

Training in Happiness

September 4, 2006

Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in, know when it's going out. If you want, you can think of the word *buddho* along the breath: *bud* in, *dho* out. Try to breathe in a way that's comfortable. You can try long breathing for a while and see how that feels. If it feels good, then stick with it. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. You can make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. There are lots of ways you can play with your breath. Think of this as a game: What kind of breathing feels good right now? Experiment to see what results you get. If your mind wanders off, bring it back. Wanders off again, bring it back again.

As with any game, if you want to play it well, you have to really stick with it. And what you're doing here is important: It's a basic skill you're going to need. As the Buddha said, the most important issue in life is whether your mind is trained or not. Only when your mind is trained can you find real happiness. And these are some of the qualities you need to train your mind so that you can trust it. You make up your mind you're going to stick with something, and you really stick with it. Make up your mind you're going to pay attention to something, and you really pay attention, really observe, really watch. Don't be a traitor to yourself.

There are so many undependable things in life, and if your own mind is undependable, then you're really in bad shape. This is why the Buddha said the difference between a wise person and a foolish person is just this one issue: the wise person sees how important it is to train the mind; the foolish person doesn't see its importance at all. The foolish person looks for happiness other places. And most of those other places are connected with the things we learned in school. Most of what we learned in school is basically how to gain the skills we're going to need to make a living when we grow up. If you turn on the TV or look in a magazine or newspaper, they basically tell you that if you want to be happy, you have to buy this, buy that. They encourage you to be greedy, to want more things so you'll work harder and get more money. But is that where real happiness lies? People can get really wealthy and still die miserable.

2,500 years ago the Buddha found that the secret to happiness didn't lie in gaining things, it lies in training the mind. When your mind is trained to be always in a good mood, always in good shape, then no matter where you are, no matter what you've got, you're going to be happy. It's the kind of happiness that doesn't change. It's the kind of happiness that's really worth working toward.

So what he teaches you are the skills you're going to need to be happy. When you think about it, that's the most important issue in your life. If you're wealthy but you're not happy, your wealth doesn't mean anything. But if you have a happiness that comes from within, then no matter what happens outside, you're fine.

This is what we're working on as we train the mind to stay with the breath. You develop mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. And you develop alertness, the ability to watch, to observe to see what's really happening. Those two skills are basic to every other skill you're going to need in life. So it's good to strengthen them. All the Buddha's teachings are aimed in this direction, to find true happiness, and he tells us that often we'll find happiness in places we didn't expect it to begin with.

For instance, he says you're going to find happiness in generosity. Now, as little kids, we were much happier to get than we were to give. But over time we've learned that when you give things to other people, there is a deep happiness that comes. You feel good about yourself. You feel good about the other person. You feel good about what you did with that thing. And an open hand is much easier to maintain than a clenched fist.

We've also learned about the precepts. The Buddha tells you not to lie. Sometimes there were times we thought we should lie to get away with something, so somebody wouldn't punish us or get mad at us. But over the long term, we've learned that that doesn't work. We don't feel good about ourselves. We have to keep covering up a lie with more lies, and that never ends. But if you always tell the truth, you don't have to worry about what lies you told to which person, because you're always with the truth. Everything you say is true. There isn't going to any contradiction. People don't doubt you. People begin to trust your word. If you give more value to your words, other people will give more value to them, too.

So happiness often lies in places we wouldn't expect it, and in things in the beginning we didn't like to do. This is why the mind needs to be trained, because usually we're pushed around by our likes and dislikes. But the problem is that just because you like something doesn't mean it's going to make you happy. At the same time, with things you don't like, it's not always the case that they're going to make you miserable.

This is why we need to train the mind to remind ourselves that sometimes things we like are going to make us miserable, so we have to learn not to do those things. We have to figure out some way to talk ourselves out of doing them. Other things we don't like to do, but they're going to make us happy, so we have to

figure out some way to make ourselves happy to do them. That's where real wisdom lies. Wisdom doesn't lie in memorizing a lot of information or even spouting a lot of the things that the Buddha said. Wisdom lies in learning how to manage your own mind.

When you realize that meditating will make you happy, make the mind solid, trust worthy, reliable, then you learn how to talk yourself into wanting to meditate. Even though part of you may say, "Gee, I don't like this," remember that the mind is like a committee. There are lots of voices in there. You don't have to trust every voice that comes up. You have to look at and see: Is this a reliable voice? Who's speaking in here? Is it greed speaking? Is it laziness speaking? Or is it wisdom speaking? Wisdom looks at things in terms of long-term happiness. The basic question wisdom asks is, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"

So learn how to recognize that voice in your mind and how to strengthen it. Working with the breath is one very good way of strengthening it. You get practice in learning how to breathe in a way that feels good. You let that good feeling spread through your body, all the way out to your fingers, all the way out to your toes. And not only do you know that this is good for you, but it feels good, too. That makes it a lot easier to do. When you can take that good feeling and spread it through your body whenever you want, then even when things are difficult, things you don't like to do but you know you really should do them, you try to breathe in a comfortable way while you're doing them, and that makes them a lot easier.

In other words, you're making new friends, new allies in your mind and in your body. Make the breath your friend. Sometimes when the breath is your enemy, that means, say, when you get angry, your breath starts getting harsh and uncomfortable, and you don't feel right. You feel you've got to say something or do something to get it out of your system. But what you usually end up doing is something you're later going to regret.

So when anger comes, learn to breathe very comfortably. A comfortable breath will make it easier to think about what's really the right thing to do here, so that you don't just act on your mood or what you want to do. You realize okay, what *should* you do? What's the most skillful thing to do right then? That way, your breath becomes your friend. And you learn to identify which voices in your mind are your true friends, as in the chant just now. You've got true friends inside and you've got false friends inside as well. The training lies in learning how to recognize which is which.

This is why we need to train our mind, because if we don't, our mind is unreliable. It'll go for what it likes and it doesn't care about the long-term consequences. Yet those consequences can destroy our happiness. We all want happiness. Everything we do is for the sake of happiness, yet often we end up doing things that really make us miserable. That's because we're not paying attention. We're not looking for cause and effect. We haven't trained our mind, so sometimes the mind gets traitorous. It undermines its happiness.

This means that the skills you learn in meditation are the skills you need in order to be truly happy. You learn other things in school. You learn other things from TV and magazines and newspapers. But the really important issue in life—What are you going to do to be really happy?—you have to learn it here. You have to develop the skills right here: learning to be generous, learning to be virtuous, learning how to get the mind under control through meditation. That way, whatever you do will lead to happiness, a true happiness, a happiness that's good for you and good for the people around you. If your happiness depends on other people's misery, they're going to do what they can to destroy it. So when you're looking for happiness, you want to make sure you're developing a happiness that doesn't harm anybody else.

And right here is a perfect way of doing it. You just sit here and breathe. But you develop skill in your breathing. That doesn't take anything away from anyone else at all. At the same time, when your mind is in better shape, the things you say to other people, the things you do to other people, are going to be much better things.

This is where true happiness lies: in learning how to train your mind. So figure out some way to enjoy the training. After all, not all the good parts of the Buddha's path are saved to the end. It's a good path to walk on. So learn how to enjoy being generous, to enjoy being virtuous, to enjoy meditating, because those skills are the secret to true happiness.