

Merit: Goodness of the Heart

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Years back, I went to visit an old college professor of mine. He'd taught me a class on Christian ethics, and I'd also taken another course with him, an introduction to comparative religion. I was on my way to give a talk. He asked me what the talk was about, and I told him it was about how from the Buddha's point of view the pursuit of happiness doesn't have to be hedonistic. He said, "I wish I could hear that talk!"

Because it is a common theme in the West: If you're out looking for pleasure, it's just for your own sake. And we know how empty pleasures can be. But from the Buddha's point of view, the pursuit of pleasure, happiness, bliss—all of which are covered by the word *sukha*—is something to be respected. If you don't respect it, it goes underground and gets distorted. So in our practice we bring it up into the open and take it seriously. If you really want to be happy, what are the requisites of happiness?

One is that your happiness not harm anyone else. This is something that's missing from a lot of discussions of happiness. There was a book I read a while back on positive psychology, the kind of psychology that covers the issue of happiness as opposed to the psychology that covers pathology. The author was classifying different kinds of happiness, but in trying to be scientific about it he said we couldn't let issues of morality get in the way. In other words, say, the skills of robbing a bank can be just as happy as the skills of going out and helping people.

That's where the author had it all wrong. If you're looking for happiness, you have to think about the consequences of how you look for happiness: What impact do your actions have on other people? What impact do they have on your own mind? And the happiness itself, what kind of impact does it have on other people and on your own mind? Otherwise, if the impact is bad, the happiness is going to start falling apart, it won't be solid. Or the people harmed by it will try to destroy it.

One of the Buddha's discoveries is that being good—in other words, by acting in ways that give rise to good results, not just avoiding harm but positively good results—is also a way to find happiness. The big three categories of being good are generosity, virtue, and meditation. When you engage in these activities, you're not harming anybody, and you're bringing positive good to yourself and to other people. The actions themselves are good; the happiness that results has a good impact on the mind.

Think of the happiness of generosity. You develop a more enlarged mind because you're not thinking only of yourself all the time. It's like living in a large house: You have lots of room to spread out. If you're stingy, if you're not concerned about helping others, it's like living in a house that's very narrow and confining.

The same with virtue: You think about the impact of your actions on other people and you try to avoid any harm. You also avoid trying to get *them* to do harm and you don't condone their doing harm. This is for their good and it's for your good. The sense of self-esteem that comes when you know you've acted in ways that don't harm other people can give a sense of lightness to the mind.

Then of course, with meditation: Sitting here with your eyes closed, you're not harming anybody, but more importantly, the fact that you're trying to get your mind under control is going to be good for you and for the people around you. You're going to be less prey to your greed, aversion, and delusion—because an important part of the meditation is that when you make up your mind to stay with the breath, you're going to have to fight off your distractions. What used to be normal thinking suddenly becomes something you've got to fight. It makes you more sensitive to ways in which your mind creates problems for itself.

This is a lesson you learn from virtue as well. When you take the precepts, you suddenly realize that certain things that you thought were okay are not really okay. This makes you more sensitive to the harm you've been doing. They may be little tiny things, but tiny things can begin to eat away at the mind—and eat away at other people's minds. So both with virtue and with meditation, you're developing greater sensitivity in your actions. Virtue is for more sensitivity in what you say and do and what your intentions are for what to say and do.

Meditation goes deeper still. We're engaging in what the Buddha calls five aggregates: the form of your body as you feel it from within; your feelings; your perceptions; your fabrications, the way you put thoughts together; and your consciousness. All of these things are activities. Even the way you keep reaffirming to yourself where your body is right now: That's an activity, your sense of form, i.e., how you feel the body from within. The feelings you focus on developing; the perceptions you focus on to anchor you with the breath. As you meditate, you get more sensitive to ways in which these choices are having a good or a bad impact on the mind. You get more sensitive to the kinds of things you might do based on the thoughts you dwell on. And you realize that it really does make a difference what you dwell on.

When you gain a greater sense of control over the mind, that gives you a sense of lightness, a sense of happiness, a sense of ease. There's the visceral ease of

learning how to breathe in a way that's comfortable. And the mental ease of realizing that when unskillful things come into the mind, you can fend them off. As you develop your repertoire of skills, you see more and more that these little stirrings in the mind that used to take over very easily, now don't take over so easily. You're able to say No to them without any sense of regret. That's a source of real self-esteem, the kind of happiness that goes deeper than just pleasures.

So you realize that goodness and happiness here go together. There's something really refreshing about that. The Buddhist term for that is *merit*. It's one of those terms that we in the West don't pick up very easily. It sounds like Brownie points and Cub Scout badges. So you might translate it as simple goodness, the goodness of the heart, a heart that finds happiness in doing good, and a heart that develops goodness in searching for happiness. It's the kind of happiness you want to spread around. Because from the very beginning, it comes from realizing that your happiness has to be harmless and it has to be good for other people if it's going to last.

And when you gain that happiness, it's a very natural thought to want to dedicate it to others. Think of all the people in the world for whom you have karmic debts. In other words, you relied on their goodness to get where you are today—the things they've done for you, the things they've done to go out of their way to help you. When you've found happiness, it's good to want to think of them.

Remember the Buddha on the weeks after his awakening. He started thinking about going to teach: Who would he teach first? He first thought of teaching his old teachers, the ones who had taught him about conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment as they understood it. He wanted to share what he'd found with them. But it was too late. They had been reborn in states of the cosmos where they were out of touch with everybody. Then he thought of the five brethren who'd looked after him. Even though they had shown disdain for him for abandoning his austerities and going for the middle way, still he wanted to help them. So he searched them out and taught them. After that, he went home and he taught his family, to repay his debts to them.

In other words, the kind of happiness that comes from doing good is something you naturally want to share. Now it may be the case that the people you want to share it with are not interested. But it's a part of that goodness, a part of that happiness, that you offer it anyhow.

So every now and then as you meditate, it's good to stop and think: Who are the people in the world who've benefited you in different ways? People you know personally, people whose books you've read, people who've created art, music

that's inspired you: anything that's been a good part of your life. You think, here we are living in this human civilization with all of its problems, but a large part of the civilization, the things that have been passed down, are passed down because they're good.

So dedicate some merit to everybody you can think of. That helps make this expansive sense of happiness, this expansive sense of well-being, even more expansive. And on days when your meditation is not going well, it's good to remind yourself that you've had thoughts like this, that you've developed this attitude. That, in and of itself, can lift the mind.

So remember: Whatever the ups and downs of the meditations, the goodness and the happiness—when they're found—are really good and happy all-around.