

## *Wise about Happiness*

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When Ajaan Lee analyses the qualities that you bring into mindfulness practice—and by extension to concentration practice—he singles out ardency as the wisdom factor. Which is interesting. It's the factor that has to do with effort, the effort you put into being mindful, into gaining concentration, trying to see into your defilements. Ardency is what does this. And ardency is wisdom in realizing that this is something really worth doing, worth doing well, and it sets to work at the skill that's involved.

That's the kind of discernment the Buddha was talking about: strategic discernment, discernment in action. After all, as he points out, some kinds of happiness are not noble, others are noble. And among the ignoble forms of happiness, there are gradations. So the question is, which ones are worth pursuing, which ones are not? After all, happiness just doesn't come floating to you or washing up on shore. It's something you have to bring about.

This is very different from the popular notion of Buddhism. There's a book I read recently, a history of humankind that devoted a few pages to Buddhism and basically interpreted the Buddhist take on happiness as saying that there are pleasant moments and there are unpleasant moments and you have to learn to accept that that's the way things are: Everything occurs in just moments. The acceptance gives a certain amount of peace.

The image the author gave was sitting on a shore with waves coming in. There are good waves and there are bad waves. You just accept the fact that that's the way the ocean is. It's beyond your control—and wisdom lies in learning to accept the fact that waves will come and then they'll go away. In other words, pleasures and pains are fleeting, so don't get worked up about them. Which is very defeatist—and totally missing the point that there are gradations of happiness. Some happiness is long-term; some is short-term.

I've often mentioned the question that the Buddha says lies at the basis of wisdom or discernment: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" And I've pointed out that the wisdom there lies in seeing that long-term is better than short-term, and that happiness does depend on your actions. But there's another point as well, in that the Buddha recognizes that there is such a thing as long- and short-term to begin with. It's not that everything is just as evanescent as the dew. Some forms of happiness really last for the long term and they're conducive to gaining the noble happiness that comes from full awakening. Those forms of happiness are really worth pursuing and they're worth putting a lot of effort into gaining.

One of the hallmarks of long-term happiness is that it's harmless as well. As the Buddha points out, if your happiness harms other people, they're not going to stand for it. In fact, realizing that there was such a thing as a harmless happiness was what enabled him to undertake the path, because he saw, as he said, that everybody was struggling for happiness just like fish in a dwindling stream fighting one another for the little bit of water that was there, harming one another in the process and then dying as the end result. And accomplishing nothing at all but creating a lot of misery for one another. He wondered, "Is there such a thing as a happiness that doesn't require taking things away from people or being possessive? Is there a happiness that doesn't require conflict?" That's what he was looking for.

That first answer to that question of, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" is the practice of merit. As the Buddha said, acts of merit are another word for happiness. Here again, *action* is the operative word here. It's in *doing* the generosity, in *doing* the practice of virtue, and in *doing* the development of goodwill and other forms of meditation: That's where the happiness lies. And it's not just a happiness for people who don't want to go further on the path. To get further in the path, you have to go through these stages, through these practices.

Ajaan Suwat noted when he noticed a lot of Western meditators looking awfully grim on meditation retreat, that "It's because they haven't had any good experiences with the Buddhist teachings on generosity and virtue to give them a sense of well-being, to give them a sense of confidence in his teachings, and in themselves, realizing that this is for the sake of happiness and they really can create happiness."

What's especially good about the practice of merit is that you see that you can create goodness inside yourself. That's a genuine basis for self-esteem, better than the little gold stars your teacher sticks on your homework paper. Genuine self-esteem comes from realizing that something you've done wasn't all that easy but you could do it. It's not that we're innately good or we're innately bad, but we have a mixture of things inside us, so it's going to be a struggle.

Generosity is not always easy, the precepts are not always easy, having goodwill for everybody is not easy, so when you can manage it, you've learned a lot of skills and you've developed the sense that, yes, you can create goodness from within you. There's a really solid sense of self-esteem that comes from that.

At the same time, of course, the practice of merit prepares you for the four noble truths, because the four noble truths are all about what you do—and the fact that some things you do are more skillful than others. The cause of suffering is something you do. You crave. You cling. The path is something you

do. You develop all the factors from right view all the way through to right concentration, to overcome that tendency to crave and to cling.

