

A Blameless Happiness

August 19, 2015

We're all looking for happiness in life. The Pali word for happiness, *sukha*, can also mean well-being, pleasure, ease, bliss. So if "happiness" isn't quite the word you'd use to describe what you're looking for in life, maybe some of those other words do. The problem is that many of the things we do in our search for happiness actually cause suffering. This is *the* big problem in life.

This was the problem that the Buddha wanted to solve. It took him a while to figure out how to solve it. There was a period when he actually thought the best way to find true well-being was to deny yourself all kinds of pleasures. He finally realized, however, that that's not the way. And he found the middle way because he was able to realize there was more to life than just pain and sensual pleasure. There were other kinds of pleasure, other kinds of happiness, that were actually blameless. Particularly the happiness of concentration: That was the first harmless happiness that occurred to him. So he pursued that happiness and, in pursuing that happiness, he ended up finding an ever deeper happiness, deeper well-being—the ultimate, i.e., a happiness that's not dependent on any conditions at all.

So he saw that there's nothing really wrong with our desire for happiness and well-being. It's simply that we don't go about acting wisely on that desire. The wise way to do it is to find a happiness that's blameless and to follow a path that's blameless.

Now, what makes a happiness or pleasure blameless? Two things: one, what you have to do in order to gain it; and two, the effect it has on you and other people.

If it's a happiness that depends on harming other people, killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants: That's very blameworthy because you're harming yourself as you're harming other people. If it's a happiness that depends on passion, aversion and delusion, that's going to be blameworthy too.

At the same time, if you're inciting other people to kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, take intoxicants, that's a blameworthy way of finding happiness as well.

It's interesting that when the Buddha talks about benefitting yourself, he frames it in terms of following the precepts. We tend to think that the precepts are there to prevent us from harming other people, that the emphasis is on *them*. But for the Buddha, in following the precepts the emphasis is on *you*: how you benefit from following the precepts.

As for getting other people to break the precepts, thatn he says, is what really harms them. In other words, you regard them not so much as the objects of your desire for happiness. You regard them as agents in and of themselves. And as he said, one the best ways of benefitting other people is to teach them how not to break the precepts. In other words, you pass along the skills where they can look after themselves.

So as long as the happiness you're looking for doesn't involve any of those forms of harm,

it's fine. But that's just the first test.

The second test is: What impact does this particular pleasure or form of happiness have on your mind? Think about restraint of the senses: It doesn't mean you deny yourself pleasures. As the Buddha said, if you find yourself living in a pleasurable way and the mind still can develop skillful qualities, then that pleasure is okay. If, however, the pleasure gives rise to unskillful mental qualities, then you've got to watch out for it. It's something you've got to avoid.

But the same also applies to pains and to feelings of equanimity. In other words, there are certain pains that are bad for your mind, painful ways of thinking in particular. The kind of thinking that says, "I can't do this practice, I'm a miserable person, I'm a horrible person, there's nothing good in the world": Those thoughts create unhealthy pains, blameworthy pains, because they're just creating more suffering for yourself. We don't like to think of ourselves as doing something blameworthy when we're stuck in a funk or a really bad depression, but from the Buddha's point of view that's just what you're doing—because you're abandoning your responsibility.

The same way with equanimity: It's not the case that all kinds of equanimity are perfectly fine. When you're indifferent to other people's suffering, or indifferent to your own well-being, your own true well-being into the future: That's not a good kind of equanimity.

So when you look at your life, you want to ask yourself, "Is your pursuit of happiness blameless? Or is it blameworthy?" We tend to think of pleasures and pains and states of equanimity as simply coming on their own, but that's not the case. There are potentials for these things coming in from the past, but without our active participation right now, we wouldn't even experience them. It's something we're *doing* right now.

So this doing is what you want to look at carefully. In addition to the general principle of not behaving in harmful ways on the external level, you have to look at your present kamma right now. You've got potentials for pleasure and pain in the body. You've got potentials for pleasure and pain in the mind, skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. And it's the way you attend to these things and the way you take delight in some of them: That's what develops those potentials.

The Buddha says it's like water that you sprinkle on seeds. The seeds are there, and some seeds from your past kamma are ready to sprout. Some are not going to sprout no matter how much you water them. Others are going to sprout regardless of whether you water them. The ones you should concern yourself with are the ones where your choice makes a difference: If you water this, it's going to develop; if you don't water it, it's not. Those are the ones you're really responsible for, because those are the ones that are going to have an impact on the mind.

So if you find yourself engaged in unskillful thinking, or if you find yourself even just sitting here wound up around pains in the body or bad mental states: Ask yourself, "Okay, how are you *delighting* in this?" It's a strange thing to think that we might be delighting in something that's really painful. But there's some activity in the mind that's engaged in that pain, that's

delighting in it, that's making inroads into your mind. Or in Ajaan Maha Boowa's phrase, "It's making a bridge into the mind, from the physical pain to the mental pain." Part of that delight, however, may be simply the fact that you delight in having a body, and in holding on to this sense of having a body. But now this pain has come and invaded your space, and you want to do what you can to push it out.

You have to realize the nature of the body is that it's going to have pains. We have that chant, "We're subject to aging, illness and death and subject to separation." In the Thai translation of that Pali passage, it's, "Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal." We don't like to think about these things as normal, but actually if you can learn how to think about them as normal, you can do away with a *lot* of suffering. But it also means that when things happen to the body, you have to say, "Oh, it's just the normal way of the body." You do what you can, if it's a disease, to treat it, but you find that there are some things that are there without asking permission—and they're there regardless of what the doctors do or whatever medical treatment you can think up for yourself—that's when you have to learn how to live with these things but without suffering from them.

This is where we get into the more detailed aspects of present kamma, i.e.: What is your intention right now? Is your intention to hold onto the body? Or are you willing to let go of some things that you thought you couldn't do without, but you might actually be better off if you could let go of some of that attachment? What is your perception of the body? What is your perception of the pain? How are you paying attention to it? Are you thinking, "Why is this pain here? Why is it harming me?" How about changing the question to, "How can I understand this pain?" You just change the question. All you have to do is just change the question, and that changes your relationship to the pain. You're now taking the offensive.

What are your perceptions around the pain? Do you actually perceive it as something with a bad intention toward you? Something that has no right to be there? Or do you learn how to accept it as something that's there, that it's something the mind has to learn how to live with?

It's like knowing there's fire in the world but you don't put your fingers in it. This doesn't mean you just run away from the pain. It means that you have to figure out, "What am I doing? What is my attitude toward the pain that's actually sticking my fingers into the pain?" You want to be able to be there with the pain but not suffer from it.

When you can master that skill, you'll find a state of well-being that really is independent of the way things are outside. That's the only state of well-being that you can really depend on. And it's blameless: It doesn't come from any unskillful actions; it doesn't lead the mind to do anything unskillful.

It's when you've found a happiness, a well-being, ease, pleasure, bliss, that's blameless: That's when you've the best thing that life has to offer.