

Happiness Without Conflict

June 19, 2018

Once, when I was at Wat Dhammasathit with Ajaan Fuang, we received a letter from a meditator in Singapore. He was talking about how he practiced meditation in daily life. He said that whatever he was doing—watching TV, engaging with work—he tried to see everything as inconstant, stressful, not self. Ajaan Fuang had me write back. He said, “Tell him not to look at things outside. Don’t place blame on things outside, that they’re not constant and reliable. Turn around and look at who’s calling them inconstant, because that’s where the real trouble is. That’s where the real blame lies.” In other words, our mind changes very quickly. And our mind is very unreliable: so unreliable, so quick to change that the Buddha said he couldn’t find a good simile for how quick it is.

This is where the real problem lies. It’s not that things outside are inconstant. It’s that the mind is unreliable. And the mind is also shaping our experiences. The Buddha said, “All phenomena are rooted in desire.” Everything we experience is shaped by our desires, which come out both in terms of our intentions, what we want to do, and in terms of our attention, what we want to look at and pay attention to outside, what’s important to us. These are the things we’ve got to train, because if our desires go out of control, then our intentions get out of control and the way we look at the world gets out of control. This is what the Buddha realized on the night of his awakening.

It’s the way we pay attention to things and the intentions that we act on: That’s what shapes what we’re going to experience. And all of these things come out of desire. His question then was, “Is there a way to put an end to that desire? And if so, can you use desire to put an end to it?” Because otherwise you’re stuck. You can’t use nibbana to reach nibbana. You’ve got to use what you’ve got. And what you’ve got, of course, is just a lot of desires. This is why the path has two factors that relate to desire. One is right resolve and the other is right effort.

Right resolve is the resolve to renounce sensuality; to develop non-ill will, in other words good will, or at least equanimity; and to develop harmlessness, or compassion. These are the desires we want to foster. And then, based on them, then there are the desires of right effort: the desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising in the mind, the desire to get rid of any ones that already have arisen, the desire to give rise to skillful qualities, and then the desire to maintain them and bring them to their full development.

But that first set of right resolves—renunciation, non-ill will, harmlessness: These things are related because our fascination with sensuality, our fascination with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, all things we want in the world outside these all lead to a lot of conflict and harm. As with so many things in the world, if you gain, somebody else loses. If they gain, you lose. The Buddha said one of the drawbacks of sensuality is that it's dangerous. He compares it to a raptor—a crow or a hawk—flying off with a piece of meat, and other crows and hawks flying after it to grab the piece of meat away. And he said, if the first raptor doesn't let go, it's going to get torn up. It's also like a man climbing up in a tree to get some fruit. He's up in the tree eating the fruit and another man comes along. The other man says, "Well, I can't climb up a tree, but I've got an ax. I can cut the tree down." If the first man doesn't get out of the tree very quickly, he's going to break an arm or a leg. There's only so much to go around.

If your desires are focused on sensual pleasures, you're going to find yourself in conflict with somebody else whose desires are focused on the same sensual pleasures. This is where renunciation is a type of goodwill. In other words, you're going to look for happiness in a place that nobody else is going to lay claim to. And you're not taking anything away from anyone else. Think of the image that occurred to the Buddha before his awakening. He saw the world as like a stream of water: The water's drying out and the fish are fighting one another for that last bit of water. Of course, they're all going to die. Nothing gets accomplished and there's just a lot of struggle and suffering in the meantime. As the Buddha added, he saw everything as being laid claim to. There was no place he could look for happiness that wasn't already laid claim to. That's when he realized he had to turn back and look inside if he wanted a happiness without conflict.

That's why we're working here on a happiness that comes from within, that's not based on sensuality. It's based on your inner sense of the form of the body, which can be very intense—the pleasure that comes as you focus on the breath like this—but it doesn't conflict with anybody else. Nobody else is going to try to come in and get your sense of your breath. Other people can see you breathe. They can hear you breathe sometimes. We've had nights here where one person is breathing very loudly and everybody else is meditating on that person's breath. But it's not the same as the sensation of your own breath element in your body. Nobody else can sense that. Nobody else can take it away. You're free to develop that as much as you like and find as much pleasure in that as you like. It's not going to harm anybody.

This is where renunciation and goodwill go together. Along with compassion. All three forms of right resolve go together like that. This means that where we

should pay attention is not so much outside. It's more inside: figuring out what else the mind is doing. Because, after all, even though we're meditating and looking for pleasure inside, the fact that we're human beings with bodies that need to eat means that we're still placing some burden on the rest of the world. This is why even though the practice of generosity and virtue and meditation are relatively harmless, you're still not totally free from harm. You're not totally free from having to compete with others until you reach the deathless.

So we don't stop with the sense of well-being that comes from focusing on the breath. We try to figure out what it is in the mind that keeps getting in the way of our understanding the deathless or having an experience of it. That's what insight is for. And again, it's a matter of learning to look at your desires: the desires that the Buddha said lead to becoming, taking on an identity in a particular world of experience. To what extent are you still doing that? Because as long as that kind of desire is still going, it's got to feed. It's got to cling.

How can you learn how to let go of these things? The best way, as the Buddha said, is to develop some dispassion for them, which means looking at them in terms of not only what you want out of them, but also learning to see the harm that's done by going for various states of becoming: either harm to yourself or harm to others. It's still there, even if it's just on a subtle level. Then you ask yourself, "What am I getting out of this? What's the allure? What keeps making me want to come back for it?" Try to see: What are the images the mind paints for itself of those pleasures?

As you're working on concentration, you don't focus only on the concentration. You also focus on understanding the things that would pull you away. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration to begin with: to give the mind a good place to stay where it can look at everything else and see the mind in action as it starts going for things; seeing the bait that it lays for itself and why it goes for the bait and why it keeps turning a blind eye, paying no attention to the harm that's being done. It's because our desires don't want to see the harm. This is why there are the negative meditations that the Buddha will give us sometimes, like the contemplation of the repulsiveness of food and the contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body.

We eat every day. We see it as a very innocent activity. We've got our bodies going every day. We see the simple fact that we've got a body as perfectly innocent. Yet there are still some drawbacks there. There's still some weight being placed on others. So we try to see: Why are we still so attached to these things? One of the reasons is that we think these are the only things we can do to find happiness: eat and maintain the body. The Buddha's saying something really

radical. There's a happiness that doesn't have to depend on these things. But it requires that you look very carefully at the drawbacks of these things, that you stop going for them. The mind can then open up to other possibilities. It can open its imagination as to what better forms of happiness might be.

This is one of the big problems with what's called secular Buddhism: It doesn't have any imagination. It says, "This material world is the world we're in and this is all there is, so this is what we've got to learn how to accept. That's it." The Buddha has you imagine that there's something better, because there *is* something better. But you're not going to find it until your imagination is open enough and wide enough to admit that possibility.

So we're training our desires so that we that can change our intentions, where we look for happiness, and change our attention, how we look at things, so that, instead of leading to more suffering, our intentions and our attention lead away from suffering. This, in Ajaan Fuang's terms, is where the blame lies: the way we act on certain intentions and the way we pay attention to things. These are things we've got to change. That means giving some more imagination to our desires, because the Buddha tells us to look for happiness in a place we've never seen before. So allow your imagination to imagine that: that there's a happiness that doesn't have to weigh on anybody at all: no conflict, no harm, a real state of peace. And learn to see that as something really worth desiring.