

## *Trust Your Desire for Happiness*

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There are many reasons why we focus on the breath, but one of them is that when you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment. You can't watch your future breath. You can't watch your past breath. That sensation in the present moment is what keeps you anchored, keeps you confident that you're here in the present moment. After all, the mind does have a tendency to wander off to the past, wander off to the future, without being conscious of what it's doing. The wandering itself is not bad. You have to think about the past and about the future at times. If you didn't, you wouldn't be able to make sense of anything.

But it's important to know when you're wandering and which direction you're going, and to know when you're not wandering, so that you can watch the processes of what's happening right here right now. Because those processes follow certain patterns. As the Buddha pointed out, knowing these patterns is really crucial to understanding what you can trust, what you can't trust. In other words, if there's a dishonest intention, you'll see it only in the present moment while it's happening, and be able to recognize it as dishonest only then. After it's happened, it's very easy to cover things up and to pretend that what happened didn't really happen.

So as Ajaan Fuang once said, if you doubt other things, at least don't doubt the fact that you've got the breath coming in and going out right now, and that it's important to stay here, so that you can see the actions of the mind as they're actually happening. With experience, you begin to recognize which kind of intention is leading in an unskillful direction, which kind is not.

Discernment is not necessarily automatic. But if you keep at this long enough, you begin to gain experience.

That's where a lot of the insight comes, from learning to see connections. If you simply see events without noticing the results, you don't really have insight. Or if you see the results of your actions but don't have a clear idea of where or which actions they came from, that kind of insight isn't all that helpful, either. You want to see connections.

So you stay right here. It may seem tedious at times, just coming back, coming back, coming back to the present moment. But it's a lot less tedious than going through eons and eons of suffering because you haven't done the work, because you haven't really looked into the process. After all, everything, we do is for the sake of happiness. That much we know. So let's take that desire and put it to good

use. Take your happiness seriously. This doesn't mean being grim about it, but it does mean really looking carefully at what you're doing and the results you get.

If you want to wait until you know everything about cause and effect and your intentions and the way to true happiness before you give anything a try, it's like waiting until science comes with the final verdict on food: which kinds of foods really are good for you, which ones are not. You'd starve to death if you waited for that.

There was someone who once proposed that we let science try to prove whether meditation works or not. That way, the Buddha's teachings wouldn't be simply a religion anymore. It'd be a science. Well, you look at science, and how many things has science really given a final verdict on that you can really trust, that hasn't been called into question? Take food science, for example. Some reports tell you vitamin E is good. Some reports tell you that it's bad. Then other reports come along and say, "Well, it's good in some cases." And so on down the line. If you waited for a final verdict for final surety, you'd die first. You've got to eat.

So you do your best with what seems reasonable. You look at your own reaction to certain foods. How do you react to vitamin E? In some cases, you can't really tell. It's hard to run a proper experiment. But in some cases, you do know. You eat this particular kind of food and you get sick. Eat that particular kind of food, or you mix these two kinds of food together, and they seem to help you. Bit by bit by bit, you get a sense of what diet is good for you, what diet is not, even before you come to absolute knowledge. You take some working hypotheses and you adjust them as you go along.

Well, it's the same with practice. You have to try things out, because you're not going to wait until for the final verdict to come in on true happiness. You've got to act now. You've got to make decisions. So you start with a working hypothesis that seems to be most conducive.

One, believe that you really do have choices. If you didn't believe you have choices, there'd be no point in practicing, no point in putting out an effort, because things would just happen automatically. But you look around yourself and you see that people who let things happen automatically without putting forth any effort don't seem to do very well. So you assume that you have choices. And where are choices being made? They're being made right here. So you've got to watch carefully right here so that you understand what those choices are. And you begin to see which directions they go.

As the Buddha said, real assurance, real certainty comes only with your first taste of awakening. Up to that point, you're working on what seems reasonable.

There's always an element of doubt, but don't allow that to debilitate you. Just tell yourself, "This seems reasonable. This seemed wise. Let's follow it to see how far it really goes." The Buddha says to test his teachings, but he doesn't mean testing them for an hour or so, or for the length a retreat. You have to test these things over long periods of time—really test them, and not just go through the motions.

