

## *The Pursuit of Happiness & Goodness*

*September 1, 2020*

To follow the Buddha's path can rightly be called the pursuit of happiness. After all, nibbana is the ultimate happiness. And it's good to think about the Pali term for happiness—*sukha*—because it has many meanings, everything from pleasure, ease, and well-being, to bliss. So this is also the pursuit of pleasure, the pursuit of bliss, the pursuit of well-being—which I might qualify by saying it's the pursuit of true happiness.

After all, even before the Buddha set out on his path, he had the happiness of being a prince, or at least of being a member of a very wealthy family with lots of sensual pleasures. But he realized the drawbacks of those pleasures. They were intoxicating. In other words, they blurred the mind, they obscured the mind, clouded the mind. And they could lead to some very unskillful states of mind, both in the pursuit of the pleasures and in enjoying them.

He realized that that pursuit was a dead-end pursuit, so then he went to the opposite extreme: He pursued self torture and self affliction. But he came to realize that that was a dead end, too. So what was there left? He remembered the time when he was young sitting under a tree and spontaneously entered the first jhana. After that memory, a question arose in his mind, "Could that be the way?" And something inside him said, "Yes."

So he asked himself, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure?" And he realized it was a different sort of pleasure from sensual pleasures. We call this the *pleasure of form*, which is different from the pleasures you get from having the body touch something that's smooth and comfortable, not too cold, not too hot. This is the pleasure of the body as it's felt from within, and it's a different kind of pleasure. In the beginning it may not seem so different, but it requires a different type of mind state.

After all, it requires skill to get the mind to settle down like this. You have to put aside all your fascination with sensual pleasures. You have to get rid of all unskillful qualities. Even if it's not for good, you have to put them aside. Only then can the mind enter into the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. In other words, you've secluded your mind from unskillful states, and you're just here with the body as you feel it from within.

This requires mindfulness, ardency, alertness—all the qualities you need to develop a skill. That right there makes you a different person. Because when you develop a skill, you have to develop patience, you have to have a clear view of cause and effect, you have to think strategically, and there are a lot of things you have to give up in order to master the skill. This builds character. In the same way, getting into the first jhana requires qualities of character.

Now, the Buddha says there are people who get into the first jhana and then they spoil it by comparing themselves to others: "I've got the first jhana. Other people don't have the first jhana." That, he says, is the sign of a person of no integrity. So simply attaining the jhana is not

enough to guarantee that you have a fully developed character or fully developed integrity. But it does require qualities of patience, endurance, determination, to get it right so that you're focused, clear, alert, and not just resting, but mindful and ardent. That's why this is a superior pleasure—because it makes you a better person.

And you pursue this pleasure, you pursue this *sukha*. There's a sutta that goes through each of the different jhanas, and you notice that for each jhana there's something that could disturb it. As you avoid the disturbance, you get into a higher level of concentration, and then things that were part and parcel of the previous level of concentration suddenly become a disturbance. So you're becoming more and more of a connoisseur of the level of stress in the mind, the level of disturbance in the mind.

This, too, develops your discernment, develops your alertness, develops your ardency. To begin just getting the mind into concentration, pursuing this particular type of pleasure, requires certain qualities of character. And these qualities are going to serve you in good stead as you go to higher and higher levels, because the pleasure gets more refined, goes deeper, gets more alluring, and there is a temptation just to stay there, saying, "This is good enough for me." But if you've developed honesty along the way, you begin to realize that there's a lot to be gained by continuing to figure out where the disturbance is in the state of mind, what you're doing to create that disturbance, and what you can let go to free yourself of that disturbance.

So on the one hand, it's a matter becoming very picky about what you think of as happiness, or pleasure, or ease, well-being. But at the same time, you have to develop good qualities of character, so that you're not just a dilettante or a hedonist.

This is a pursuit of happiness that also involves the pursuit of *goodness*. It's a term we don't hear much. Ajaan Lee talks about it quite a lot, though. He says, "People come to the monastery to develop their *goodness*."

A couple years back I did a search on Amazon, among the books. I just typed in "goodness" to see what came out: Most of the books were on baking. That's the kind of "goodness" people usually think about.

But the goodness of your character is something the Buddha paid a lot of attention to. You're not just doing a technique here. In other words, you're not just getting good at the technical aspects of being with the breath, getting the mind to settle down. If you do it well, you do it right, you're developing some goodness as well—which is why this pleasure is superior. After all, you can indulge in lots of sensual pleasures and not be particularly good at all. In fact, there are a lot of pleasures that require that you abandon your goodness. But to get really good at concentration requires that your goodness develop as well.

But even this happiness has its drawbacks. After all, it is dependent on conditions. It's something that's fabricated; it's put together. But as you pursue it, you get more and more sensitive to precisely that fact, and that's what enables you to go beyond it, which is why this is part of the path. In all the elements of the path, all the factors of the path, the Buddha has you

develop qualities that will pull you out of things that are unskillful, but also will contain the seeds for their own transcendence.

Although the Buddha said that a person of no integrity can attain jhāna, he also mentioned that as soon as you start thinking about, “Oh, my jhana is better than everybody else’s,” you’ve lost it. So if you want to get really good at this, you have to be a good person, develop good qualities of the mind, and those will stand you in good stead.

So don’t be afraid of the pleasure of concentration. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have this pleasure, there’s no way you’re going to be able to overcome your desire to go for sensual pleasures. No matter how much you may know about their drawbacks, the mind needs pleasure in order to survive, and if it doesn’t get this pleasure then it’s going to go sneaking back to its old sensual pleasures—or worse. So allow yourself to enjoy the meditation. Find the sensitive spots in the body that respond to different ways of breathing, that let you know, “Okay, this way of breathing is really good,” and focus there.

As the Buddha said, *indulge* in it. Not to the point where you lose the breath and just go for the pleasure. Remember the breath. The fact that you’re attentive to the breath is what allows the pleasure to exist. But indulge in it.

It’s a pleasure that doesn’t weigh on the world and it’s a pleasure that’s clear-eyed and sober. We live in this world of aging, illness, death, and separation, so what kind of pleasures are appropriate for that kind of world? Sensual pleasures aren’t: You look at them and you realize that if you enjoy these, they develop bad qualities of character that will then pull you down. Whereas the pleasure of concentration develops good qualities, qualities that will stand you in good stead as you face aging, illness, death, and separation.

The Buddha was very clear-eyed about the drawbacks of the world. But he didn’t say, “Well, because the world offers us a lot of suffering, we simply just have to suffer.” The wise person is one who can find a sense of well-being inside in spite of what’s going on in the world—and can find it in a way that doesn’t weigh on the world at all, and offers a good example to other people in the world.

So don’t be afraid to pursue happiness, pleasure, bliss, well-being, ease—just learn how to do it wisely.