

## *Don't Be Burdensome*

*April 20, 2014*

We get a number of people coming here asking why we're practicing, what we're practicing for. And when you tell them that we're practicing for true happiness, they say, "Well, that sounds like a very small goal. There's nothing really dignified about trying to be happy." They say, "Anybody can be happy, look for happiness in his or her own way." That's because their idea of happiness is basically "different strokes for different folks." Whatever you like counts as happiness.

But that's not what we're about here. We're looking for *true* happiness. And there are standards for what counts as true happiness and for what counts as the effective way of trying to find that true happiness.

It has to be happiness that doesn't place any burdens on anyone else. And a happiness that's not subject to conditions. Now, you're not going to find that kind of happiness everywhere. And not everybody's looking for that. Part of the practice is learning how to realize that that's what you really want, that you're willing to put up with whatever effort and whatever difficulties are required to find that true happiness.

So it's not just a hedonistic search for whatever you like. It requires discipline and sacrifice to find something that's really true, really reliable, and really blameless.

We're looking for something that frees the mind from its fetters. And of course, the desire for sensual pleasure is one of the fetters. That right there rules out what most people think of as happiness. And then we discover that there are many other subtler fetters that we have to work through. A lot of them center on passion, which again shows that this is not an ordinary search for happiness. It's the happiness of a dispassionate mind. But that's not a mind that's gotten very dull and blasé and negative. It's a mind that's grown up, basically. It's realized that the sorts of pleasures we look for ordinarily are not really worth it. There must be something better.

So we have to develop good qualities in mind. This is what makes the path noble, because these qualities are honorable. The path requires effort, and the effort here often means talking yourself into doing what you know is good for you even though you don't like doing it, and talking yourself out of doing things that you like to do but are going to be bad for you. So it's not just an easy path.

There was a newspaper columnist a while back who said, "The quest for

happiness is not very holy. A holy path is one that makes you suffer.” Now, I don’t know if I’d agree with that, but there is a dignity that comes from the ability to step back from your likes and see what actually is going to lead to happiness—and what’s actually going to lead to suffering down the line, even if it involves some pleasure beforehand. You need discernment to tell yourself—not only tell yourself but also to stick with the determination—that you’re going to go for what leads to true happiness, regardless of your likes.

There’s that old principle of being willing to sacrifice lesser pleasures for greater pleasures. I think I’ve told you there was a translator who came to this passage and said, “This couldn’t possibly be what this verse means, because everybody knows that. It doesn’t require a Buddha to tell us.” Well, we may all know it, but how many people actually follow through with it? It takes a certain dignity of character to be willing to let go of the lesser happiness. Most of us want everything: the little pleasures and the big ones. It requires maturity to see that a lot of the big pleasures are not going to come unless you let go of the little ones. And the big pleasures are not going to come quickly. You also have to realize that you can’t really trust your mind, when it’s not trained, to tell you the right thing to do.

I’ve been going through some of the issues around Buddhist Romanticism. This seems to be the big problem: They keep you stuck in a world where there is passion and when the mind is still fettered by becoming, and they give no real guidance as to how to do find happiness. You have to find your own path. Well, that’s really being heedless. It’s basically saying it’s okay to experiment in any way you want. But here with the Buddha’s teachings you have guidance from people who actually know. They can say there’s really danger there. The Romantic vision is a very heedless one—and a very limited one. Even though it talks in grandiose terms, it still keeps you stuck in becoming. The basic question, according to them, concerns your position in the Infinite Universe, but regardless of your position, it’s still becoming. Even when you identify with the Universe, it’s still a state of becoming. And as the Buddha said, anything involved with becoming is involved in suffering and stress.

But we’re looking for something that goes beyond that. And it means that you have to look at your urges that have been leading to becoming all along, because those are the ones you’re most familiar with, the ones you’re most likely to fall for. And you have to learn how to question them.

In addition to requiring a lot of out of you in terms of being really honest with yourself, the path also requires that you not be burdensome to others. Contentment is one of the virtues that you develop within: contentment with

your material surroundings, what you've already got, but not content with where you are in the practice. If there's work that needs to be done, you're willing to do it. But contentment with your material things really does have an impact on the people around you. It helps you with another principle that's important to the Buddha: learning how to be unburdensome, practicing in a way that is light on the world and is light on other people. Even when they may seem happy to go out of their way to help, you want to minimize the burden you place on them.

There's a story about the monks who got into a competition as to who could have the nicest hut. They were constantly asking for construction materials and labor and help in various ways. It got to the point where people seeing monks coming would turn the other way, close the door. Even if they saw a cow off in the distance and they thought it was a monk, they'd turn away.

So the Buddha called the monks together and told them a couple of stories. One was about a monk who'd gone into the forest. The forest was a nice place but it had one drawback. There was a marsh nearby, and a lot of birds would come to the marsh every night and would squawk all night, disturbing his stillness. So he went to see the Buddha. And the Buddha said, "Do you want to get rid of the birds? Three times in the course of the night, announce to the birds, 'I want a feather from each of you birds.'" The monk followed the Buddha's advice, the birds got tired of being asked for feathers, and so they left.

The other story was about two brothers who were hermits, living near the bank of a river, in little caves up from the bank of the river. The younger brother had a naga that would come and visit him. The naga would just come and show himself to the hermit. It didn't say anything, didn't do anything, just sat there and then would go down back into the river. It scared the younger brother, so he asked the older brother what to do. The older brother said, "Well, does he seem to have anything of value?" And the younger brother said, "Yes. He's got a beautiful crest jewel." So the older brother said, "Well, next time you see him, ask for the jewel."

And so the next day the naga came up. The younger brother asked for the jewel, and the naga looked at him and went away. The next day, the naga came halfway up the way to the cave, and the hermit saw him and asked for the crest jewel. So the naga turned around and went back into the river. And the third day, as soon as the naga got out of the river, the hermit asked him for the jewel. And the naga said, "Look, you're asking for too much, I'm not going to come back again." And then of course the younger brother was upset, because the naga had been such a neat thing to have as a visitor.

So being unburdensome is an important aspect of the practice. In terms of the food you eat, whatever you are dependent on other people for, you want to make

it as light a burden as possible. Because that teaches you to be really scrupulous. When you're scrupulous with your affairs with other people, then you tend to be scrupulous with yourself. Even the little desires that come up in the mind: You have to question them. You think you'd like  $x$ , but is it really worth burdening other people with that?

So the development of good qualities in the mind is very closely associated with how you treat other people. You want to be modest, in other words you don't brag, because you've got to shed all kinds of things—not only your desire for nice things, but also your pride.

Ven. MahaKassapa, who was one of the Buddha's students, one of his major disciples: When he first ordained, the Buddha had a very strong sense that MahaKassapa had a lot of pride. So he told him, "Whenever you approach families, always do it with humility. Never assume anything about what they might want to give. Always be humble."

So our pursuit of happiness here is not just a hedonistic pursuit of whatever pleasures we may decide we like. The Buddha sets very high standards for what counts as true happiness and very high standards for the qualities of mind that are required in order to find that happiness. So whether you call these qualities holiness or dignity or nobility, they're an important part of the practice, too. In fact, it's through developing these qualities that you're able to find a true happiness. It's not going to be found any other way.