

How to Be Happy

December 27, 2017

Focus on your breath. That's all you have to do for the next hour. Just try to be as aware of the breath as you can, all the way in, all the way out. Notice where you feel it. And keep watch over your mind to make sure it stays with the breath. If you simply try to force it, it's not going to want to stay. It'll want to wander off. So do what you can to make the breath interesting. Try to notice when you breathe in in different ways: What effect does it have on the body? What effect does it have on the mind? What kind of breathing is most comfortable? What way of conceiving the breath is most comfortable? You can think of it as the air coming in and out through the nose, or you can think about the flow of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and out. If it weren't for that flow of energy, nothing would come in and out at all.

So where do you feel that flow of energy? For most people it's in the chest, but it could also be in the shoulders, or in different parts of the head. In fact, as you get more sensitive to what's going on in the body, you begin to realize that the whole body's connected to the breathing. Every nerve, out to every pore of the skin, is involved in the breathing process in one way or another. So if you can think of the breath suffusing throughout the body, what effect does it have on the way you breathe? What effect does it have on the way you feel here in the present moment? Because how you're going to get through the hour here depends on what you're doing right now.

Years back, there was a woman who brought a friend to what we call our outdoor classroom, out under the trees, for an hour of meditation. The friend wasn't really prepared, but it was a lovely day. The sun wasn't too hot, there was a nice gentle breeze, and at the end of the session the friend said she had never suffered so much in her life. She hadn't listened to the instructions, or maybe they didn't speak to her, but at any rate she didn't know what to do with the breath. She was sitting there with nothing to do.

So give yourself something to do with the breath. Notice how you talk to yourself about the breath. We often think of meditation as involving not thinking at all, but especially in the beginning there's going to be some conversation inside about what to do, what not to do. As long as there's going to be some conversation, focus it on the breath, focus it on the mind, keeping the mind with the breath. If you do this with some skill, you find that it creates a sense of well-being. If you do it without any skill, it can be pretty miserable. So try to be observant because that's what skill is all about. And remind yourself, the whole purpose of this is to find happiness, true happiness, a happiness that goes deeper than ordinary happiness.

Think about the qualities that lead to a happiness that's true. One of the qualities, the Buddha said, is respect. After his awakening, he reflected, now that he was awakened and there was no one else in the world who was awakened, there was no one he could pay respect to. And

as he said, “People who live without something to respect live in misery.” Think about that. If you live in a world where you don’t respect anybody, or there’s no principle that you respect, life gets pretty mean. It gets reduced to just a bare grubbing for a livelihood, and fighting other people off, and then dying at the end. You can’t respect yourself, you can’t respect others: That’s a miserable place to be. But if there’s something to respect, something that you feel is higher than you are, something that gives you a sense of direction, that’s what you respect. And even though you haven’t gotten there yet, the fact that you have that object of respect is something that gives a sense of well-being. So ask yourself, who do you respect, what do you respect? Is this really worthy of respect?

In the Buddha’s case, after realizing there was no other person he could respect, he decided to respect the Dhamma to which he had awakened. He would bow down to that, he said. And everything he did was going to be in line with that. That’s the first thing to think about—and ask yourself, why do we respect the Dhamma? Because the Dhamma respects our desire for true happiness. It wants us to respect that desire for true happiness, too. As the Buddha discovered in his awakening, true happiness is possible: something that’s not subject to any condition, so it’s not going to be affected, it’s not going to be taken away by any condition. That does exist and it can be found through human effort.

So wherever in the mind is a desire for true happiness, the Buddha’s basically saying, respect that. And not only respect it, here’s how you work on it, here’s how you develop it. That kind of teaching, that kind of teacher is someone really worthy of respect. After all, the Buddha didn’t charge for his teachings. He freely taught. He went all over India to find the people who were ready to teach, and he worked at setting out the teachings together with the Sangha so that the teachings would survive even after he was gone. Here we are, almost 2,600 years later, and the teachings are still here, still worthy of respect. So if, as you’re practicing, you have any doubts about the practice or doubts about yourself, ask yourself why? What do you respect instead? And is it really worthy of respect? And then give the Buddha’s teachings a try.

That relates to another set of qualities that the Buddha says lead to happiness. These are the qualities that make you into a deva. A deva’s a being on a level of real bliss. Not the ultimate bliss, but much higher than the human level. But the qualities of deva are qualities that we can develop, too, which means that they can give us happiness as well.

The first quality is conviction. And here conviction doesn’t mean that you believe blindly whatever the Buddha said, but you do believe in the fact that he was awakened and that his teachings are worth giving a try, a serious try. So what do they teach you? They teach you the power of your actions. This is another reason why they’re worthy of respect. As for anyone who teaches you that your actions don’t matter, you have to wonder: What do they want out of you? If someone teaches you that your actions do matter, they’re throwing the responsibility on you. They don’t want to get anything out of you, but they do want you to be responsible, and to remind you that you have to be responsible for yourself.

We were talking earlier this afternoon about the committee of the mind, the different voices that come up in the mind, and one you really have to watch out for is the one that says, “It doesn’t matter what you do. Go ahead and act on your impulse.” Well, conviction is there to remind you that not all impulses are good and that they do matter. Which ones you choose to follow, which ones you don’t choose to follow: They do matter. So this way conviction is like a stick, but it’s also like a carrot. It reminds you that you do have it within your power to change the way you act. No matter how unskillfully you may have been acting in the past, you can change. And true happiness is within the range of your power. Do you want to let that possibility go, or do you want to act on it?

