Happiness as a Skill

THE PRACTICE OF PUÑÑA

Puñña—usually translated as "merit"—is a hard concept for many Western Buddhists to wrap their hearts around. They find it cold and calculating: good-karma points stored up for future consumption, Buddhist merit badges for looking good in the eyes of the world. It doesn't help that some of the earliest Westerners exposed to the concept of merit spread the idea that it was a Buddhist version of papal indulgences: an attempt to game the system of karma by buying one's way out of hell and into heaven in the next life. The whole notion of wanting to earn merit for the future seems to fly in the face of one of the basic principles of Buddhist practice: to focus on the present and let go.

Part of the problem lies in the translation. When we look at how the Buddha himself uses the word, we can see that he aimed it primarily not at external signs, but at qualities of the heart.

To begin with, there are many passages where he contrasts *puñña* and *pāpa,* or evil, as opposites. For example:

> Here he grieves
> he grieves hereafter.
> In both worlds
> the evil-doer grieves.
> He grieves, he's afflicted,
> seeing the corruption
> of his deeds.
>
> Here he rejoices
> he rejoices hereafter.
> In both worlds
> the *puñña*-doer rejoices.
> He rejoices, is jubilant,
> seeing the purity
> of his deeds. — *Dhammapada 15–16*

This suggests that *puñña* might be better translated as "goodness." This may not seem much better than "merit," especially when we note that, again and again, it's said to be something that's "done," "made," and "accumulated," another case of focusing on externals and acquisitions. But when we remember that all action, for the Buddha, begins inside you with the intention, and returns inside as pleasure or pain, this is a goodness that has to begin and end in the heart.

And it's a goodness that creates happiness all along the way, both for yourself and for others. The Buddha begins Itivuttaka 22 by telling his disciples, "Monks,

don't be afraid of acts of goodness. This is a synonym for what is blissful, desirable, pleasing, endearing, charming—i.e., acts of goodness." He analyzes these acts into three types—giving, self-control, and restraint—and then further identifies self-control with virtue, and restraint with a heart of goodwill. This yields the list of goodness-acts that has become standard throughout the Buddhist tradition: giving, virtue, and the development of goodwill. And although the Buddha discusses the long-term karmic rewards of each of these acts, his opening statement makes it clear that the happiness of an act of goodness lies not only in its future rewards, but also—and more importantly—in the act itself. This is goodness that, when you learn to appreciate it, generates immediate happiness and bliss.

But here we run up against another aspect of puñña that many Westerners find off-putting. The Buddha treats acts of goodness as skills to be analyzed and developed. He goes into detail on the results of various ways of practicing giving and virtue and of developing goodwill, grading them as to whether they produce greater or lesser amounts of goodness, and exhibit greater or lesser amounts of skill in producing reliable happiness.

For example, with giving: He's clear that there should be no constraints on giving—when asked where a gift should be given, he answered, "Wherever the heart feels inspired"—but he adds that an act of giving, to produce the best results, must meet certain objective criteria in terms of the donor's motivation for giving, the donor's attitude while giving, the recipient, and the gift itself:

• In terms of the *motivation,* the Buddha recognizes many gradations, the lowest being the desire to store up wealth for a future life, the highest being simply the thought that the act of giving is an ornament and support for the heart here and now. xx

• In terms of the *attitude,* the Buddha recommends that you give attentively, with the conviction that something good will come of the gift, with empathy for the person who's receiving the gift, and not with the sense that you're simply throwing it away. In other words, the way you talk to yourself about the meaning and importance of what you're doing while giving a gift plays a large role in how much happiness you derive from the act.

• As for the *recipient,* the Buddha says that it's best to give to those who are free of passion, aversion, and delusion, or to those who are practicing to arrive at that goal, because these are the people most likely to make best use of the gift. When you later reflect on the gift and its consequences, you'll be happy you gave.

• As for the *gift* itself, the Buddha recommends that you give in season—i.e., a gift appropriate to time and place—and that the gift not adversely affect you or anyone else. This means that you don't give so much that you harm yourself financially, you don't steal the gift to give it away, and you don't give a gift that will place undue burdens on the recipient.

And although the Buddha does mention that large gifts can create a great deal of puñña, he's quick to add that the goodness of even great gifts of generosity to

highly attained individuals is no match at all for the goodness that comes from observing the five precepts: abstaining from killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. The goodness of observing the precepts, in turn, is no match for the goodness of developing a heart of goodwill.

