

Your Highest Aspiration

July 10, 2009

The Buddha once said that if we could get what we wanted simply through wishing and prayer, there'd be no one in the world who is poor, no one in the world who is ugly, and no one in the world who is sick or had a short life. So what are we doing when we express a wish, say, for the happiness of all beings: "May I be happy, may all beings be happy, may we all be released from suffering, may we all not be deprived of the good fortune we've attained"? It's not that we hope that the wish will make these things happen. We're trying to make sure that our intentions fall in line with our own highest aspirations.

Look at the mind as it goes through the day and you'll see that you have lots of different intentions. Some of them are skillful, some of them are not, and they tend to pull in opposite directions. If someone were to appear in front of you right now and say, "Okay, you have three wishes," what would you say? What would you wish for? Do you have skillful intentions already well formulated? It's a huge help to the practice if you can stop and think about what's your highest aspiration, what's your most sincere aspiration. Otherwise, you find yourself acting on all kinds of unskillful aspirations and they don't have anything to stop them.

There was a student movie that was made a couple years before I went to Oberlin, and it still plays there as far as I know. It's about a student who steps on a little plaque: The sidewalks in Tappan Square converge at one spot, and there's a plaque dedicated to the person whose fortune had been used to fix up Tappan Square. People generally would not step on the plaque. But in the movie one day, a kid steps on the plaque and a genie suddenly appears in a puff of smoke in front of him and says, "You have three wishes. What would you like?" And the kid, being a kind of a Joe Schmoe, ends up wishing for revenge on his friends for all the indignities he has suffered at their hands.

That's probably what most people would wish for. A lot of people go through life with a lot of resentments, and all they can think about is how much they'd like to see so-and-so get his or her just desserts. But if you're really sincere in trying to find true happiness, you can't let those kinds of intentions, those kinds of aspirations have control on your mind, not even for a little space of time—which is why we have these chants every day to get the idea embedded in your mind that what you really want is happiness for all beings. And if you're going to try to find a happiness, you want a happiness that doesn't harm anyone else's happiness. You

want to keep your intentions all in line, at least the intentions that you act on. Then, when something comes up in your mind that would work at cross purposes, you'll be able to recognize it.

The advertising industry has realized the power of a repeated message. You hear something over and over and over again, and it seems to be embedded in your nerves. So this is why we chant it every day: "May I be happy, may all living beings be happy." We want that to be our underlying intention. So we keep reminding ourselves of that.

The next step, of course, is to act on that intention. In simple terms, this is what the practice is all about, trying to find a true happiness that doesn't place burdens or put obstacles in other people's way. There's that passage where King Pasenadi asked his queen—it was probably a tender moment with two of them together alone—and he asks her, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" He's hoping, of course, that she'll say, "Yes, of course: you." But she doesn't. She says, "No. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" And he has to admit that no, there's no one he loves more than himself. So that's the end of the tender scene.

The king goes down from the palace and goes to see the Buddha. And the Buddha says, "What she said is true. You survey the world and you find that everyone loves him or herself very fiercely. And so," he adds, "you should never harm anyone else." We can interpret this in two ways. One is simply the realization we have all this in common: We really love ourselves. We really all want happiness. It's a deep-seated desire. So we recognize that we have this trait in common. But you also recognize that if your happiness depends on someone else's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. They'll do what they can to overturn that happiness. So if you want a happiness that's secure, it has to be based on not harming anyone else. Fortunately, it turns out that true happiness is something that comes from within. The causes for suffering come from within, and the solution comes from within. So they cause no one any harm.

If you look at dependent co-arising, you notice a good half of the factors all take place prior to sensory contact. We tend to attribute our suffering to things happening at the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, the input that comes in through our senses, the physical and mental pain that we suffer through the senses. But as the Buddha points out, that's not where the true cause of suffering lies. Pain doesn't have to induce suffering. Unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations don't have to induce suffering. We suffer because of our ignorance, and through our ignorance we suffer because of our intentions, we

suffer from what we bring to sensory contact, which means that if we end that ignorance, then regardless of what happens at the senses, we don't have to suffer.

This is how goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for other beings leads us into the mind, leads us to practicing meditation, because we want to put an end to the ignorance that underlies all our suffering. And what it comes down to, as the Buddha says, is inappropriate attention, not seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. Now, this doesn't mean just not knowing about the four noble truths. It means not really looking at our experience in terms of those truths, in terms of those categories, and not developing the skills based on those categories.

