

The Skill of Happiness

September 24, 2019

As we meditate, we're trying to master a skill. In the beginning, the skill is the skill of concentration: getting the mind to stay with one object—like the breath. You think about the breath and then you notice when it's coming in, when it's going out, and you evaluate it: Is it comfortable? What kind of breathing would be comfortable right now? And you also evaluate your focus: Where's a good place to focus? You can focus on the tip of the nose, the base of the throat, the middle of the chest, just above the navel—anyplace where you can clearly notice now the breath is coming in, now it's going out. You breathe with a sense of refreshment.

We're trying to master this skill because it opens the way to other skills as well. As the Buddha says, you dig down deeply enough in your mind and you can find something that stands outside of space, outside of time—something that's not affected by change at all. It's the ultimate happiness. And it can be found through our efforts. This is why we're working on this skill.

We take refuge in the Buddha, not because we think he's going to come and save us or do the work for us, but because we're inspired by his example. Here's a human being who was able to develop qualities in his mind that we all have in potential form in our minds. In so doing, he was able to find a happiness that was not only solid and secure but also totally unburdensome: It placed no burdens on anyone at all.

You look at the pleasures of the world, the happiness that can be found in the world, and they're very fleeting. All too often they require that we lean on other people. So we place a burden on somebody, sometimes many people, in order to find that happiness. This is one of the reasons why we have that reflection on the requisites—food, clothing, shelter, medicine—realizing that as we live our lives, we need these things. Yet in every case it involves placing burdens on other people, other beings. So we're looking for a happiness that doesn't place those burdens. A noble happiness. This is why we're inspired by the Buddha's example. And so we work on this skill.

Try to be alert to what you're doing. Try to be mindful, remembering that you're here to stay with the breath. Then, if you have meditated before, you can remember the lessons you've learned as to what works and what doesn't work in getting the mind to settle down and to be happy to stay here. Because the mind is like a committee. There are lots of views, lots of opinions, lots of strategies we've used in the past for finding happiness. When they see that the field is open, there's no other activity going on right now, they'll come to the fore and pull your thoughts off in different directions. Either that or the committee members that want to just go to sleep. You doze off.

You can't let them take over because we're trying to develop a state of mind that's alert, solid, mindful, and earnest—earnest, not in a grim sense, but earnest in the sense of really trying to do this seriously well. As with any skill, you work at it again and again. And you have to watch what you're doing, then look at the results. If the results are not coming out well, then you go back and you change what you do. Because it's in the doing that we can prove for ourselves whether the Buddha really is a good example or not. As he himself said, the best test for any teaching is when you adopt it, what does it lead you to do? Do you act skillfully or unskillfully? Here, "acting" means not only things you do with the body but also with your speech and your mind, the activities of the mind. Because, after all, in the Buddha's analysis, it's what we're doing right now in the mind that's causing us to suffer right now.

We sometimes hear the teaching on karma that what you're experiencing right now is determined by what happened in the past, but that's not totally true. There are influences from the past but you also have freedom of choice in the present moment. If you didn't have that freedom, there would be no way you could develop a skill. It's because you have that freedom that you can choose to focus on one thing as opposed to another. You can think in one way as opposed to another. You can even breathe in one way as opposed to another. You can notice what the impact is on the mind right now and you can make changes. So even though there is an influence from the past, the decisive factor is what you're doing right now.

As we're meditating, physical action gets boiled down to the breath. Mental action gets boiled down to your perceptions—in other words, the labels you apply to things. Like right now, you have an image of the breath in your mind. You can ask yourself, "What kind of image would be helpful right now?" Especially, what kind of image of the breath would help make the breath more comfortable? You can think of the breath, not so much as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the flow of energy in the body. That allows you to know that even as you're sitting here with your eyes closed, that your body is here—where the different parts are—because you can feel it from inside. That feeling it from inside: That's breath.

So physical action is reduced to the breath. Mental action is reduced to your perceptions. Your verbal actions are reduced to your internal conversation, as you talk to yourself about this, asking yourself, "What kind of breathing would be good now?" When you've tried a particular kind of breathing—say, you've tried long breathing for a while—then you can ask yourself: Does it feel good? Does it feel refreshing? If you're tired, does it give you energy? If you're tense, does it relax you? Learn how to use the breath to bring things into balance so that the mind will be more and more inclined to want to stay here with a sense of well-being: bright, alert, and curious about what's going on.

This is one of the qualities of the Buddha that you see all the way from the very beginning: He was very curious. Could there be something that's deathless? Could it be found by human efforts? Let's try. He would try different approaches, some of which didn't work, but even when they didn't work, he didn't give up. He was curious to find something else. He worked at

this until he actually found the happiness he was looking for. Totally free from change. Totally free from any kind of harm or burden on anybody.

And so, following his example, we should be curious about what we're doing here. After all, it is our own mind right here. We've probably noticed that the way the mind thinks—the attitudes it brings to the present moment, the assumptions it brings—shape its experience. Can we bring attitudes and assumptions that are conducive to getting the mind to settle down and to see itself clearly?

So this skill that we're mastering here is a skill of exploration: trying to explore how far the mind can go in creating a harmless but true and lasting happiness. We're not trying to clone the Buddha's awakening or clone his insights. But he gives his insights to use as the path, but the experience of the goal, what happens, is something that's totally yours. As in the Pali term, *paccattam*: It's totally personal. And it's found by exploring.

So it's up to us how much we want to master this skill, how far we want to take it. Some people give their whole lives to this. After all, as the chant just now said, "The world is swept away." The things we accomplish in the world outside have some impact on other people but then they get swept away. We're happy to help. That's what the chants on goodwill are for, along with the practice of generosity, the practice of virtue so that we're not harming anybody. But the prospect that there could be something that doesn't change and that is true happiness: That captures our imagination, makes us curious. Is this true? When the opportunity is there, you don't want to let it go past.

In my own case, after I met Ajaan Fuang in Thailand and practiced meditation with him, I came back to the States and I was torn between staying here and going back to having a regular life or going back to Thailand. What I'd been torn about was the fact that life in Thailand was difficult and I wasn't sure that I would be able to make it, able to survive the conditions. But then I realized that if I didn't give it a try, I would regret it for the rest of my life. Because here was an opportunity I hadn't imagined before: that there is a skill for finding happiness. And in developing that skill, even though it is happiness for yourself, it's not a selfish happiness. You have to develop a lot of good qualities that have a good impact on the world around you as you develop the path to find it.

This is why some people give their lives to this skill, but everybody who attempts it benefits, in line with the effort they put in. So it's a good skill to master.