

Succeeding at Happiness

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One of the first things that drew me to the Buddha's teaching was that it approaches happiness as a skill. It's not something hit or miss, not something that a God can give or take away at will at his or her pleasure. It's something you can create. As with any skill it requires two things, as the Buddha said: commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to doing something and then you reflect on it: How's it going? What are the results? If you don't like the results, you can change what you're doing. If you do like the results, you can maintain the original causes.

In other words, you approach happiness as an exercise in wisdom. Think of the Buddha's statement about how wisdom begins with finding a brahman or contemplative—in other words, somebody who has practiced the Dhamma—and asking that person, “What's skillful? What's blameless? What when I do will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?”

The basic answer comes in the three forms of merit: generosity, virtue, and meditation. It's important that you approach each of these activities as a skill if you want to get the most out of them. This means you don't just go through the motions. We're not talking about ritual merit here. We're talking about actually taking it to heart, engaging in these things, committing to these activities, and then reflecting on them to adjust our actions. It's in the reflection that the wisdom grows.

You can take that pattern of commitment and reflection and make it more detailed in terms of the four bases for success. You want to succeed at generosity, succeed at virtue, and succeed at meditation. Despite what you may sometimes hear, that there is no such thing as a good or a bad meditation, there really is. Good meditation helps you to settle down. The mind is still, satisfied, nourished by the meditation. It can be done. The same principle applies to generosity and virtue. You can succeed at these things.

The four bases of success are desire, persistence, intent, and analysis. The analysis corresponds to the reflection and the other three bases correspond to the commitment.

To begin with, you have to *want* to commit yourself to developing merit. You have to want to be generous. Tell yourself: Something good is going to come from this. The Buddha said this attitude is an important part of getting the most out of generosity. In order to generate that desire, you want to look for recipients who

inspire you, so that you feel good about giving them what you've given. The Buddha recommends looking for people who are free from passion, aversion, and delusion, or who are on the path trying to get rid of those qualities in the mind—because those people will be the ones most likely to make the best use of your gift.

So you look at the recipient.

Then you look at the gift: What are the things you want to give? Are they good for the recipient? And what attitude you want to maintain as you give? The skillful attitude is one of sympathy and respect.

That's desire, the first base of success.

As for persistence, you try your best, for example, with your attitude, your motivation. As the Buddha said, some people give because they're thinking of storing up what they're giving. Generosity for them is a way of putting things in the bank for the next life. He says that's the lowest of the possible motivations. He doesn't say it's bad, simply that there's better.

A higher motivation is based on compassion: You see that you have more than enough of something and other people don't have enough, so it doesn't seem right that you wouldn't share. Higher than that is a motivation more inclined toward concentration: Giving makes the mind serene; joy and gratification arise. The highest motivation is when it's purely, as the Buddha said, an ornament of the mind. In other words, you're no longer feeding off what you're going to get out of the gift. It's just a natural expression of the mind's goodness.

So try to do this well. Get your motivation in line and then think about what you're giving, how you're going to give it.

Then pay attention to what you're doing and how you're doing it. That's the third base of success. Look to see: What is it that the recipient needs? What would make that person happy? Put some thought into it. This is the part of gift-giving where you can be as creative as you want.

Then use your discernment, your powers of analysis, both in the act of giving and in reflecting on it. As you give, try to maintain a good attitude in the mind. As the Buddha said, have the attitude that something important will come of this. There were people in his time who said giving didn't really accomplish anything at all. Everybody was going to be annihilated at death—at least that's what those people thought—so why give? It's all going to go to nothingness anyhow. That was their attitude.

The Buddha, though, said, "No." When he says, "There is what is given," it sounds strange but it's to counteract that other idea. The truth is, we're not annihilated at death. We can help one another along. There is a path of practice

that we can follow, and we can help other people follow, that will lead to true happiness. Generosity is part of that path.

So, you're bringing in all four bases for success, so that you succeed in your generosity. In other words, it becomes a genuine source of happiness.

The same with the precepts: Don't regard them as a chore, or as onerous rules that are forced on you. Here's your opportunity to live in the world in a harmless way and you're trying to be meticulous in it. Cultivate the desire to be harmless. For example, with the precept against lying, there are so many little white lies that people tell in the course of the day. It has become taken for granted that this is what people do. You look at the Internet, and it's mostly lies, lies, lies—not 100%, but there's so much of it. It's so common.

