

## *Happiness is a Skill*

*October 19, 2019*

When I went back to Thailand to ordain, a friend contacted a local newspaper, thought it would be a good story. And so a reporter actually came and asked me a question that ever since I've been asked many times, "Why do you want to ordain?" At that point I'd already met Ajaan Fuang and spent some time with him and decided I wanted to go back.

So I told her what I had learned from Ajaan Fuang was that it was possible to treat happiness as a skill. It wasn't something random, hit or miss, but there actually was a path of practice where you could master the causes for happiness. Now, a lot of my understanding of the Dhamma has grown in the years since, but that's one point that's stayed the same. The Buddha did teach a skill. He approached happiness as a skill. And it's a choice: You can choose to be happy.

Some people don't like to hear that, because it makes it sound like the people who are unhappy are at fault. But the Buddha's not trying to assign blame to anybody. He's simply pointing out a possibility: that you can choose to develop the skills that will lead to happiness, because the causes for your suffering lie inside.

Now, he's not saying that you simply have to accept things the way they are, that the problem is with you while the world is fine. He doesn't say that. The world has lots of problems, there's a lot of suffering out there, there's a lot of cruel and unjust behavior out there. But he says you can train the mind so that it doesn't have to suffer from those things.

And even more directly, the fact that your body ages, grows ill, and dies: You can learn how not to suffer from that, either. But here again, it's not simply a matter of accepting. To one extent you do accept these things, but to another extent you can say, "The things that my mind does around that to make me suffer, I can't accept those. I've got to change those." That's what we're doing as we practice meditation: We're changing our minds.

It's not simply a process of relaxing and being okay with whatever comes up. As the Buddha said, you have to develop what he calls "pain not-of-the-flesh" or renunciate pain: the realization that you are suffering from things, that it is possible to put an end to suffering, but that you're not there yet. This is the suffering that comes with the desire to want to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones, along with the realization that there's work to be done. This kind of pain doesn't happen on its own. You have to actually give rise to it, but it's your motivation. You can think of it as the string in a bow: If you pull the string back and add some tension to it, you can shoot the arrow; if you don't pull the string or if you leave the bow unstrung, the arrow won't go anywhere. There has to be some tension on the line for the arrow to go any distance.

So there's tension in the path, there's pain in the path, there are things we have to hold onto, that we have to develop. We have to be willing to look suffering straight in the eye. The Buddha's path to happiness, or the skill of happiness, wouldn't work if you pretended that suffering wasn't there and that it wasn't real. He says very much that it *is* real. It's one of the truths that he says is categorical, true across the board: There is suffering. And on one level, he starts with something we already know. He doesn't start by making claims about the existence of some god someplace or something that we can't see. We *can* see our suffering, we can see our pain, we can see our anguish, our distress. These are things we're all familiar with.

The Buddha gives a list of things that are instances of suffering: not getting what you want, having to be with things you don't like, being separated from the things you *do* like. We all know these things, but there's also a level in which we *don't* know suffering. When he analyzes all those forms of suffering down to their common denominator, he defines suffering as the five clinging-aggregates, a point that's not immediately obvious. When he assigns a duty to this suffering, he says it's something you want to comprehend. It's because we don't really comprehend suffering that we keep on suffering. When he defines right view, he defines it as knowledge in terms of the four noble truths. So there is some knowledge involved there, but a lot of things you have to take on as working hypotheses—for instance, that the suffering really is in the act of clinging.

The word for clinging can also mean feeding. In the catechism that the Buddha gives for novices, the first question is, "What is one?" The answer is, "All beings subsist on food." The fact that we feed defines us as beings, and we find a lot of our pleasure in feeding. And yet here the Buddha's saying that we're suffering because we take on the identity of beings and we suffer because beings have to feed. That's a teaching that goes against the grain, something we don't really know yet, but we adopt it as a working hypothesis. We try to look for the aggregates and see how we cling to them, how we create an identity around them. To know the aggregates, the Buddha has us take them and turn them into concentration. This is where a lot of the skill comes in.

Look at Ajaan Lee's teachings on breath meditation. Many of his analogies have to do with people with skills. Many of the Buddha's analogies for the practice also have to do with people with skills. As you're training the mind, it's like developing any skill. You learn a few things from the teacher and then you try out the principles yourself. Then you have to learn how to judge the results: If you see that the results are not good, then you go back and you make some changes. If they're still not good, you make changes again. You try to get more and more sensitive to what you're doing and you begin to see the connection: You do things this way and you get those results; you do them *that* way, you get other results. Which is better? So you're developing your powers of observation, and also your powers of evaluation.