This is where another one of the qualities that lead to happiness come in, which is learning. You learn the steps that the Buddha taught. When he talks about virtue, what does he mean? When he talks about generosity, when he talks about meditation, learn about these things. Our educational system nowadays teaches you how to be a good member of the society, productive and all that, but it doesn’t teach you how to find happiness. That’s something you have to learn on your own, and this is a good place to start because this is what these teachings are all about. As the Buddha said, “The teachings all have one taste, which is the taste of release.” And release is the ultimate bliss. So it’s good to read up on these things.

Following that, there’s generosity, being willing to give. Give material things, give of your time, give of your energy, give of your knowledge. The Buddha would often teach generosity in conjunction with gratitude. We’re here to give, not to get, because we’ve already received so much. It’s the opposite of a sense of entitlement. People with entitlement are never happy, because they feel they’re not getting everything they deserve, not getting enough. If you realize, though, that you’ve already been on the receiving end of a lot of goodness, you don’t feel so entitled. The fact that you know a language depends on the fact that other people taught it to you. The fact that you know how to manoeuvre in the world depends on other people who have taught you, so have some gratitude for them and then be generous to the world in response—because if you’re looking for opportunities to be generous, they’re there. That gives you a sense of inner wealth, instead of wanting to get get get, receive receive receive, when there’s never any sense of “enough,” you realize, if you have something to share, that there’s already more than enough. That sense of having more than enough: That’s a real happiness regardless of what the actual material circumstances around you are. The frame of mind, the state of mind that wants to be generous, that wants to give, is a happy state of mind.

Another quality is virtue, abstaining from things you know are harmful. The pleasure that comes from this is being able to look back at your actions and realize that there’s nothing with which you can blame yourself, nothing that you have to be ashamed about. Nothing you have to hide from yourself. You’re not a weight on the world. You don’t harm yourself, you don’t harm others—and you don’t get them to act in harmful ways, either. That way, when you sit down to meditate, you can sit down with a clear conscience.

Then there's discernment, your ability to see exactly what you're doing while you're doing it—and to see what the results are, both the immediate results and the ones long-term. This enables you to gain a direct sense of what kinds of actions, what kinds of motivations for actions are skillful, and which ones aren't. The Buddha said that his pursuit of the path started with the realization that he had to divide his thoughts into two types, those that were skillful and those that were not. The unskillful ones were the ones imbued with sensuality—in other words fascination about thinking about sensual pleasures, wanting to get this pleasure, wanting to get that pleasure, weighing the mind down; thoughts imbued with ill will: and thoughts imbued with harmfulness. The discernment here lay not only in realizing that these were unskillful, but also in learning how to keep them in check so that they didn't take over.

As for thoughts that were skillful and imbued with renunciation—in other words looking for a pleasure elsewhere than in sensuality; thoughts of goodwill; and thoughts of harmlessness: Those, he said, he could think all day and they wouldn't be harmful. But he still had to be mindful where they were going, to make sure they didn't start wandering off track.

He offered a comparison of a cowherd. During the rainy season when the rice is growing, the cowherd has to keep check on the cows to make sure they don't go wandering and eating the rice, eating the rice plants. In the same way, you have to keep check on your unskillful thoughts. As for skillful thoughts, those are like cows after the rice has been harvested. There's no danger, so you can just let the cows wander as they like, but just remember they're there until the time comes at the end of the day when you have to get them home. But as the Buddha realized, even though it's possible to think these thoughts without harm, they still tire the mind. This combination of inner virtue and discernment lies at the basis of what's needed to get the mind into good concentration.

We talk about gaining discernment from concentration, but you also need to have some discernment to get the mind into concentration to begin with. Discernment is what allows you to know what to do, where to look, where the real problems are.

This is the ultimate clue to happiness: realizing that the problems are not outside, the problems are inside, and if you can clear up the problems inside that's the end of the problem. So you've got to train the mind. And because you've been building this on virtue, there are no walls in the mind that bar things off. In other words, there's not a lot of denial about what's going on, because mindfulness is the basis of concentration. Mindfulness is an ability to remember things for a long time so that you can learn lessons from the past about what's worked and what hasn't worked in the mind, so that you can keep applying those lessons in the present moment. As your mindfulness gets established, it turns into concentration. And there's a bliss that comes with the mind's ability just to settle down, be with one object.

At first, you have to make adjustments so that the mind fits the object and the object fits the mind. In other words, what kind of breathing would feel good now, what way of conceiving the breath would be good both for the mind and the breath right now? What do you have to

change in the way you're breathing and conceiving the breath? Then, when things begin to feel good, you try to settle down. Let that sense of ease spread through the body. As for any other thoughts that may come up, you don't need to get engaged.

These are some of the qualities that can make this hour into a happy hour. If you can bring these qualities into the meditation, it makes all the difference, because one of the important principles of kamma is not so much what you did in the past, it's what you're doing right now that matters. There may be some limitations coming in from the past, but your choices about what to focus on, what to do with what you've got right here: Those make the difference between whether you're going to suffer or not suffer at any given moment.

So keep careful watch over what you're doing right now, because that's the source of true happiness if you do it with skill. And the skill is something you can learn. That's the good news of the Buddha's teachings. Your happiness doesn't have to depend on people outside or things outside. It depends on your ability to develop a skill: to take your desire for true happiness seriously, not in a grim way, but with a lot of attention and care.