the results. If they're not satisfactory, well, change what you do.

It sounds very simple. But most people when they come to Buddhism want something more abstract, something more esoteric. They miss this very basic essential question, the beginning of wisdom: “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” When wisdom doesn't get off on the right foot, it can easily go astray.

So you look at your external actions, at your words, and at the movements of your mind—because you begin to understand that the movements of your mind are what's causing all the trouble inside.

The world outside is simply the way it is. Things are inconstant, stressful, not-self. If we try to lay claim to them and create a happiness out of them, we're asking for trouble, because we're asking something from them that they can't give.

But if you look inside, you begin to realize, “Okay, if I develop concentration, if I develop discernment, these qualities enable me to live in the world in a way that minimizes the suffering: less suffering for myself, less suffering for the people around me.”

At the same time, you begin to find a source of happiness inside that's special, that's something separate. And it doesn't require all that much. We miss this internal source because we're so ignorant. We have so many other issues going on that we don't pay attention to this one question: “What am I doing? What are the results?”

If you pay attention here, you begin to find things opening up. You can learn new ways of acting and speaking and thinking.

So in this way, as you come to understand the sources of suffering inside, you also begin to understand what true happiness is. And when you understand true happiness, it's a lot easier to live in the world with compassion, to live in the world

with goodwill and empathetic joy: seeing, when other people are happy, that you're not jealous of their happiness, and their happiness doesn't diminish you. You're also able to live with equanimity in areas where you can't make any difference in the world, because you realize that your happiness doesn't have to depend on things out there. It's more an internal issue.

So when you understand the issues of suffering and the issues of happiness, that's what makes happiness possible—even in the midst of this world with its aging, illness, death, and separation.

One of the chants we have here is the reflection on the fact that we're all subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. But then the concluding reflection is that we all have our actions, we're heirs to our actions. And this is where the hope lies.

Learning to look at the way you act and learning from your mistakes: That's the way to find true happiness even though there's aging, illness, death, and separation in us and all around us.

Again, it's not a selfish happiness. It's not an unfeeling happiness. It's a happiness that doesn't place a burden on anyone else. And as I said, when you're more secure in your own happiness, it's a lot easier to be a source of strength to others.

So keep these points in mind as you go through the activities of tomorrow and you leave the monastery and continue in whatever other activities you have in your life. Understand where true happiness comes from, understand where true suffering comes from.

You can put an end to the suffering and you can find a happiness that doesn't change. It's always there when you need it.