The more you can do this with sensitivity, the more you're going to see, and the more the mind can calm down. When you've got it calmed down, you've got all the aggregates right

there: the form of the body in the breath; the feeling of pleasure that comes when the breath feels good; the perception—the mental image of the breath being the energy going throughout the body—that holds the breath in mind; fabrication, the conversation you hold with yourself about the breath as you’re evaluating it; and then consciousness, which is aware of all these things. You’ve got all five aggregates right there, and you’ve got them in a relatively easeful state, a relatively constant state, a state relatively under your control.

So you can look at all the other things that you’ve been constructing out of these aggregates, and see that they *are* inconstant, stressful, not-self, when you’ve got this point of comparison. This is what allows you to consider them and step back from them and be able to let them go. And then finally, you try the same analysis on the concentration. Realize that this, too, even though it’s relatively constant, is inconstant; there is some stress—very subtle but it’s there—and even this is not under your control. This is when you can let go and find something better.

But the analysis that sees these things as being inconstant, stressful, not-self, that’s taking you to another level of knowledge: the knowledge that the Buddha calls comprehension, which is the duty with regard to suffering—understanding it to the point of realizing why you go for it, why you enjoy it, but also what the drawbacks are. When you can that the drawbacks way outweigh whatever benefit you get from these things, you let them go. That’s when you really *know* suffering.

So when we start out, we start out with something we know but we don’t know. We know that there’s suffering there but we don’t know what it is or how or why. But as we get more familiar with it, we begin to pinpoint more precisely what it is, and what we’re doing as we suffer, so we can stop it. When we learn to stop, that’s when we fully know it.

As the Buddha said, it’s because of our ignorance of suffering that we suffer. The word ignorance, *avijja*, can also mean lack of skill. So he’s not just teaching us *about* suffering. He’s teaching us the skills we need in order to understand it, comprehend it, go beyond it ourselves. And those are the skills that lead to happiness.

The end of suffering’s not just a blank state or a neutral state. It’s the ultimate happiness. Now, what’s good about this happiness is, one, it’s not going to turn on you, and two, it’s totally harmless. This life that we spend in the practice is aimed at a harmless happiness, because we’ve seen the ways that we harm ourselves and other people by the way we look for happiness. And the Buddha’s solution, of course, is not to say, “Don’t look for happiness.” He says to look for it, but to do it in a wise way, a skillful way. And he lays out all the steps. It’s simply for us to learn the steps and then master them as a skill.

Think of Ajaan Lee’s example: Someone can teach you how to make clay tiles. But if you’re going to get good at it, *you* have to put in the effort, to be observant, and then use your ingenuity to move beyond just plain flat clay tiles to tiles of different shapes, different colors, different mixtures, to advance the skill of clay tile making. When you take that attitude to the

path, that attitude to the meditation, you see that it's not just a rote exercise. You're not just following somebody's instructions to do this, this, this, this, and then they guarantee it's like putting meat into a meat grinder and it's sure to come out ground meat. You've got to develop your own sensitivity, you've got to develop your own skill. The Buddha points out the way, he gives the instructions, but as Ajaan Lee observes, it depends on your powers of observation and your determination to want to do this well.

Now, a lot of people don't develop this skill because they don't know it exists. That was the state I was in before I met Ajaan Fuang. Happiness was hit or miss: You never knew when it was going to come; you never knew when it was going to go. But meeting him, learning from him, opened my mind to new possibilities. This is why the Buddha said that having an admirable friend is the whole of the holy life. In other words, without knowing about those possibilities, there's no way you're going to develop them, there's no way you're going to look there. But when you find that these things *are* possible, and it's a skill you can develop, that opens a whole new world.

I once mentioned to Ajaan Fuang how I thought he was wise, and he said he wasn't born that way. Whatever wisdom he had came through mastering the skill of the practice. And he was the happiest person I'd ever met. That, too, came from the skill of the practice.

So as we take on this skill. There are a lot of things we don't know. The Buddha says there is such a thing as nibbana, but we don't know. He says suffering is to be comprehended, and he says suffering is the five clinging-aggregates, but we're not sure about that yet as we start out. Still, we're willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Then it's through our conviction that this could be a really good way to practice, a really good way to live—at least holding that possibility in mind: That's what can motivate us. Of course, the other motivation is the fact that suffering is there. Even though we may not comprehend it yet, even though we may not fully understand it, we know it's there and it's driving us. We can't just sit still and do nothing. But for most of us, as the Buddha said, we're bewildered and still looking for a way out. He offers us a skill for how to end our bewilderment and to finally escape. And that's the most important skill that you can find anywhere in the world.