These are all things we're doing and we want to learn how to do them well, to learn how to abandon the unskillful side of the four noble truths and develop the more skillful side. And you get practice in this area with the practice of merit. The path requires restraint. Well, that's what you learn in the development of virtue and in the development of universal unlimited goodwill.

The path requires ingenuity, and that, too, comes from the practice of merit. You find ingenious ways of being generous. Sometimes you don't have much in terms of material wealth but there are other things you can give. And this is the part of the practice where you can show your creativity. What would you *like* to give to other people? What goodness you would like to give rise to in the world? There is mindfulness involved remembering a precept, alertness in watching over your actions to make sure that you do follow the precept, and ardency in trying to do it well, realizing that there are times when, in observing the precepts, you might be in danger of telling a truth that someone else would abuse, so how do you learn how not to lie and yet still not divulge that information? That requires ingenuity. That requires discernment.

Or how do you figure out how to deal with pests? I lived once with a monk who, when he was a lay person, had been a hunter. He talked about what it was like trying to psych out the animals. It was interesting. He seemed to have a lot of sympathy for them, but then of course he went ahead and killed them. But if you're taking the precepts, you have to learn to have sympathy for the animals as well. That means not just being nice to them but figuring out, okay, how we can live together so that they don't get into spaces where you don't want them to go. You've got to think about their psychology. Learn to understand them. It's a real lesson in empathy, observing the precepts.

And the practice of developing goodwill, as the Buddha said, is a form of mindfulness. It's something you have to determine to do. It doesn't come from your innately good nature. It comes from the potential you have for having goodwill for some beings and learning how to extend it to all beings. Which requires mindfulness. You have to keep remembering that in the face of sometimes very bad behaviour: how to maintain goodwill in spite of that.

And it requires discernment, remembering that happiness does come from actions. This means that when you're extending goodwill to somebody, you're wishing that they would understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. Which, when you understand that, makes it a lot easier to have goodwill for everybody.

So the practice of merit prepares you for understanding the four noble truths. When the Buddha explained the four noble truths, often he'd preface them with what he called a graduated discourse, talking first about generosity,

and then virtue, and then the rewards of generosity and virtue. Only when he saw you were secure in those ideas would he be willing to talk about the drawbacks of the rewards. Some people go straight to the drawbacks, thinking, “Well, in that case, I’m not going to bother with generosity or virtue.” But that’s not how the Buddha meant us to be trained.

You’ve got to train in these things. Taste their rewards so that you’re ready for the four noble truths because you’ve learned the skills of knowing how to make sacrifices, knowing how to be ingenious, gaining some mindfulness and restraint.

That’s another aspect of goodwill that we often overlook: learning the restraint, the patience that’s required for goodwill. That, too, will help with learning to master the four noble truths because they do carry duties. They’re not just truths that sit there on the paper. They’re categories of your experience that carry duties. When we’re used to the fact that we’re here for understanding action, realizing that some actions are more worthwhile than others because they lead to a happiness that’s more worthwhile than others: That’s when we’re ready for the four noble truths.

So there are gradations as to what kind of happiness is worthwhile and what kind of happiness is not. And even though some forms of happiness may not take us all the way to the noble level of the deathless happiness, still some of them are helpful with giving rise to the path. That way, you can give rise to mindfulness, and mindfulness then reminds you to give rise to skillful qualities of all kinds. It’s not just there watching things coming and going away.

When the Buddha talks about mindfulness as a governing principle, it means remembering to give rise to good qualities that are not there yet and to prevent them from falling away, so that the mind can get into concentration and taste a happiness that’s on a higher level. More lasting. More solid. Which can then form the basis for the rest of the path getting strengthened, so that it can take you all the way to the deathless happiness.

So there are gradations of happiness, and it’s a skill to understand that and be able to give rise to them. Which is why Ajaan Lee said that discernment lies in the ardency first in wanting to do this well, and then in figuring out how to do it well—because if you don’t do it, it’s not going to happen. But if you’re wise enough to want do it, then you’re ready for the path.