That requires a certain amount of conviction—conviction even before you're sure. What drives you is the suffering that exists in your life and your desire to find a way out. The Buddha never forced you. He never said you have to believe his teachings. But he advises you to look at your life. If there's suffering, then you might want to try this path because it explains why there is suffering and gives you some guidelines on what you might do to put an end to that suffering. Some of the guidelines don't require that much effort, but others require a lot of effort and a lot of dedication.

So the effort and dedication come from your sense of heedfulness. If you don't do something about your habit of creating suffering, it's just going to keep creating more and more suffering. So this is what the Buddha assumes: that we want happiness. It's a reasonable assumption. He's simply asking us to take that desire seriously. As we look around us, we see that other people want happiness, too. This makes you reflect: If your happiness depends on their suffering, they're not going to stand for it. So again you want to look for a happiness that doesn't harm anyone.

This is the basis for the Buddha's teachings on compassion. It's not that we're all one. If you feel compassionate of others only if you believe that we really are all one, that's a very selfish form of compassion. You talk about feeling other people's pain, but it's more that we can create pain within ourselves when we see other people in pain. We don't really feel their pain. Ajaan Suwat once made a comment when he was teaching in Massachusetts. One of the retreatants there was brand new to Buddhism, extremely high strung, worked as a telemarketer. At one point in the retreat he said to Ajaan Suwat, "You guys would have a good religion here in Buddhism," he said, "if only you had a God. That way, when the going got tough, you could have some confidence that the God would come and help you." And Ajaan Suwat said, "If there were a God who could arrange that when I eat one mouthful of food, it would make everyone in the world full, I'd bow down to that God."

In other words, when you eat, other people don't get full. Other people eat, you don't get full. You might be happy for them, but that's a different feeling entirely. If we really were one, we'd have a common stomach. We could actually feel one another's pleasures and pains, but we can't. We do know, though, that

our actions have an impact on one another. If you want to be truly happy, you want to make sure that your actions don't harm anyone else, because they're looking for happiness too. So you sympathize with them even though you realize that ultimately we are separate. After all, if we were one, then when the Buddha gained awakening, we all would have been awakened at the same time.

Finding true happiness is something each person has to do for him or herself, because the reason we're unhappy is because our lack of skill. And as we all know, you can't make someone else skillful. You can show them your own skill and give them pointers, but they have to make an effort and be observant of their efforts. They have to see things for themselves as to what works and what doesn't work. They have to improve their powers of observation. The happiness and pleasure and pain that they experience comes from their actions, just as ours comes from our actions.

So you sympathize with them, you recognize our commonality. And even when you don't sense commonality—in other words, other people's values really seem bizarre, shortsighted, and selfish—you realize that we all come from the same point: We all want happiness but a lot of us are very deluded about it. We've been deluded ourselves, so there's no reason look down on other people because they're deluded. Each of us has our own forms of delusion. But what we have in common is this desire for happiness.

The great wisdom of the Buddha's teachings is that he tells us to take that seriously. It's not a selfish thing. For so many people, the desire for happiness is narrow, selfish, and hedonistic, but as the Buddha said, if you really are serious about happiness, you have to be purer in your actions, in other words, harmless. You have to develop discernment as to what's skillful and what's unskillful. And you have to be compassionate, recognizing that your happiness cannot depend on the suffering of others if it's going to last. Wisdom, purity, compassion: These are all noble qualities. They grow in the mind that really takes happiness seriously.

So you ask yourself, do you really want to be happy? If you say Yes, okay, here is a path to follow, because it's a path that gives priority to that desire, one that other people have followed and claim to have gained good results. We see other people following the path and some of them seem inspiring. Others don't seem quite so inspiring. In cases like that, you can simply ask, well, are they really following the path or not? The path is noble. There's a classic statement about the Dhamma, that it's *adi-kalyanam majjhe-kalyanam pariyosana-kalyanam*: good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. The Buddha never asked you to do anything mean or spiteful or ignoble. The path builds on good qualities and it creates good results.

So even if you don't go all the way to the end of the path, it's a good path to be on.