

A Happiness Based Inside

December 14, 2007

Our happiness is such a fragile thing. You'd think we'd take better care of it. It's like a precious vase that we go and put on the edge of a table or leave out on the driveway or out in the middle of the street where it's bound to get broken.

We want a happiness that lasts, a happiness that's not going to turn on us. And yet we base it on what? Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. And are these things ever stable and lasting?

They do provide pleasure. The Buddha never denies that. But they can't provide a lasting happiness or a basis for a lasting happiness.

For that, you have to look within. That's why we meditate, to look for a happiness doesn't have to depend on the pleasures outside.

When the mind is well-trained, you can live with those pleasures. The Buddha doesn't force you to abandon them. He just asks asks you to stop clinging to them, to stop feeding on them so desperately.

If they're the only kind of happiness we know, we spend all our time trying to arrange sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. And they don't stay under our power. They keep going off and doing other things.

Like your body: You can control it to some extent, but there are an awful lot of things that happen in the body that you have no control over at all. And this is your own body. When you start getting out into the world around you, things are even less and less under your control.

But as the Buddha said, unless you see another alternative to pain aside from sensual pleasures, sensual pleasures are where you're going to look. You're going to be trying to spend all your life arranging things and rearranging things to provide those pleasures, only to see everything come crashing down.

That's why we look inside to work with the breath. To get beyond the sensual level, the Buddha says there's a level of form, which is the way you sense your body from within. This, too, changes but you're getting closer and closer to something that's more and more under your control.

You can adjust the breath. You can take the sense of ease that comes when the breath feels comfortable coming in, comfortable going out. And the mind, at least for the time being, can put aside its obsession with things outside.

There comes a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. You can take that and you work it through the body. The image the Buddha gives is of a bathman kneading water though a ball of bath powder. Today we might say it's like a baker kneading

water through flour to make dough for bread.

This is something you can work with, something you can do, something that's more under your control, something you can tap into at any time. So even though there may be pains in the body, you can focus on the breath in such a way that the energy in the body can help either alleviate the pain or at least provide you an alternative place to focus your attention.

Now, once you've learned how to master this kind of pleasure, it's not automatic that you'll suddenly abandon your desires for sensual pleasures. The nature of the human mind is that it wants everything it can lay its hands on. The more pleasures, the better.

This is what requires discernment, to realize that you have to make a choice: either focusing on your internal happiness, your internal pleasure as your main source of pleasure, or still wanting to dabble with things outside, wanting to feed off things outside. You have to choose where you're going to feed, and it's one or the other. Because if you go plunging into sensual pleasures, you lose this internal basis.

Again, it's not that as a meditator you have to run away from sensual pleasures. You just have to change your attitude toward them, realizing that they can't provide the basis for any real lasting happiness—and that you've got to learn to hold on inside.

As your discernment grows, you begin to realize that when you're not clinging to outside pleasures, you're taking a huge weight off of the people around you. You're not always trying to arrange them according to your wishes—and you're not demanding that they provide you with full happiness. You're more self-reliant. You lean on them less. That right there is a huge gift to them.

You need a combination of tranquility and insight to get the mind firmly established in a good dependable state of concentration and to keep it there—and to realize that if you're going to have a foundation for happiness, it lies in this direction and not outside.

That means, one, steadying the mind with a sense of the breath and learning how to watch out for when it slips off.

This is one of the reasons why walking meditation is such an essential part of the practice. You learn to maintain this center even as you move around and negotiate with the world around you. It takes an adjustment in your sense of your center of gravity and of the things you have to keep an eye on as you go through life.

At first it seems to take extra energy and extra time from your other preoccupations. And it will, but there comes a time, as you get more and more

used to being centered here, that it becomes more natural. You find that you're coming from a more solid place, so that after walking meditation, you can try other more complicated activities until eventually you can do just about anything in your daily life and stay centered with this sense of the breath inside the body as your primary focus, or as your foundation from which you observe other things.