In other words, the karma of virtue and vice, both inner and outer, is much stronger than the karma of generosity, so there's no truth to the idea that the puñña of generosity can buy your way out of the results of a life of corruption or crime. A better way to compensate for any past misdeeds would be to recognize them as mistakes, to resolve not to repeat them, and to devote the heart to the practice of virtue and goodwill. These, the more powerful forms of puñña, are not for sale. In fact, they're open to all, rich or poor. There are always opportunities in any life to practice them, which means that the path to an abundant and lasting happiness presents itself to everyone at every moment.

For many people, though, all this talk of objective grades of happiness still seems too calculating. Goodness and happiness, in their eyes, shouldn't be measured or analyzed, and instead should be allowed to be subjective, spontaneous, and serendipitous. That's part of their joy.

This brings us back to the charge that puñña, however you translate it, brings the calculating mind into an area that should belong exclusively to the impulses of the heart. This perception—along with the fact that people practicing for the Buddhist goal are said to be among the ideal recipients of gifts—has led some people to ask whose mind(s) thought up the calculations. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the idea of puñña is totally extrinsic to the Buddha's teachings. They claim that it began not with the Buddha, but with later generations of monks and nuns who wanted to take advantage of the good reputation of the monastic Saṅgha—and of the hopes and fears of lay people concerning the afterlife—to garner support for their monasteries. The concept of puñña was thus invented to attract donations to the monastic Saṅgha, while at the same time deflecting donors from the higher levels of practice. That's the accusation.

But when we look more carefully at the Buddha's teachings on puñña, we find that they're intrinsic to the most basic principles of the Dhamma, and particularly to the principles of discernment and right view. The practice of Dhamma as a whole, from the act of giving a gift to the attainment of unbinding *(nirvāṇa/nibbāna),* is the pursuit of happiness as an objective skill.

It's *objective* in that the laws of cause and effect governing pleasure and pain are the same for all conscious beings. No matter who you are, when you act on unskillful intentions, pain results. When you act on skillful intentions, pleasure results. Dhamma practice is also objective in that the ultimate happiness at the end of the path is of a nature—unconditioned by space, time, or culture—that no other happiness could possibly equal or exceed.

The practice of Dhamma is a *skill* in that awakening isn't a spiritual accident just waiting to happen. It's found by developing a clearly marked path of skills that, although they don't cause unbinding, can reliably take you there. Not only is the practice of puñña intrinsically related to the development of discernment, it

also brings a dimension of the heart to the arising of insight, an area all too often treated as purely a matter of the intellect. This is in line with Pali linguistic usage, in which the words for "mind"—*citta* and *manas*—both cover what we in English call "heart" as well. When we think of insight as an affair of both heart and mind, we get closer to the Buddha's own sense of what he was teaching.

And in a reversal of the belief that puñña was invented to facilitate the life of the Saṅgha, we will find that the Saṅgha was actually designed, in part, to facilitate the practice of puñña. The rules governing the life of the monastics provide a social structure—an economy of gifts—that encourages this added dimension of the heart as a necessary precondition for teaching and practicing the Dhamma. If you don't learn to appreciate the practice of goodness through having engaged in it, there are many higher aspects of Buddhist practice you won't understand at all.

FROM PUÑÑA TO INSIGHT

It may seem strange to yoke the practice of puñña to the arising of insight. After all, what does putting food in a monk's bowl have to do with seeing the true nature of how things are? That's how a lot of people look at the issue, but they're coming from a misunderstanding of the Buddha's teachings on insight and discernment. The discourses of the Pali Canon never equate discernment with seeing the true nature of how things *are*. Instead, they explain discernment as seeing the true pattern of how things *work*—the "things" here being intentional actions and the laws of cause and effect that determine whether an action will lead to pleasure or to pain.

As MN 135 points out, discernment begins by asking questions of truly wise people about the power of action:

> "What is skillful, venerable sir? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? What, when I do it, will be for my long-term harm & suffering? Or what, when I do it, will be for my long-term well-being & happiness?"

These questions not only treat action as the primary focus of discernment. They also assume that actions should lead to predictable results and that some actions, reliably and objectively, lead to more happiness than others. These assumptions underlie the idea that happiness can and should be approached as a skill. In fact, they underlie the whole notion of a path of practice that would qualify as a universal truth.

