

Sources of Lasting Happiness

October 22, 2012

The Buddha talked about three ways of giving rise to lasting happiness. The first is generosity. The second is virtue. And the third is developing the mind—by which he meant developing good qualities in the mind, qualities like goodwill, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, alertness: qualities that help you act in skillful ways because they enable you to see what's actually going on. They can help you see what you're doing and see the results of what you're doing. If you see that the results are not good, they can help you think of new ways of acting that will be better. These are the qualities we develop as we meditate.

You may have noticed in the chants we had just now about aging, illness, death, and separation: These are things we don't like to talk about much but they're there. They happen to everybody. The Buddha's purpose in talking about them is not to be pessimistic or depressing. It's simply to remind you that there's work that needs to be done. You need to develop qualities of mind that will enable you to have a sense of inner well-being even when you meet up with aging, illness, death, and separation.

That means that the work we're doing here as we meditate is important work.

We're surrounded by all kinds of opportunities to be miserable or to make ourselves miserable, but we do have the option of developing the qualities of mind that free us from that kind of suffering.

As you're focusing on the breath here, there are three qualities that have to come to the fore right away.

The first one is mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind. Sometimes you hear it defined as being non-reactive or being fully present to the present moment, but that's not how the Buddha defined it. Non-reactivity he termed equanimity. Being fully present he called alertness—which is a quality you are trying to develop, but the mindfulness is the part that keeps reminding you, in this case, to stay with the breath.

As you're staying with the breath, what are you going to do with it? You watch it for a while as it comes in, goes out. You notice when it's long, when it's short and what it feels like when it's long, when it's short. That's the alertness: You notice whether it feels good or not. And you have the option: If it doesn't feel good, you can change.

This is one of the great things about the breath. Unlike a lot of the other functions or processes in the body, you really can change it. If you want it to be

longer, just think “longer” and you can make it longer. Shorter, faster, slower, heavier, lighter, deeper, more shallow: You can play with the breath for a while to see what feels good right now.

Or you can simply pose the question in the mind each time you breathe in, “What kind of breathing would feel really good this time around?” and see how the body responds.

To gain a sense of whether it’s really comfortable or not, try to expand your awareness to fill the whole body. If you have trouble taking the whole body at once, you might go through the body first section-by-section. When you breathe in, watch it down around the belly for a while: How does that feel? When you breathe out how does it feel? Keep watching there for a while. If you notice that one way of breathing feels more comfortable than another there, go ahead and stick with that kind of breathing.

Then move up to the chest, into your head, down the back. Even in your arms and legs you can get a sense of how you feel the breathing energy in those parts of the body. In the beginning, though, you may not be able to sense much there. So focus on the areas where you do feel: Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Try to be broad and expansive in your awareness.

If you want to use a meditation word to help you stay with the breath, you can use *buddho*, which means “awake.” *Bud-* in, *-dho* out.

So those are two qualities: mindfulness and alertness.

Alertness also helps you know when the mind has wandered off. This is where you need to bring another quality in, which is ardency: You’re determined to do this skillfully. After all, this is your mind. The mind is what determines your actions, and your actions have a huge impact on the course of your life.

When they talk about karma, all too often we think about past karma from previous lives. But the Buddha’s main focus was on your karma in the present moment, because the mind is very active. We’re not just sitting here passively receiving impressions. The mind is trying to figure things out: what to do now, where to focus now, how to interpret things. It plays a huge role in shaping how you experience things in the present moment. That’s the karma that the Buddha’s interested in. That’s what we train, so you want to be ardent in doing this skillfully.

For example, when the mind wanders off: As soon as you catch it, just drop the thought. You don’t have to tie up the loose ends into a neat bow. Just drop it. Come right back to the breath. When you come back to the breath, don’t engage in a lot of recrimination; don’t come down hard on yourself. Just remind yourself, okay, you want to stay here. Then breathe really nicely for a while as a reward for

coming back.

This way, you begin to learn that ardency is not just effort. It contains an element of enjoying the practice. And this is something you really do want to enjoy. If there's no sense of joy in what you're doing, it gets dry very quickly. So make it your sport—watching the different ways you breathe and trying to explore: How does this breathing process feel in different parts of the body? How much have you ever explored this? How much have you taken advantage of it?

When you're feeling tired, you can change the way you breathe so that you can feel more energized. When you're feeling tense, you can breathe in another way that's more relaxing. If there's a pain in a certain part of the body, think of the breath energy going down right through the pain and loosening up any tension there may be around it. There are lots of things you can do with the breath energy.

