

Desire for Happiness

January 2003

Every time we chant the five themes for daily recollection, I'm struck by the contrast between that chant and the one that follows it: "May I be happy."

The themes for recollection are not happy things. We're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. And even the principle of karma, which is what the Buddha offers as hope in our practice, still sounds pretty onerous. You slip up and you're going to suffer.

And then we chant, "May I be happy."

That contrast right there says a lot about life. We live in a world where there's a lot of suffering. In addition to the basic suffering that comes from having a body, there are also all the horrible things that people do to one another: killing, stealing, cheating, abusing in one way or another.

Yet in the midst of all this, we want happiness. It's this desire for happiness that underlies the whole practice, coupled with an understanding of karma: Without that understanding, the desire for happiness becomes sentimental and sometimes rather unrealistic. But as the principle of karma says, if you act with skillful intentions, the results will be happy, the results will be pleasant.

This means we have to act with skillful intentions, intentions that don't want to cause harm. It's that desire not to cause harm and the realization that we have to implement it through the principle of karma: That's the beginning of the practice. It's the motivation and the understanding.

This is the beginning of what are sometimes called the wisdom and compassion—more appropriately the discernment and goodwill—that underlie the practice. That's what starts us out. It's why we chant these things every day.

Now, for most of us, our desire for happiness in a world where there is a lot of suffering often leads us to harden ourselves. We've suffered from this person, that person, this kind of thing, that kind of thing. We harden ourselves both inside and out, hoping that that's the way to get out of suffering.

But it doesn't work that way. The more you harden yourself, the more insensitive you get to your actions. And it's through your actions that you have your only hope for getting out of this predicament we're all in.

So one of the first steps in the practice is to begin to soften yourself up from the inside—not only with thoughts of goodwill, but also actual actions showing goodwill for yourself.

You start with a very immediate way with the way you breathe. Allow yourself

to breathe comfortably. Think of the breath not only as the air coming in and out of the lungs but also as the whole energy flow in your body. Can you detect any part in the body where things feel depleted, as if they're lacking in energy? Are there any cells that would like a good deep breath to reach all the way down to them? Well, you can breathe that way. No one's stopping you. No one's preventing you. Just remind yourself of the possibility to open up. And try to be as sensitive as possible to how the energy flow in your body feels.

Sometimes we harden ourselves to this, which makes it hard to follow the breath, makes it hard to stay in the body. We're constantly running out, running away.

Some people have suffered so much in life that they can't even find their bodies. They close their eyes and there doesn't seem to be any body there. They've shut everything off inside. But with patience, as you learn to get in touch with your breath, learn to be more skillful with the breath, as you allow yourself to open up inside and get over the fear that you're just going to open yourself to more suffering, you find that the breath becomes a strengthening quality. In addition to being a pleasant place to stay, it gives you more and more energy.

As that energy gets more consistent, it begins to fill the whole body. As it fills the body, impressions from outside make less and less and less of an imprint, less of an impact on you. It's almost as if you set up this energy field that repels the negative energies that come at you from outside.

So when this opening up inside, this softening up inside, allows you to be more sensitive, it paradoxically makes you stronger—if you're consistent, if you're really devoted to following through.

We're developing qualities of the mind here. We're not looking for little insights that we can wrap up and take home. We're looking for skills. And this is the beginning skill: getting more and more sensitive to how the breath feels.

It requires alertness, it requires mindfulness, and as these qualities get developed, those are the qualities you take home. Those are the qualities you put into use at all times.

There's bound to be a certain repetitive part to the practice. We keep coming back to the same issues over and over and over again: to strengthen the consistency of that quality of your goodwill for yourself, your alertness, your mindfulness, all the qualities you want to develop in the mind.

So it's not just a matter of doing it once or twice and saying, "Well, that's enough for today." You do it again and again and again. You try learn how to maintain these qualities, keep them going. It's with the maintenance that they build up a momentum.

The Buddha has an image of a river flowing down from a mountain. If you open the water courses off the river on either side, then the current gets dissipated, gets weak, and can't build up into anything strong. But if you close off the water courses, that keeps the current focused, and it builds up a momentum. The further it goes down the hillside, the stronger it gets.

It's the same with this quality of consistency in your practice. Once you learn to be sensitive to the breath, in touch with the breath, then allow it to expand through the body. If you find any little pieces of tension or tightness in any place in the body, any sense of blockage, allow the breath to move in there, seep through those places of blockage, open things up.

Then maintain that quality of openness. Maintain it through the in-breath; maintain it through the out-breath. And then the next one and the next one. And in the maintenance it develops momentum, it develops strength, it becomes a new habit in the mind.

Then you learn how to maintain that openness in other situations as well. You find that in situations where you're afraid or anxious, you tend to tense up again. You've got to realize that the openness of the breath inside doesn't open you to bad outside influences. It actually protects you. It fills your body with an energy that doesn't allow bad influences from outside to come in. So in your inner sensitivity you gain strength.

You have to learn how to trust the practice. Of course, you've got to test it before you can build that trust. But allow yourself to test it to begin with. The more you test it in different situations, the more you find it really does work. This allows you to trust and explore this quality of inner sensitivity even further.

Because once you've got these qualities more and more established, you can continue to ask the question of where you're causing yourself suffering that you don't have to. You can ask it with more finesse, more precision, greater sensitivity. You get into even more subtle levels of stress that you cause for yourself, more subtle levels of action in the mind.

The Buddha's teaching is basically a challenge. He says, "How far can you pursue this question of not harming yourself, not harming others, being sensitive to what you're doing, and learning how to stop doing anything that's causing unnecessary stress?" That's his challenge. Just keep following it through.

We often think of the Buddha's teachings as an interesting body of thought, an interesting philosophy of life, an interesting mode of practice. But he meant them to be more than just interesting. He his teachings to be challenges, saying, "If you follow this all the way through, it takes you to the total end of suffering, takes you even beyond space and time—total limitlessness."

That's quite a possibility. You turn around and you look at your life. Are you living a life that's pursuing that possibility or are you closing yourself off to it? Doesn't that challenge pique your curiosity? Is this possible?

Then you look at yourself again. What reasons would you have for *not* wanting to explore the possibility that you can learn to end all the habits that cause stress and suffering in your life? When you take the teachings as a challenge, that's how you're responding to them appropriately. That's how you get the most use out of them.

Even if you don't go all the way, you find that the more you do pursue them, the less and less suffering you're causing for yourself and others.

So even if you don't make it all the way to the end of suffering in this lifetime, you've made a definite improvement in your life. You've turned your life in a direction that will keep your mind pointed in the right way.

You find yourself with a real sense of accomplishment. Not the sort of accomplishment you can measure in outside terms, but in terms of a greater sense of having cleaned out the mess inside, straightened out the unskillfulness inside, opened yourself up inside, to get a better sense of what's already there and what the possibilities are.