

Delight in the Path

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Several years ago, I got into an argument with a former Zen monk on the question of which teaching took priority: the three characteristics or the search for happiness.

His position was that the three characteristics took priority. In other words, you had to tame your search for happiness to admit the truth of the three characteristics. Otherwise, you're fighting against reality, hoping for illusory forms of happiness, only to be disappointed. But if you resigned yourself to the fact that nothing was permanent, nothing was free of stress, nothing was really under your control, then you could live in peace.

I argued that the search for happiness took priority. After all, that's what the Buddha searched for from the very beginning: total happiness. Then the three characteristics fall *under* that search, in the sense that if you come across something that's inconstant, or stressful, or not-self, it can't be the ultimate happiness you're looking for. Because that's what we are looking for: the *ultimate*, something that goes *beyond* the normal, a special happiness that does not disappoint.

It may sound like a technical question, but it has a lot of important implications. There was a study done several years ago: People in Sri Lanka who were reputed by their friends to be really into the Dhamma were given psychological tests, and the conclusion was that they were all suffering from a mild form of depression. They had resigned themselves to the impermanence of things, didn't have any large scale hopes or expectations—life was gray. That's what happens when you put the three characteristics first.

The Buddha was not the sort of person to resign himself to those things, and he doesn't advise us to, either. He tells us to *delight* in the Dhamma, to delight in the path of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones. There's work to be done, and it's good work.

It's simply that for a lot of us, it involves more seclusion than we're used to. We're also learning to see the downside of a lot of things that we used to find meaningful in life. It can be disconcerting and disorienting, but it depends on how you talk to yourself about it.

The ultimate happiness, *nibbāna*, doesn't require delight, "delight" meaning talking to yourself to encourage yourself to enjoy a particular form of happiness. When they say the arahants are beyond delight, it sounds a little gray, but it's actually because they don't *need* delight. We hold on to delight because we've needed it all along. We've applied it to our ordinary ways of looking for happiness because something deep down inside us tells us that they're not satisfactory—they're not enough.

So we have to encourage ourselves, talk to ourselves, to motivate ourselves to keep going for everyday happiness. Those verbs that they use to describe the Buddha's Dhamma talks—

instructing, encouraging, rousing, urging—are things we do with ourselves all the time. But we tend to encourage ourselves in the wrong direction, urge ourselves, rouse ourselves in the wrong direction.

He, on the other hand, gives us encouragement to show us that there are other ways of talking to ourselves to appreciate what happens when you can be alone and watching things going on in your mind.

That's the big issue: We fall for these processes that lead to becoming, where we take on an identity in a world of experience around a desire, and we *live* in those becomings. Our sense of *who* we are is in those becomings, our sense of *where* we are, *what's* important, centers in those becomings.

But now, as we meditate, we're learning to step back from them and to see that they have their drawbacks. Your old customs of how you would urge yourself, encourage yourself, and rouse yourself no longer apply. You see through them.

It often happens that we have trouble living without encouragement, but the Buddha's not telling us to live without encouragement. He himself encourages us, but he encourages us to see things in a different light: that we're free from our entrapment, free from our slavery to our desires that have to depend on becoming.

So you want to learn how to appreciate that: that you're stepping out of something that was a really bad habit, a habit that was doomed to disappointment and failure—trying to find satisfaction in something that's inconstant, stressful, not-self.

So, it's good to keep in mind the point that the Buddha's not telling you, "Well, this is the way the world is—just accept it." He's saying, "This is the way you've been looking for happiness in the past, and it's not good enough—because there is something better."

As he explains how the mind has fallen for these things and how it doesn't have to: That's part of his encouragement. He instructs us first in the steps of how the mind creates a thought-world and then goes into it, but he encourages us to learn how to step back and watch these things and learn how to bring them under our control.

There's a clarity that comes with that, and a fascination with understanding, "Oh, this is how the mind has been lying to itself all along. This is how it's been misrepresenting happiness to itself all along." There may be some nostalgia for your old ways, but it's good to learn that "Okay, it was just a disturbance, it was just a lie. There's something much better."

This is why the Buddha recommends that when the mind gets quiet, you take at least a little time to appreciate the disturbances that are *not* there in the quiet, and the clarity with which you can see things now.

Think of that stock phrase that's repeated many times when people would listen to the Dhamma for the first time and they're suddenly struck with how clear it is, how hopeful it is. They say, "Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! It's as if someone has set upright something that was overturned, revealing what was hidden."

In other words, the Buddha sets your values straight. You don't have to submit yourself to the fact that things are impermanent, stressful, and not-self. You can put your desire for true happiness *above* those things. That's setting things *upright*.

Revealing what is hidden: looking into the ways by which the mind creates false worlds for itself, false pleasures for itself, and seeing them for what they are.

Part of this, of course, is in his explanations, and part of it is in the range of skills that he has us develop. As the mind gets more quiet, a more exquisite form of happiness or well-being can be found through the concentration. You get a different perspective on things. What seemed to be pleasure, you see as actually stressful. That's how what was hidden is now revealed: the ways of the mind in creating these worlds. You see how empty a lot of the raw materials are and you ask yourself, "How could something really reliable or trustworthy be built out of these ephemeral things?"

They also exclaim, *It's as if he showed the way to someone who was lost*. We've been lost in these becomings for who knows how long? Ajaan Suwat would call them "the traveling places of the mind." We've traveled around sensuality becomings, form becomings, formless becomings, for who knows how long, looking for satisfaction, wandering off the path, and now he shows us the way: virtue, concentration, discernment.

Another exclamation was, *It's as if the Buddha had taken a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms*. In other words, if you realize that what the Buddha is showing you is something really valuable, you can make use of it. In the past it was dark: What was going on in your mind was dark. The ways to find happiness were dark.

The cultures of the world that tell us that satisfaction—to the extent that it *can* be found—has to be found in material things, status, power: That's darkness. When we can see that there really is a possibility for true happiness, that's the light that shows us this alternative does exist.

So learn how to delight in that. Delight in the fact that you're able to get the mind in a place where it's no longer fooled by the false, dark values of the world. Delight in the fact that you're able to develop skills in the mind that you never anticipated before. Seeing through a lot of the ways of the mind, gaining some mastery over them: That's worth delighting in.

Just as the people in the time of the Buddha were struck by how valuable this Dhamma was, learn how to tell yourself about its value, talk to yourself about it, learn how to delight in it. Urge, rouse, encourage yourself in this direction.

Appreciate the fact that things that were overturned are now set upright. Things that were hidden are now revealed. Where you were lost, you've found the way. And where there was darkness, you can see opportunities that you never saw before.

So, take this talent that we have in learning how to delight in things that are really unworthy of delight, and apply it to things that are more worthy of it.

And as I said, ultimately it takes you to a place where you don't need delight because the happiness is so satisfactory that commenting on it doesn't add anything to it.

But meanwhile, take this delight in urging, rousing, and encouraging, and use these ways of thinking to make yourself happy that you're on this path. Appreciate it, because it's the best fabricated thing there is.