When an unpleasant mood comes into the mind, you realize you've got some tools to use with it—instead of just indulging in the unpleasant mood, which can actually do some harm to the mind as you keep feeding on and obsessing over something. You can ask yourself, "To what extent does the way I breathe have an impact on the mood?" So experiment. Change the way you breathe.

If you're feeling anxious about things, try to breathe deep down into the abdomen. Think of all the muscles in the abdomen expanding as long as the breath can be. And do it again and again.

Sometimes the sense of anxiety is like a vicious circle. You have feelings of anxiety, so you breathe in an anxious way; and when you breathe in an anxious way, it's going to create more feelings of anxiety. But if you very consciously breathe in a very different way, it cuts the circle. That's something you can explore.

You can find ways of breathing that give rise to a sense of fullness in the body. "Fullness" here doesn't mean that your stomach is full, simply that all the cells in the body, all the different parts of the body, feel like they have a nice energy filling them. When you breathe in, you don't have to squeeze the breath in. When you breathe out, you don't have to squeeze it out. Allow there to be a sense of fullness all the way in and even fullness when you breathe out.

There are lots of ways you can play with the sensations in the body as you focus on the breath, so that being here in the present moment is not just a dull, dry thing. After all, how can it be dull and dry? Your mind is right here and it's acting all the time: placing this label on things, placing that interpretation on things. You want to be able to see and understand what it's doing, because these processes of the mind really do have a huge impact on what you experience in the world now and on into the future.

It's not so much the present moment is a wonderful moment—it's an

important moment, because this is where you really do have choices. And you want to learn how to exercise them well.

There's so much in life that you don't have control over, but this is one area where you do have control: the things you say, the things you think, the things you do. You can make up your mind to do these things skillfully. Then see what impact it has on your life.

At the same time, you can figure out, "What's the skillful thing to do right now?" As you develop the mindfulness, alertness, and ardency that come from working with the breath in this way, you find that you can apply them in all areas of your life. That way, you're shaping your life in a much better way, so that regardless of what gets sent your way, you can turn it into grist for the mill.

And what does the world have to offer? It has gain but it also has loss. It has status and loss of status. There's pleasure and there's pain. There's criticism and praise. Good things and bad things all mixed up.

If the mind is well trained, it can take even the bad things and benefit from them. If you insist on having only things good in your life, the mind is going to be really weak. But if you learn to develop the discernment that allows you to turn to a good purpose even bad things coming your way, that's what's really meant by strength of mind. You can live anywhere in any situation and not suffer. And when you're not suffering, you're not adding to other people's suffering, either.

This is what's meant by developing the mind. It's a source for genuine happiness because once you train the mind, then it's not going to become your enemy.

All too often people, have pleasant situations in their lives but they can make themselves miserable. If things are not pleasant, they're even more miserable. They keep piling on more and more suffering.

When the Buddha talked about suffering as his first noble truth, this is what he was focusing on: the suffering we create for ourselves unnecessarily. He never said life is suffering. He simply said there is suffering in life in the way we cling.

And clinging comes from where? It comes from actions of the mind that are unskillful—which means if you can learn to train the mind to be skillful, there's no suffering weighing the mind down.

When you're not preoccupied with suffering anymore, you find that you're lighter and you're a light influence on other people as well.

The happiness the Buddha was talking about, the happiness that comes from generosity, virtue and developing good qualities in the mind: It's a special kind of happiness in that it doesn't create boundaries. The happiness that comes from material gain, status, praise, sensual pleasures: That creates boundaries and

divisions, because if you gain it, somebody else loses it. If they gain it, you lose it.

And there's never enough. As the Buddha said one time, even if it rained gold coins we wouldn't have enough for each person's sensual desires.

So that kind of happiness is a recipe for conflict. But with the happiness coming from generosity, you gain, the people around you gain. The same with virtue: You gain, the people around you gain. And the same with meditation: Everybody gains. It's the kind of happiness that erases boundaries. That's why it's so special and why the Buddha spent so much time teaching it.

So look in your own life for opportunities to be generous, to be virtuous—i.e., not intentionally harming yourself or other people with your words and deeds—and to develop good qualities of the mind.

We've all had pleasures in our lives, but the happiness that goes deep into the heart has to come from these activities. So do your best to master them.