As the Buddha pointed out, the precept against lying is the most important of the precepts, but for some reason, it's one that people tend to resist the most. They keep coming up with excuses. They try to argue from the Nazis that there are times when you have to lie.

This is where you have to bring in your persistence and intentness to stick with the precepts. And your ingenuity: As you try to do this well, there will be difficult situations where you have information you don't want to divulge. So what can you say that's not misrepresenting the truth, but also doesn't divulge the information to people who might abuse it? It can be done. It's a good exercise of your ingenuity and discernment. That way, virtue becomes a challenge, and you're up for the challenge.

In that way, the practice of virtue develops habits that will be good for your meditation, the third meritorious activity.

You start with the desire to do this. You want to get the mind to settle down. That desire is not to be looked down on. We're not practicing what they call choiceless awareness. We're choosing to get the mind to focus on one thing. It's okay to want the path to happen, to want the mind to settle down. It's all part of right effort: generating the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. So desire is a legitimate part of the practice.

Of course, you want to focus the desire on the causes. If you just think about how much you want the results but don't do the causes, that's when the desire gets in the way. If you really focus on the causes, that becomes your persistence as you notice any distractions or any tendency when the mind is about to get distracted. You can learn how to head it off at the pass.

You can also focus your desire on the breath. The breath energy is an important part of your experience of the body. Your health depends on it. Moods in the mind will be affected by the state of the breath energy in the body. So here's

something to explore, and this is your opportunity to explore it. What kind of breathing would feel really satisfying? Which parts of the body seem to be starved of breath energy? What can you give to them?

Then how do you relate to the breath? How do you picture it in your mind? What way of picturing it helps you get a sense that the whole body is breathing, every little cell is breathing, and they're all in harmony, they're all working together? Stick with it, be persistent, so that you can learn these things for yourself. By the way you perceive the breath, you can change the way you actually experience the breath, and it does become more satisfying, more nourishing. Of the various parts of the path, this is the one that the Buddha identifies as the food for the mind, food for the path.

If you're not feeling nourished by your concentration, something's wrong. So give full attention to what you're doing, in terms of the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself about the breath, the images you hold in your mind about the breath, the feelings that develop in the body as a result, and then what you do with those feelings. Pay full attention to this and then reflect, use your discernment: How do you get the most out of this? How do you understand what's going on in terms of these different kinds of fabrication so that the mind can settle down and be clear to itself?

In all of these activities—generosity, virtue, meditation—it is possible to succeed. It is possible to bring about genuine happiness as a skill.

So, look at your practice. If it doesn't seem nourishing, ask yourself which of these bases of success is missing. Where's your desire focused? Are you really putting in the effort to do this well? Are you paying full attention to what you're doing? Are you reflecting on it in a wise way, in a way that can take the results of the reflection and then adjust what you're doing so that you can get better and better results?

That's how any skill is developed. You're focusing this approach on genuine happiness. You'd think that more people would be interested in following this path. It's as if people don't take their happiness seriously.

There was a book that came out years back called *Cosmic Consciousness*, where the author talked about how a sense of unity, a sense of oneness, and a sense of rightness of the world were something common to all religions. He talked about how people would spontaneously gain these insights, gain a sense of this consciousness. The part he didn't like that was in Buddhism, where people actually cultivated it. He thought it didn't seem natural. It was more natural—and therefore better, he thought—when it was spontaneous. Of course, that had to do with the author's ideas about who was behind all these feelings of unity and

consciousness. He saw it as a gift from above, and it didn't seem right to him that people were actually learning how to exercise control in this area. The problem with that, you can see from the book, was that his interpretation of what the Buddhist monks were doing was pretty far from the mark. If you just sit around, waiting for these things to happen on their own, you don't have anything to compare. But if you commit yourself to doing the meditation and you reflect, you get to know your mind— its many ins and outs and ups and downs.

Then in comparing and reflecting, you get more discerning as to what really is a worthwhile goal, and what's the best path there. We're here not for a state of oneness. Oneness, as the Buddha pointed out, is something fabricated. It's put together, and as you get more sensitive to the process of fabrication, you can see that.

You want to develop your sensitivity so that you're looking for something better, something unfabricated. In other words, you get more and more particular about what you regard as satisfactory happiness. That's part of developing these set of skills as well. Getting better as you commit yourself to the practice, and more discerning in how you reflect on the results of what you've done.

So, think of happiness as a skill. As the Buddha said, the acts of merit— generosity, virtue meditation—are in and of themselves happiness and they lead to more happiness. They're good in the doing and good in the results they yield. What more would you want?