

Peace vs. Clinging

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The Pali word *sukha*, which is ordinarily translated as happiness, actually has a very wide range of meanings: bliss, happiness, pleasure, ease, well-being. Take your pick. But the essence of what the Buddha is getting at as he talks about happiness as a goal, nibbana as the highest *sukha*, is in his statement that there is no happiness, there is no *sukha*, other than peace. That's because it's peace of the mind that gives well-being. Even when we're happy in the normal sense of smiling and cheerful, it's because part of the mind is at peace. Things fit together.

Of course, there are many levels of *sukha*, some of them worth pursuing, others not. But the really important ones are the ones that relate to peace, that really bring the mind to a sense of well-being where it can stay and feel full of contentment. So that's what we're working on as we meditate, because we realize that the happiness offered by the world outside is not all that lasting, not all that dependable.

Now, for people who don't know anything else, the idea of losing that kind of happiness is horrendous and threatening. That's why there are wars, and people try to justify the wars by saying that "That's the only happiness we've got, so we might as well scratch and bite and kick and kill in order to keep it." As the Buddha pointed out, there's a happiness that goes deeper, that doesn't require that. In fact, it can't be threatened by anything outside, and it doesn't threaten anything outside. Which is why he was at peace with the world.

We want that kind of peace and well-being as well. It can be touched only by a mind that's been trained. That's why we're sitting here meditating, trying to get the mind to settle down, to have a sense of at least temporary well-being, temporary peace. Just stay with the breath. Allow the breath to come in, go out, in whatever way feels good for the body. This is one aspect of physical pleasure, physical ease, that's really conducive to the path. As the Buddha said, when we practice, we don't reject any *sukha*, pleasure, ease, that's in line with the Dhamma. In other words, any pleasure that's conducive for the mind to settle it down, that's conducive for the mind's being virtuous, developing all the good qualities it needs, is perfectly harmless. It's okay.

It's when the pleasure begins to get in the way, when you get fixated on this or that particular type of pleasure, these sounds, these sights, tastes, smells, tactile sensations, this kind of food, this kind of dwelling, whatever: That's when the pleasure is a problem. If that's the case, as the Buddha says, that's when you have

to practice with pain, to find some way of weaning your mind away from that particular pleasure. But the problem is not the pleasure itself. It's the mind's fixation. That's what we have to work on: your perception of the pleasure, why you want to go for it.

This is why we have that contemplation of the 32 parts of the body. A lot of our desires for pleasure have to do with the body, either our own body, or somebody else's—our own body in the case of keeping it well fed, keeping it comfortable, at ease. You have to ask yourself: Who's in charge here, the body or the mind? If the body's in charge, then you've got a problem because that means that the mind's potential for good is going to be compromised. So you have to learn to realize that there's only so much good the body can do, and only so much you can depend on.

So you've got to focus your real attention on the good that can be developed in the mind. We're not saying that the body is bad or that it has no use at all in the practice. But while we're sitting here breathing, watching the breath, trying to develop a sense of well-being in the body through the breath, we have to look into our ways of relating to the body that are unhealthy—unhealthy for the goodness of the mind—and learn how to give the body less importance, so that the well-being of the mind, the peace of the mind, can stand out and be given pride of place, be given priority.

This is also why we have the reflections on the requisites, to remind ourselves that we need only so much food, clothing, shelter, medicine. Anything beyond that is excessive and burdensome, both to ourselves and to others. So we need to keep our needs to the proper minimum, enough to keep the body protected, healthy, and able to practice. In this way, we learn to put limitations on the pleasures of the senses and focus more on the well-being of the mind, because this is what really matters. This is where true peace can be found.

Just as the Buddha has many meanings for *sukha*, he also has many meanings for its opposite, *dukkha*: stress, suffering, pain, dis-ease. He starts out by illustrating different types of *dukkha* that we're all familiar with, and then he gets to the essence. We're familiar with birth, aging, illness, and death, being separated from things we like, having to live with things we don't like, not getting what we want. All this, he says, boils down to clinging to the aggregates. We're trying to feed off of things that can't give us really good food.

So when you're looking for peace, you also have to look for what's disturbing your peace. And the disturbance lies in the act of having to feed. What kind of feelings are you feeding on? What kind of perceptions are you feeding on that are shooting arrows into your heart? What kind of thought constructs are you

feeding on? What kind of food is this? If you were to take a picture of the mind as its feeding, what kind of posture and look would it have? Some things we can feed on in the light of day. With others, we have to sneak away and hide in a corner someplace to feed on them in the dark. So what are you feeding on, and why? Because those are the things that are causing you suffering. Those are the things that are disturbing your peace.

So when you think about being happy or sad, look a little bit deeper. Happiness is peace. Sadness, dis-ease in the mind: Those are clinging, the act of feeding on things that don't really give you good food. These are the questions that the Buddha has you ask: Where are you finding your happiness, and is it really giving you happiness or not? It's good to keep the questions basic. When you get abstract, it's easy to be led astray. But if you look for the peace and if you look for what's disturbing the peace—particularly, “What are you doing that's disturbing the peace?”—that will take you far.

When the Buddha was teaching children, he was always pointing them to their actions, telling them to look at what they were doing and at the results they were going to get. There were some boys one time who were fishing. He was on his alms round and he asked them, “Do you like pain?” They said, “No, of course we don't like pain.” “Then why are you causing pain to that animal? Do you think that the pain that you've caused that animal is just going to stop there?” He said, “It's going to chase you even as you run away from it.” No matter what you do to try to run away from the results of your actions, they're going to hunt you down.

When he was teaching his own son, he said, “Look at your actions before you do them. What do you anticipate the result to be? What is your intention? If it's going to cause any kind of harm or affliction, don't do it. While you're doing it, look at it again to see if it's actually causing any harm. If it is, stop. If it's not, go ahead. Once it's done, look at the results afterwards. If you caused any harm, resolve not to repeat that mistake again. Talk it over with somebody further on the path, about how you can avoid that mistake. But if you don't see any mistake, then take happiness in the fact that you're on the path and continue training.”

He starts on the external level with these principles of looking at your actions and their results, and then, as you work on your meditation, it's the same principles all over again. What are you doing right now? What perceptions are you applying to the breath? What ways are you thinking about the breath? If you're wandering away, why? What are the results you're getting? How about changing what you're doing?

So it's all about our actions and the extent to which they're clinging and feeding and causing suffering, and the extent to which they're conducive to peace. All of what the Buddha taught can be found right there.