It's easy to see how acts of puñña—giving, virtue, and the development of goodwill—are the entry-level answers to the questions based on these assumptions. But the Buddha's answers to these questions don't stop there. *All* of his teachings on discernment are answers to these questions. For instance, in the list of the factors for awakening, the discernment factor—analysis of qualities—is said to be fostered by paying appropriate attention to the qualities of the mind that lead to skillful and unskillful actions. The four noble truths, the terms of the

discernment leading immediately to awakening, are also focused on action: which actions produce suffering; which actions form a path leading to its end. And although ultimately all actions will have to be abandoned for the sake of awakening, the actions of the path first have to be developed before the heart and mind can reach that point of total letting go.

This is true all the way to the verge of awakening. For instance, the perception of not-self, one of the strategies for letting go, is an action. As part of the path to the end of suffering, it's recommended because of the actions it inspires—actions that will yield long-term well-being and happiness.

> "Suppose a person were to gather or burn or do as he likes with the grass, twigs, branches, & leaves here in Jeta's Grove. Would the thought occur to you, 'It's *us* that this person is gathering, burning, or doing with as he likes'?"
>
> "No, lord. Why is that? Because those things are not our self, nor do they pertain to our self."
>
> "In the same way, monks, the eye isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term well-being & happiness … The ear… The nose… The tongue… The body… The intellect isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness … Whatever arises in dependence on intellect-contact—experienced either as pleasure, as pain, or as neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that, too, isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term well-being & happiness." — *SN 35:101*

This long-term well-being and happiness, of course, is the realization of unbinding, which can be experienced only when you let go of the activity of these six senses.

THE SKILLS OF HAPPINESS

What all these passages show is that discernment consists of value judgments about actions—in particular, which actions are worth engaging in. Not only that: These passages also show that the entire project of the Buddha's teaching is to approach well-being and happiness as a progressive skill. The Buddha, seeing that happiness does come in lesser and greater forms, searched for actions that reliably could lead to higher and higher levels of happiness, and ultimately to the total, unchanging happiness of unbinding.

The practice of puñña, then, is in no way foreign to the general project of the Buddha's teachings. It gives essential guidance in the first steps in this project, showing that it's much better to follow the principles of action that can lead to a reliable happiness and well-being than to leave happiness to happenstance and chance. As you gain experience from acting on this principle in everyday levels of goodness, pursuing it to greater levels of refinement, it's easier to trust it as you venture into more unfamiliar levels of the practice as, in meditation, you focus directly on the mind.

At the same time, the sensitivity developed in the practice of puñña ensures that the practice of meditation, in developing both concentration and discernment, is not just a training of the intellect, but also a training of the heart. A common theme, repeated again and again in the suttas, is that the practice of goodness leads to a sense of joy free from regret, and that this joy leads naturally to a sense of refreshment, calm, and pleasure, allowing the heart to settle easily in concentration.

As for discernment, it's a type of sensitivity. If the heart and mind haven't been trained in the kind of sensitivity that comes from empathy and an appreciation of goodness, an important dimension of human experience is missing. That would lead to lopsided discernment that spotlights the intellect and leaves the heart in the dark. A mind without expansive goodwill, the Buddha said, is narrow and restricted—hardly one to gain all-around vision and understanding. This may be why he also said that a person who is stingy can't enter right concentration—to say nothing of reaching higher attainments on the path.

THE LESSONS OF PUÑÑA

The practice of puñña is never treated as a mere stepping stone to more advanced levels of the practice, something to be done and then disposed of as you move on quickly to bigger and better things. Instead, the continued practice of puñña provides an ongoing environment of well-being in which those more advanced levels can thrive. It's like a field in which good seeds can find the nourishment they need to grow into healthy and productive plants.

Because puñña is focused on fostering actions that lead to a genuine happiness, its practice also teaches many important lessons about the nature of action and the nature of happiness, lessons that guide the higher levels of the practice. This is true of all three types of goodness.

The act of giving, for instance, teaches the value of delayed gratification: You can't gain happiness without first being willing to give something away. It also teaches you that there are gradations in pleasure: The pleasure of giving is more lasting and satisfying than the pleasure that comes from simply consuming what you've got. These lessons help promote a mature attitude toward the difficulties we all face in getting the mind to settle down, when it needs to let go of the cherished attachments that lie in the way of developing greater and greater levels of inner peace.

The practice of virtue teaches you to focus on your intentions—the precepts can be broken only if you break them intentionally—as well as giving training in mindfulness and alertness, qualities needed in meditation. To keep the precepts, you have to keep them in mind and be alert to what you're doing, to make sure that your actions are actually in line with the precepts to which you're committed.

