

Goodness

February 8, 2016

Happiness is something we all want. The problem is that we have different ideas of what constitutes happiness. In fact, inside each person are many different ideas about what happiness is and how best to find it.

This is why we have so many committee members in the mind. Each has his or her own idea, which has or hasn't been tested, and is all too happy to recommend it, whether or not it's been tested—and with very little discussion about what the standards would be to judge as to whether something's truly happy or truly good.

And that right there is an interesting equation. Some people don't equate goodness with happiness. All the great people in the past, though, said that to be truly happy, there has to be goodness as well. The two have to go together.

This is why we wish well for ourselves, and if we have any intelligence, we wish well for others. This is where the goodness comes in. We don't want our happiness to depend on anyone else's suffering.

We start our meditation every day with the chants on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, to remind us of our motivation for practicing. We want a happiness that's special, something that's lasting, something that's blameless, and at the same time can be a gift to others.

Because you notice when the Buddha talks about goodwill, it's always unlimited, immeasurable, all around, up and above, down below, every possible adjective he can use to describe how it's all-encompassing, total, in every direction, without exception. We want to have goodwill for everyone.

Our goodwill is unlimited, but our strength and other resources are limited. This is a fact we have to live with: on the one hand, admitting our limitations, but then, two, figuring out how we can strengthen ourselves so at least we have fewer limitations on our strength and our ability to do good in the world and to do good for ourselves.

This is why the Buddha teaches the five strengths. There's the strength of conviction, that your actions really do make a difference. This derives from our conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that he gained true happiness through his own efforts. And it's through qualities that were not exclusively his. In other words, the potential for these qualities exists in all of us: being resolute, being ardent, being heedful. These are all things we can do. We have them to some extent already. We're heedful about some things, we're resolute in some areas, and we're ardent about some things. And the trick is strengthening these qualities, making them more constant and applying them in the right places.

But it all comes down to qualities of the mind. This leads right into the next strength, which is persistence. Once you see that the qualities of the mind are important, you have the desire to prevent unskillful ones from arising and to let go of unskillful ones that have arisen; to give rise to skillful qualities and to develop the ones that have arisen so that they

become fully developed.

And you've got to keep this in mind. This is where mindfulness comes in as a strength. Because it's so easy to forget. You get involved in, say, sensual desire, ill will, or any of the other hindrances, and it just seems so convincing while you're in that world, that the things you desire really are worth it, really are desirable. Or that the people you feel ill will for really are horrible people, and you'd be really happy to see them suffer a little bit—or more than a little bit. When you get a little bit drowsy, “Ah, yes. The body needs to rest,” you tell yourself, “It's got all the signs. I just can't put in any more effort.” And so on down the list. We believe these hindrances when we're in them and so we have to be able to remind ourselves that, No, they're not taking us in the direction we really want to go. We can pull ourselves out. And this is what mindfulness is for: recognizing a particular mind state and then remembering what we should do with it.

Let go of the hindrances, develop the factors for awakening, and you gain the strength of concentration. This is really what provides food for the mind, because it gives you a source of pleasure, a source of well-being, an inner stability that pushes against a lot of the limits you had on your mind before.

And then there's the strength of discernment. Once you have this extra energy, what are you going to do with it? The Buddha said that the best thing is first to take care of the problem of how you create suffering for yourself. I don't know how many people say that this seems selfish, but it's not. You take care of yourself first so that when you start thinking about helping other people, your help is really genuine. Now, this doesn't mean that you have to become an arahant and *then* help people. But the quality of your help is going to improve as you learn how to take care of your own problems inside.

Ajaan Suwat used to like to say, “Each of us has only one person,” ourselves, who we can have some control over, with whom we can really make a difference inside. As for the goodness you can develop beyond that, it's a gift to the world, something you're happy to leave behind if you're not coming back. And if you *are* coming back, what you've left behind in the world is going to be there to give you the strength to continue on.

This is why the Buddha talked about our interaction with other people under two terms: virtue and generosity. Virtue is holding back from doing things that are harmful. And generosity is all the spontaneous goodness we want to provide. It can be material things, it can be your energy, it can be your time. Setting an example for others: That, too, is a gift.

The Buddha talks about virtue as being a gift, in which you give safety to others. At the same time, you give a good example. The world needs good examples, because the media, which seem to be taking over everybody's awareness of reality, trade in some pretty bad examples. Those are the ones that are easiest to find, say, on the Net. They're all around us. And people begin to take them as patterns, as examples, for how we ought to behave.

You go into a place like an airport lounge or waiting at a bus station, train station, wherever: People are not looking at people anymore, they're looking at their little screens. But if we're going to change things, it's not going to happen by appearing on somebody

else's screen. You have to do something that creates an example that startles people, makes them look up from their screens. Now it's very easy to do that with unskillful things, but to do it with something skillful takes a lot more subtlety. Which is why you have to learn how to be dealing with the subtle issues inside your mind.

Take the ajaans in Thailand. People took notice. At first they didn't take any notice at all. Ajaan Mun was off in the forest and very few people heard about him. Those who did and were inspired by him, had to follow him into the forest. Often they had no guarantee that they would be able to find him, they didn't know exactly where he was. They had a general idea, they heard where he *had* been. You read the stories of his students having to undergo a lot of hardships just to get to him. But that's the example of a really good person. Word begins to get around that this is someone who's out of the ordinary.

There were people who didn't like what he was doing or didn't like what he was saying. Ajaan Chah has an interesting discussion where he says that Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao tended to divide families. Some members of a family would be inspired by them and others would be repelled by how different they were from ordinary monks.

So you don't really have any control over how other people are going to respond to your example, but you want to set a good example, as good as you possibly can. Not that you're showing off, but you want to have something that's really solid inside. And people with eyes and ears will notice that. And given the general state of the world now, they'll be startled. In some cases, you'll be actually able to talk to them about what's good in the practice.

As the Buddha said, one of the best ways you can benefit others is to get them to be interested in getting rid of greed, aversion, and delusion; to get them interested in following the precepts, so that they can take care of the one person that each of them is responsible for.

But that's an area where you have to use your discernment—exactly how much you can actually say to other people and how willing they're going to be to listen. A lot of that has to do with their karma. Ajaan Lee has an interesting comment. He says that when you're trying to teach other people and they're not really interested, it counts as idle chatter.

We keep coming back to the fact that, as Ajaan Suwat said, you have one person. That's the person you're really responsible for. And if you neglect this one person to go around trying to straighten out other people, you've got your priorities wrong. You've got to straighten out this one, that's your main focus. You want to strengthen this mind, so that the goodwill you have for yourself and the goodwill you have for others will have a better and better foundation, a better chance to be brought into being or to show its influence.

So think about these five strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are the things that take away some of the limitations of your mind, so that the limitlessness of your goodwill has a better chance of getting expressed.