

A Happiness Without Boundaries

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The Buddha recommends three basic ways of finding happiness: generosity, virtue, and meditation. In each case, the happiness is not just for yourself or just for other people. Both sides benefit. And this is an important lesson: that true happiness doesn't have boundaries. It doesn't have to be either/or. When you're generous, of course, the person you're being generous to benefits—and this doesn't mean just material generosity. It can also be being generous with your compassion, being generous with your time, generous with your knowledge, generous with your forgiveness. And although it may take energy on your part to be generous in this way, your mind benefits. It becomes a much more expansive mind. It doesn't have that narrow, fearful quality that it has if you're just concerned about what you're going to gain, being afraid that other people will take away what you've got. You realize that you have more than enough to share.

It's one of the amazing features of the human race: Often you find that people who are materially poor are actually wealthier in the sense that they have more than enough, they're happy to share with other people. They find happiness in sharing, much more than people who have a lot of material wealth but don't have a sense of enough. It's a sense of "I have enough. I have enough to share": That's where real wealth lies. And you understand that to be happy doesn't require that much in terms of material things, especially if you augment this with the practice of virtue, the practice of meditation.

Virtue is the resolve not to harm anyone, not to act in ways that are going to adversely affect yourself, adversely affect others. Again, this blurs the line between your happiness and other people's happiness. It becomes a joint happiness because they, of course, are not subjected to your unskillful actions, and you don't have unskillful actions on your conscience.

Even more so with the meditation: You're sitting here focusing on the breath, learning to be more mindful, learning to put away distractions. And as you may have noticed, before we started meditation, we had that reflection on goodwill: "May all beings be happy." It's a good attitude to carry into the meditation, realizing that you're doing this for your happiness and for the happiness of all beings. And it's good practice while you're meditating, if the thought of someone that you've wronged or someone who's wronged you comes up in your meditation: You see their face, well, wish that person goodwill and then get back to the practice—because the practice is the real embodiment of goodwill. You're

developing qualities of the mind—mindfulness, alertness, restraint—that give rise to a sense of ease and well-being inside that doesn't depend on taking anything away from anyone else. You're developing skill inside.

This means that you need less and less from other people in order to keep your happiness going. And you also produce less greed, less anger, and less delusion, so the people around you are less subject to your greed, anger, and delusion.

So the idea that we're sitting here meditating just for our own sake is not really true. We're here for the sake of happiness without any limitations as to whose happiness that might be. We get focused less and less on who's benefiting from this, and more on the simple fact that these actions are beneficial and the benefits spread around. This is an important part of the practice: to see things simply in terms of cause and effect without limiting it as to "me" or "them," "mine" or "theirs" or this person or that person. The benefits blur the line, especially as you get more and more able to rely on yourself. When we talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, we're taking them as examples as to how to find true happiness, how to develop the skills inside that lead to happiness.

So. The Buddha. We talk about his three major virtues: wisdom, purity, and compassion. They all come from learning how to find happiness in a responsible way, realizing that long-term happiness is better than short-term, and a happiness that doesn't harm other people is more likely to last. The wisdom leads you to compassion, and it also leads you to realize that if you're really serious about finding true happiness, you've really got to be pure in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds.

That's what you're doing as you're sitting right here. You're not harming anybody by what you are doing, you're not harming anybody by what you say, and you're learning how to deal with harmful emotions, harmful ideas as they come into the mind. For the time being, learn how to put them aside, put them aside. You look at them and you realize, "I don't have to identify with that." Greed comes in, you don't have to identify with it. Anger comes in, you don't have to identify with it. When delusion comes in, it's harder to see because by its nature when you're deluded it's hard to see that you're deluded. But by developing more mindfulness and alertness as to what's going on, you can chip away at that delusion as you begin to sense that things you took for granted in the mind were actually choices you were making. And you can make the choices in a different way.

This is why the Buddha asks us to look at everything in terms of actions, choices you're making. You begin to realize that when you identify with a thought or an emotion, it's not a hard fact that you're suddenly presented with. You made

a choice to develop an identity around that. And the simple practice of staying with your breath and then finding when something else comes up, you learn how to say no: That's giving you practice in learning how to dis-identify. It gives you practice in seeing that you have a wider range of choices than you might have thought before—and that you do have more power to choose a happiness that's harmful to no one at all.