The development of goodwill, which the Buddha equates with restraint, teaches you that restraint is not a type of confinement. Instead, it's an act of

kindness to yourself and others. In fact, you best show your goodwill for others when you refrain from doing them harm. This realization makes you more inclined to practice the mental restraint needed for strong concentration.

As you develop these three types of goodness, they show you the power of choice. You can choose to act in ways that improve your environment and, over the long term, the state of your heart and mind. This is a good lesson in how your intentions shape what the Buddha calls becoming *(bhava):* your sense of who you are and the world in which you live.

The three types of goodness also show you how true happiness erases boundaries within that world: As you pursue true happiness, you also promote the happiness of others. You see that when happiness is skillful, there's no sharp line between yours and theirs. When you give, you benefit and so do the recipients of your gifts. When you follow the precepts, you gain in self-esteem, and you pose no danger to others. When you develop goodwill, your heart grows more expansive and you're more likely to treat others well.

Because these acts of goodness often begin with delayed gratification, they require that you train yourself to develop the right attitude while doing them. This means learning how to talk to yourself as you perform acts of goodness, to keep your attitude healthy and your outlook bright. The Buddha has a technical term to describe this inner conversation—he calls it verbal fabrication, which he defines further as directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic and then you engage in an inner dialogue, asking questions and making comments around that topic to evaluate what's worth doing and what's not. As you get more skilled in directing your thoughts to goodness and evaluating which actions are truly good, you find that this verbal fabrication can make an act of goodness pleasurable in and of itself.

At the same time, it prepares you for meditation in two important ways. First, verbal fabrication is part of the first level of right concentration. When you've had training in talking to yourself in a skillful way through the practice of goodness, that skill transfers into the meditation as you learn to talk to yourself productively about the object of your concentration and your relationship to it. This enables you to settle down snuggly, reaching a level of stability where you can drop the directed thought and evaluation to reach deeper levels of physical and mental peace.

Second, as the focus of your inner conversation moves away from the happy results you expect in the future and toward the happiness inherent in acts of goodness while you're doing them, you prepare yourself for an important meditative skill: the ability to focus on mental acts in and of themselves. It's easiest to look directly at your intentions when you're acting on intentions that you know, in your heart, are honorable and good. Even if negative mind-states barge into your awareness, they're less likely to knock you off balance because you can recollect your virtue and generosity—standard meditative practices that the Buddha recommended—remembering that you've got a strong good side, too.

As you take the Buddha's definition of puñña more and more literally—seeing happiness in the intention to do goodness—you become accustomed to looking for the feeling tone in intentions themselves. This focus prepares you for one of the Buddha's more radical insights—that suffering is not something passively endured, it's an action: the mental act of clinging, in and of itself. This focus also prepares you to see the role the mind plays in constructing *all* of its sensory experience, an insight that can lead to liberation.

The fact that you've been doing your best to construct your experience through acts of goodness means that when you do let go of mental constructions, it's not out of hatred or fear or self-recrimination. Instead, you can let go with a sense of appreciation for the fact that your mental constructs have delivered you harmlessly and happily to that stage in the practice.

This is how liberating insight can grow from mastering the good act of giving alms.

INSIGHT FOSTERS GOODNESS

Just as the practice of goodness helps to perfect the higher levels of the practice, the higher levels, in turn, help to perfect the practice of goodness. This can be seen in the Buddha's descriptions of the most skillful levels of giving, virtue, and the development of goodwill, which come only with the preliminary levels of awakening.

The most skillful motivation for giving, for example, is what we noted above: You give with the thought, not that you will gain anything from the act, but that it's simply an ornament and support for the heart. This, the Buddha said, is the motivation of the non-returner, someone who has achieved the third of the four levels of awakening. Such a person is not destined to return to this world, and so has no need to look for a future reward. This type of motivation is said to be even higher than giving with the thought, "When this gift of mine is given, it makes the heart serene. Gratification & joy arise." To treat a gift as an ornament for the heart means that you're not hoping to feed off it in any way at all. It's a totally free gift, an act of beauty—something that only a person at least on the level of non-returning is in a position to do.

Similarly with virtue: A person practicing the most skillful level of virtue is said to have "virtues pleasing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the observant, ungrasped at, leading to concentration." These are the virtues of a person who has achieved stream-entry, the first of the four levels of awakening, the first glimpse of the deathless. From this point on, you observe the precepts scrupulously because you've seen that your own unskillful behavior in the past is what prevented you from glimpsing the deathless prior to that.