So that's the settling and the steadying side.

And then there's the discernment side. You want to see what pulls you out. This gets easier as your concentration gets stronger. The more stillness in the, the more easily it can catch these other little movements of the mind as it goes out.

But at the same time, you have to reflect. It's not simply the power of concentration that's going to enable you to give up your attachments to wanting to feed off this, that, and the other thing outside. You have to be able to watch:

When the mind goes out after those things, what is it like?

How does it feel?

What does lust feel like? What does anger feel like?

What kind of lies do they tell you?

Can you really trust them?

Do you really want to go out there?

What happens when you do?

Having a good state of concentration inside gives you something to compare things with. But you've got to be consciously making the comparisons and seeing the areas where you can focus on things outside in certain ways so that your center is not disturbed by other ways of focusing, i.e., involving greed, anger, delusion, and all the other unskillful mental qualities that knock your center off kilter.

This requires discernment: comparing things, seeing connections, and seeing that if you want certain pleasures, certain problems come in their wake. And you have to be able to gauge: Are they worth the effort?

The effort spent in centering the mind is always well-spent. But it has to be augmented by this ability to discern, to see that you can't have your cake and eat it, too. There are certain areas where you've got to make choices. And primarily the choice is in terms of attitude.

Again, you can still live with the people you love and enjoy their company, but you have to watch out for your attitude, the extent to which you cling to them, the extent to which you feel that your happiness has to depend on them.

So on the one hand, you want to provide the alternative, the sense of well-being that comes from having a centered mind. And at the same time, learn how to use your discernment to see through the lies that the mind tells itself when it says, "I've got to have this, that and the other thing outside if I'm going to be

happy.” Whether the lies are subtle or really screaming at you, you’ve got to recognize them for what they are. The mind is going to play make-believe.

Like little kids decide they’re going to play doctor and nurse: One kid’s going to be the doctor, the other’s going to be the nurse, and another’s going to be the patient. They know they’re not really doctors, nurses, or patients. But for the time being, they like to pretend.

Well, it’s a habit in the mind that sometimes it forgets that it’s pretending. That’s what you’ve got to watch out for.

This is why the Buddha said that honesty is the basic prerequisite for practicing the Dhamma: not only being honest with other people, but especially being honest with yourself—about what the mind is doing, where it’s trying to base its happiness, and the results it actually gets.

This is why a good solid concentration practice requires both tranquility and insight, because neither without the other can really do the job. If you’ve got all these wonderful insights but there’s no actual sense of pleasure and ease from settling down with the breath, you’re going to stay stuck in sensual pleasures. If you try to deny that, the mind will go sneaking out and finding surreptitious ways of doing it.

If you have the concentration without the insight, it’s simply one other place where the mind can rest for the time being. But then it’s willing to drop that for other things very easily. Or it can lie to itself saying, “Well, I can maintain the concentration and still be involved in greed, anger, and delusion. Nothing goes wrong.” You turn a blind eye to all the damage that those things are doing to the mind.

So it’s necessary that you develop both tranquility and insight, so that you can avoid the dangers of being attached to sensuality, you can avoid the dangers of being attached to the concentration in an unhealthy way—or of being attached to both in an unhealthy way.

It’s the combination of tranquility and insight that really frees the mind from its misunderstandings, frees it from its old eating habits, and provides it with a happiness where there’s no desperation at all, no fear at all, because ultimately the happiness that comes when you break through to the unconditioned can’t be threatened by anything. Nothing can touch it. It’s simply there.

It’s because of this happiness that the Buddha talks about the drawbacks of sensual happiness.

Like the discourse just now, “The eye is burning,” he said, “with the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion, with the fires of birth, aging, illness, and death, sorrow,” and all the rest.

It wasn't his nature to simply badmouth things. He pointed out the drawbacks of sensuality because he wanted to point you to the fact that there's something better, something more reliable, a happiness you really can depend on. And that's the happiness we're practicing for.