So as you meditate, keep reminding yourself: The benefits spread around. And the more you look at things in terms simply of action and consequence, the happier you'll be, the happier other people will be. Most of us, when we think about karma, don't think about it as a happy or compassionate teaching. It seems harsh: lots of retribution, lots of punishment for unskillful actions. But as the Buddha taught it, he saw it more as an opportunity. It opens the opportunity to change the way you live. It opens the opportunity to live in a more skillful way. It opens the opportunity to find true happiness. It opens the opportunity to make sure the happiness is not just your happiness. It spreads around. It's a solid happiness, a long-lasting happiness, because it doesn't have narrow boundaries.

After all, when the Buddha would introduce the teaching on karma to people, he'd start out with generosity and gratitude, saying that generosity does have value. Gratitude is meaningful. And generosity has value because we're not automatons. We do have the choice to give or not to give. We realize that there is more freedom in giving. If you just cave in to your stinginess, or cave in to your fears or your greed, you're tying yourself down. But when you learn how to make that choice and be more generous with your things, more generous with your time, more generous with your forgiveness, you feel more free. That's a worthwhile thing. There are people who really benefit from this, both yourself and others. And that's a valuable thing.

It's possible to look at the world in a way that makes our actions seem totally meaningless. After all, the sun is going to go nova someday. The universe is huge. What difference does it matter whether you're kind or not kind? Well, as far as the stars are concerned, it doesn't make much difference at all. They're not going to be affected by it. But your awareness is affected by it, the people around you are affected by it, and that really is important.

As for gratitude, if people were automatons, there'd be no reason for gratitude. But stop and think: People have made the choice to do something well, to do something kind, and you've benefited from that. And they had the choice not to be kind, not to do it well, so you should be grateful of the fact that they made the right choice. That, in turn, inspires you to realize that making the right choice is a beneficial thing. It spreads the happiness around.

So these are some of the beginning implications of karma, in the way the Buddha taught it. He was very careful to argue against two kinds of thought: One was that everything is totally determined from the past. You have no choices. And the other was that everything is really random: There's no pattern at all that you can learn from; things just happen willy-nilly. Even though he wasn't the type of person to seek out arguments, those were two teachings he would always argue with because they made our choices meaningless. He was devoted to the principle that our choices do matter, and the quest for happiness that's totally harmless is an important quest that matters more than anything else.

This means that we have to look at how we're making ourselves happy, what kind of happiness we're looking for. You look at what society has to say about what counts as success, and it doesn't take much thought to realize that it's all pretty meaningless. If you think that that's all there is, then that's all there is. But that's not what the Buddha would say. He said true happiness is possible, and it lies in training the mind. It's the kind of happiness that doesn't have boundaries. With the happiness that's measured in cars and houses and material wealth, one person has it, and the other person doesn't. But happiness measured in terms of generosity, virtue, all the skills you develop through meditation, is a happiness without boundaries. It's a long-term happiness. It's a secure happiness.

And that's the happiness that makes life worth living. We're not just here eating and excreting and sleeping and whatever. We have this potential in our mind. There is this freedom of choice that we can take advantage of. And the more you explore that freedom, the more you learn to use it skillfully, then the greater the freedom grows: right there in that fact that you have the freedom to choose. If you really look into that and exercise that freedom, that's the portal to a freedom that has no bounds at all.

So this is what we're working on as we sit here focused on the breath, realizing that we have the choice to stay with the breath or to go wandering off and thinking about whatever, the way we've always been doing in the past.

Try the choice of staying with the breath no matter what comes up. As soon as you catch yourself wandering off, come back. Make the breath comfortable as a way of reaffirming that choice, that this is where you really want to stay. Give yourself greater inducement to stay here. Each time you come back to the breath, ask yourself: What's the most comfortable way of breathing right now? What breath would feel best? What part of the body feels starved of breath energy? Well, give it some breath. It's a totally harmless way of finding happiness. And it develops the skills you need to find a happiness that dissolves boundaries, leading to something that's really free.