The first category, of course, is to see where there's stress, where there's suffering. And here the Buddha's not simply talking about the stress of change, the stress of inconstancy. It goes deeper. It's the stress that comes from craving and clinging. We cling to the five aggregates as us or ours. That's why we suffer. So the trick is to learn how not to cling—in other words, to find out why we crave these things and to put an end to that craving. That requires finding something that's more solid than these things.

So we develop concentration to be able to look at the mind in this way because the duty with regard to stress is to comprehend it. It takes a lot of mental strength to look at the stress and suffering that are oppressing the mind. And concentration provides that strength. We bring the mind to a state of oneness, a state of unification, with a sense of ease, well-being, fullness, refreshment. We try to develop this as a skill, something we can tap into whenever we need it.

So here we are developing the fourth noble truth, and that's the duty with regard to the fourth noble truth: to develop it. In other words, when concentration comes, you don't just go, "Here comes concentration. Oops, there it goes." When it comes, you try to see how you can keep it in focus, how to stay as still as possible without squeezing the pleasure out of that stillness, without squeezing the fullness out of that stillness. This requires time and it takes effort, but it's a skill that we can master, that we can develop.

Once we have the skill, then we can turn around and look at that stress and suffering that comes from craving and clinging to see what advantages it gives us, and also to see the drawbacks. If you look at these things carefully, you begin to realize that the drawbacks way outweigh the advantages, especially when you're coming from a feeling of fullness, well-being. The simple stress that comes from that craving and clinging becomes more and more apparent. You come to realize that it's not really necessary. We used to think that to be happy we needed the craving, we needed the clinging. But when you see that you don't need these things, why would you continue doing them? You drop them. You let them go.

This is where the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self come in. You look at the craving, you look at the clinging, and you see that these things are inconstant. They come and they go. When they come, they bring stress with them. So you ask yourself, if these things are stressful and they don't really lead to any true happiness, why would you want to claim them as you, as yours? And it's in letting go of that sense of identification, or a sense of possession: That's how the mind is freed from its clinging.

This is why the Buddha taught the teaching on not-self. He wasn't concerned with establishing a philosophical principle that there is no self, because then you'd have to explain everything in terms of there being no self. That wasn't his approach at all. You look at how the Buddha treated those three knowledges on the night of his awakening, starting with the knowledge of past lives and then the knowledge of seeing beings arising and passing away. Most people when they reach that point, would have said, "Hey, I've got a great basis here for a great theory about the way the world works. I can create a philosophy, create a system out of that." And the Canon talks about people who did just that—and they ended up with all kinds of wrong views, wrong in the sense that they don't really tackle the problem of why people are suffering and how you can put an end to the suffering.

That was what was special about the Buddha's approach. He took that knowledge and asked himself: How can this apply to putting an end to suffering? In his second knowledge, he saw that people suffer based on their intentions. Now, where are intentions happening in your mind? They're happening right here. Why do they cause suffering? Because they're based on ignorance. So you want to put an end to that ignorance. When you really comprehend suffering and stress, when you've fully abandoned their cause, fully developed the path, that's when you realize the end of suffering. When all those teachings have done their work, you can put them aside. You don't need them anymore.

It's like building a house. As long as you're working on the house, you need to take good care of your tools, keep them in good condition, have them right near at hand. When the house is done, you don't need the tools anymore. In the same way, when the teaching on not-self has done its job, you put that aside, too. It's not that you're going to replace it with a teaching that there is a self. You realize that all those theories about the existence or non-existence of the self are just another example of suffering and stress if you cling to them. Because what you've done is you've taken that intention—"May I be truly happy, may all beings be truly happy"—and you've applied it to everything you think about, everything you say, everything you do. Even as you get into the deep layers of concentration,

the deep layers of meditation, that's always the underlying intention. Given that you've had a particular experience with a particular state of concentration, you've gained particular insights, how do you use that concentration, how do you use that insight for the sake of true happiness, a blameless happiness?

This is why it's important that we try to establish that intention of goodwill as firmly as possible, and keep acting on it, and not let ourselves get waylaid—so that the expression, “May I be truly happy,” is not just an idle wish. And we don't think that simply by wishing it it's going to happen. We're trying to keep our intentions in line by being very clear about what we really want, so that we can act on them consistently. That way, no matter what happens in the meditation, you're safe. It happens, you know. People sometimes gain psychic powers, they gain strong insights, and if that intention is not firm, they start going astray. Even with great insights, you can go astray—if you forget the purpose of what we're doing here, why we are here: We're here to find a blameless happiness, a total happiness, a happiness that doesn't require that we keep feeding on other people.

So think about this each time you repeat that phrase, “May I be happy; may all living beings be happy.” Because it's what the practice is all about.