At the same time, though, you're not overly anxious about having to follow the precepts. Actions in line with the precepts come naturally. This balanced attitude of scrupulous observance without anxiety is what makes your precepts conducive to concentration. Wise, observant people praise your virtue because

you don't grasp at virtue to prove that you're superior to others. As one Pali expression has it, you're not "made of your virtue": In other words, you can live in line with the precepts without having to construct a sense of self around them.

As for goodwill, it's fully perfected when it leads the mind to a firm state of concentration, clear enough that you can see the fabricated nature of the concentration and, becoming dispassionate toward it, can achieve full release.

DHAMMA IN THE CONTEXT OF GOODNESS

All these connections between the mastery of puñña and the attaining of awakening show that the practice of goodness is inseparable from the practice of the Dhamma. In fact, for the Dhamma to thrive, it requires an environment shaped by the practice of goodness, both on the internal level—when, in approaching happiness as a skill, you develop necessary Dhamma skills within the heart—and on the external level, in social arrangements that encourage the practice of goodness as the best environment in which the Dhamma can be taught and learned.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha instituted the monastic Saṅgha: It's a social structure specifically designed to help facilitate the practice of generosity, virtue, and universal goodwill.

It promotes generosity in that the Buddha created a body of rules that, as long as his monks and nuns follow them, make them virtuous: worthy and inspiring recipients of other people's gifts. At the same time, the rules require that they behave in ways that don't exploit or coerce the generosity of their supporters. Because they are celibate, they need no support to raise families, which allows them to be unburdensome to their donors. Because they live off gifts freely given, they're under no compulsion to teach—which means that those among them who *do* teach can give the Dhamma freely, as a gift. It's only in an economy of gifts like this, where the Dhamma can be freely given, that the Dhamma is not turned into a commodity, subject to market forces that would distort it. What better way to teach generosity than to practice it? And what better way to practice it than to give the Dhamma as a free gift?

The monastic Saṅgha promotes the practice of virtue not only through the rules governing the behavior of the monks and nuns, allowing them to live a harmless life, but also through the implicit and explicit encouragement they give to lay people to be virtuous as well. The fact that there are people who find happiness through behaving virtuously acts as a valuable counterweight to the examples throughout human history of people who get ahead by trampling on the well-being of others. The example of the Saṅgha shows that there are other, better ways of finding happiness than simply "getting ahead."

Because the members of the monastic Saṅgha come from all social backgrounds, it also provides an example of harmonious relationships among people who ordinarily might never live together. At the same time, the members of the Saṅgha are encouraged to teach all people, regardless of background, who show an interest in the Dhamma. In this way, the Saṅgha helps to show that

universal goodwill is not an empty fantasy. It can overcome barriers that ordinary society puts in its way.

The Buddha called the Saṅgha the "unexcelled field of goodness for the world." He was speaking of the noble Saṅgha—all those, whether ordained or not, who have attained at least the first level of awakening—but the conventional monastic Saṅgha, over the centuries, has provided the structure by which that field is tended and maintained. If it weren't for this arrangement by which the Dhamma can be freely taught to all comers, the Dhamma would have long ago been distorted by privatizing market forces to the point where it wouldn't be Dhamma anymore.

TRUST IN GOODNESS

So it's not the case that the practice of puñña was invented to feed the Saṅgha. Instead, the Saṅgha was designed, in part at least, to promote the practice of puñña, both by monastics and their supporters. It provides the environment in which goodness is most fruitfully developed into a skill for the sake of true happiness. Goodness, in turn, when developed as a skill, provides the context that the practice of the Dhamma as a whole needs in order to thrive.

Even though the Buddha went beyond all attachment to good and evil on attaining full awakening, he didn't go beyond his appreciation for what the practice of goodness can do. He saw that it would provide the only environment in which his Dhamma could survive in a world on fire, as he saw it, with greed, aversion, and delusion.

It might seem a risky prospect—entrusting the Dhamma to the practice of goodness in such a world—but that's what he did. So far, his act of trust has continued to bear fruit for more than 2,600 years. The fact that the Dhamma is still available for us to practice is due to the goodness of many, many generations of people. The best way to show our gratitude is to develop some goodness of our own, so that we can fully benefit from the Dhamma and pass it on intact, as a genuine gift to those yet to come.