

## *For the Survival of True Happiness*

*February 4, 2023*

I read a strange statement the other day: someone saying that the greatest idea in human history was Darwin's idea of evolution through the struggle for the survival of the fittest.

I always thought that the Buddha's four noble truths were the greatest idea, because they point to something really different and more profound: We want to survive, not for the sake of brute survival, but for the sake of happiness. There are people who sacrifice their lives for the sake of something that feels noble, and it makes them happy that they've made that sacrifice. There're also people who don't want to live. They look at life and they see no opportunities for happiness at all. They don't care about the body at that point.

So the mind's greatest drive is not for survival, but for happiness. We latch on to the body because we think it'll be a good vehicle for happiness. The Buddha doesn't deny that. After all, he tells you to focus on the breath, he tells you to do walking meditation. You use the body. But the problem is that we have different ideas about the kind of happiness the body can provide for us. That's what we've got to watch out for.

This is why we have to have the contemplation on the 32 parts of the body and the reflection on the fact that the body is subject to aging, illness, death. We have to regard it as a tool, and a tool that we can use only for a certain amount of time before it begins to wear out. So we want to make sure that we don't get fascinated with the tool for its own sake.

On the path to the end of suffering, we train the body as part of our training, in virtue. In other words, we make sure that we don't use the body to kill or steal or have illicit sex or to lie or to take intoxicants. We use it in our training in concentration as we focus on the breath, or as we focus on the movement of the body as it goes through the day, using the body as our place to be grounded. The final use is for the sake of discernment, because it teaches us, if we listen to it, that time takes things away.

When we're young, we see the body growing, getting stronger, getting more capable. Even though we see old people around us, we tend to think that that's them. For us, our body is only going to go in the direction we want it to, i.e., getting better and better. But then gradually it turns around. Where you once were strong, you become weak. Where you once were healthy, you begin to develop illnesses. And the body that you've known as a body that's alive turns into

a body that's no longer alive. So you want to make sure that you're not attached to it.

I think I've told you the story about Ajaan Fuang going around what he called the body shops at Wat Makut in Bangkok, where he taught. Saturday would be the day that people would come in the middle of the day to practice meditation with him. That meant that on Saturday evening there would be very few people to teach, so he'd go out and get some exercise, walk around. That would be the hour when funeral-chanting services were held. He came back one evening and said, "You know, the number of people who die and hang around their bodies is really large." You wonder what he saw. And would you want to be that kind of person, who dies and doesn't have any idea where to go, doesn't have any sense of yourself being apart from their body? You'd just hang around your corpse.

In Thailand, that's one of the reasons they cremate bodies, just to make sure the spirit doesn't have anything to hang around anymore. But it shows that a lot of people have no sense of any independent part of the mind that doesn't have to depend on the body, any kind of happiness that doesn't have to depend on the body, even though the Buddha stated many times that the ultimate happiness is something totally divorced from the body.

And he shows how we use the body in order to get there. It's in that fifth contemplation that we chanted just now: "I'm the owner of my actions, the heir to my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." You fall heir to your actions, not to the body, but the actions of the body and mind can take you to a good or bad place.

So you want to make sure you use the body and your mind to act in ways that're going to be skillful, that will lead to happiness. This is where happiness lies: in the training of the mind. So this is what you want to make sure survives. The Buddha talks about five kinds of loss. There's loss of health, loss of wealth, loss of your relatives, loss of virtue, and loss of right view. As he points out, your happiness can survive perfectly well even when you lose your health, lose your wealth, or lose your relatives. But your hopes for true happiness will not survive if you lose your virtue or your right view.

So those are the things you want to hold on to. View the body as something that can be let go. It's something you're going to use, but you want to use it in the proper way. And if you're going to struggle for survival, struggle for the survival of your virtue, struggle for the survival of the right view, because you do have the choice. As the Buddha said, if you believe that everything that you're going to experience is shaped by past actions, you're left adrift—bewildered and without a protection—because you have no basis for thinking that one course of action

would be better than another course of action, or even that you had the right to choose. When you think in that way, then whatever impulse comes into the mind, you just go for it. In that way, your goodness dies.

You have to work on the assumption, the working hypothesis, that you do have choices, and that your choices are really going to matter. So this is where you focus your attention: on the things that you choose to do and say and think.

In particular, train the mind through meditation. We use the breath as a way of anchoring our attention in the present moment so that we can observe the mind. We work with the breath both because it provides us with a comfortable place to stay as we're watching the mind and because the breath is the part of the body most intimately connected with the mind.

When greed, aversion, and delusion, start in the mind, they're reflected in the way you breathe. As you focus on the breath, you'll see yourself using perceptions to stay with the breath. Directed thought and evaluation to stay with the breath. This sensitizes you to these processes in the mind.

There are a lot of Tibetan teachers who say, "Why focus on the breath? At death the breath is going to leave you. And at the moment where you really need your topic of meditation, it's going to abandon you." Well, that would be true if the breath were the only topic of meditation that's engaged in focusing on the breath.

But remember, the Buddha has us focus on ways of breathing that make us sensitive to how the mind fabricates its experience through its perceptions, through its feelings, and even—in the way the instructions for breath meditation are given—through the way you talk to yourself. The act of becoming sensitized to these things is what's really going to make a difference when you die. These are the things you're going to be holding on to. These are the things that are going to be giving you guidance. When it comes to the point where you have to let the body go, you learn how to hold perceptions in mind that will be useful for keeping the mind focused, to make sure it's discerning about what can be held on to and what has to be abandoned.

And you've learned how to talk to yourself in a skillful way, which you'll need at that point, because lots of different cravings will pull the mind in lots of different directions. You want to remind yourself that the dangerous forms of craving are the ones that deal with sensuality, becoming, and non-becoming—in other words, getting fascinated with sensual pleasures, or wanting to take on an identity. You see that you're losing the body and you're afraid, "If I don't have a body, where am I going to be? What's going to become of me?" Or sometimes there's so much pain leading up to death, both physical and mental, that you just

decide, “I’d rather be snuffed out and be done with it all.” All those kinds of cravings can come into the mind and drag you down, so you have to learn how to talk to yourself so as not to fall for them. That’s a skill that breath meditation can teach you.

So we’re not aiming so much for the survival of the body as we are for the survival of our happiness, the thriving of our happiness. This practice is for anyone who takes that issue seriously—and you’d think that people would be serious about their happiness. In other words, they would be careful and observant and try to be discerning about how they look for happiness. But so few people are. Some whim comes to the mind and they just follow it. Some brief perception strikes their fancy.

I have a friend from childhood who encountered some wealthy people when he was young. He was always attracted to that wealthy lifestyle. Even though he never earned enough money to live that way, he tried living that way and ended up in a lot of debt, just because of this perception that took hold of his mind when he was a child. This is a case of people looking for happiness but not really being serious about it.

If you’re really serious, you try to be systematic. You try to think it through, observe who out there really is happy. When they describe their happiness, whose explanations make the most sense? You’d have to say that the best candidates are the Buddha and the arahants. This is why we listen to them. This is why we bow down to open our hearts to their teachings, because we have so many other impulses that pull our desire for happiness in other ways. We need to have our respect for them pull us in the right direction.

So be serious about being happy. Be willing to do whatever is needed. Be willing to sacrifice whatever has to be sacrificed, and you’ll find that that kind of survival really is worth struggling for, because you’re not involved in struggling against other people, you’re struggling against your own defilements. And victory over the defilements is the best kind of victory there is. You’re not creating bad kamma with other people. In fact, your inner victory is going to be good for other people outside as well.