

The Quest for Inner Happiness

June 29, 2008

Every evening before we meditate as a group, we do some chanting to induce the right frame of mind for the meditation. For instance, the chant on the brahmaviharas: “May I be happy. May all beings be happy.” That’s meant to remind us of why we’re here. We want true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t cause any suffering, any harm to anybody else—which, of course, is a happiness that has to be found inside.

With external happiness—depending on food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—there’s only so much to go around. And even when we try to keep our needs minimal, it still places a burden on other people.

This is why we want to look inside for happiness. This is why we meditate.

But before that chant, we also have the chant reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, to remind ourselves of how the Buddha found happiness, how he taught others to find happiness, and the qualities of the people who followed his teachings so that they could find happiness, too.

And particularly the qualities of the Buddha. They come down to three big ones: wisdom, purity, and compassion.

The Buddha’s wisdom lay in finding that it is possible to find a true happiness. You start out by asking yourself, “What can I do to find a long-term happiness?”—as opposed to what I might do that would lead to a shorter-term happiness or a long-term suffering.

The wisdom here lies in realizing that happiness comes from your actions. It’s not something that simply comes floating in, floating away. It may seem random, but that’s because we don’t understand the causes of happiness yet. There *are* causes, there *are* things you can do that will lead to short-term happiness, that will lead to long-term suffering, or that will lead to long-term happiness. And you realize it’s the long-term happiness that’s worth working for. That’s another point where the wisdom comes in.

You also realize if your happiness has to depend on other people’s suffering, it’s not going to last very long, because they’re going to do what they can to put an end to that happiness. That’s where wisdom leads to compassion.

And then from compassion to purity. You really try to reflect on your actions: Look at what you do, look at what you say, look at what you think that might cause harm for yourself or harm for others. If you see that it causes harm, you resolve not to do that action again. If you see that you’re causing no harm, then

you can take joy in the practice and keep on training.

So these are the three qualities we want to bring to our meditation: wisdom, compassion, purity.

We take the Buddha as our example. This is one of the reasons why *Buddho*, or the word for Buddha in Pali, is taken as a meditation word: to remind ourselves of these qualities and of the way the Buddha developed wisdom, compassion, purity in his quest for happiness; to remind ourselves that we want to develop those same three qualities in our quest; to realize that we're here for a long-term happiness.

It's not the case you're going to meditate once and that's going to take care of all your meditation needs. It's something you're going to devote yourself to over time, because it's a skillful activity. It doesn't harm yourself, doesn't harm other people. And it trains you in the qualities of mind you're going to need—in particular, mindfulness and alertness. You try to keep the breath in mind. And you keep in mind the fact that your mind will probably slip away, and you want to be alert to that. As soon as you notice it happening, you bring the mind back to the breath. The more sensitive you are to what's going on, and the quicker you can come back to the breath, the better.

That's why you have to bring a third quality, which is called ardency. You really pay attention to what you're doing and you really try to stick with it. You learn how not to get discouraged when you find the mind wandering off and sniffing at the flowers, looking at the sky, running over old receipts, settling old scores, planning for tomorrow's meal, whatever. As soon as you catch yourself doing that, you just come right back to the breath.

And use what strategies you can to make the breath interesting, comfortable, a pleasant place to stay, an interesting place to stay. Learn to think of the breath not as the air coming in and out of the lungs but as the movement of energy through the body. Then you can explore how the movement of the energy is going right now in different parts of the body. You can wander around the body for a while to see which part of the body seems easiest to focus on or when you focus on it has the most beneficial effect on the breath. Take your time to choose your main focal point.

You're not just clamping down someplace. You're actually exploring and choosing which kind of breathing feels best, which part of the body seems to be the best place to stay focused. You may settle at a place for a while and then decide that you don't like it after all. Well, you can move again. This way, the meditation is not an exercise in clamping down on the mind. It's an exercise in exploration, seeing what way of relating to the breath seems most fruitful.

If you find the mind wandering away from that, bring it back and then ask

yourself, “What way of breathing would be more comfortable?” Maybe it’s not comfortable enough yet. If it were really comfortable, you wouldn’t go wandering off. It would feel very gratifying just to say, “Breathe in. Breathe out. Allow the breath to nourish every little cell in the body.”

So if you’re not feeling nourished by the breath, ask yourself, “What would be more nourishing?” Explore. Experiment.

This is how you bring those three qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity to bear on what you’re doing. You start on a very basic level, realizing that if you want to find happiness, you’ve got to know the breath. It may not seem promising in the beginning, but this is where the Buddha was looking when he gained awakening, so you might as well give it a try.

Then have some compassion on yourself in breathing in a way that’s comfortable, so that the meditation doesn’t seem like a chore.

The purity is when you notice if you’re wandering off and you immediately come back. It’s purity in the sense that you don’t indulge in inner idle chatter and waste your time here. You’re sticking with your original wise, compassionate intention. As soon as you sense you’ve wandered off, you come right back. You see you made a mistake, do what you can to fix it right away.

Don’t get involved in all sorts of questions about whether you’re a bad person or a bad meditator. You’re not here to judge yourself as a person, you’re here simply to learn a new skill. Be more skillful in how you approach the question of how to be happy right now, how to feel ease, a sense of rapture and fullness right now that doesn’t impose anything on anyone else—a totally blameless happiness.

So as you sit here and meditate, remind yourself you’re developing wisdom, you’re developing compassion both for yourself and for everyone else around you, and you’re developing purity: the three qualities of the Buddha.

As you bring these three qualities to your practice, they help keep it on course. That way, the simple act of sitting here and watching the breath becomes something special. It can become a foundation for a happiness that’s genuine, a happiness that’s harmless, a happiness that’s actually a gift to yourself and to other people.

For most us, our quest for happiness is not a gift to anybody. It’s a process of taking. But a happiness that comes from within, from these inner skills that you’re developing: That’s a gift to yourself and to the world.

So keep working at it. Keep it nourished with these qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity, because they’re the qualities that turn the quest for happiness into something extraordinary.