

Be, See, Free, We (7 of 10) Happiness

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There was a monk from Thailand who would come to Spirit Rock to teach sometimes. Many people would come to hear him, and the meditation hall there would be full. After everyone was already there, he would enter the hall from the back and walk up the aisle to the front. He didn't know much English, but as he entered the hall and walked down the aisle, he would exclaim in a loud, booming voice, "Happy, happy, happy." That wasn't the usual way that things began at Spirit Rock. When he said it, I think everyone perked up and smiled and were kind of delighted at what he was saying.

In the time of the Buddha, he had many titles. One of them was "the happy one." His community of monastics was seen by people around them as happy, joyful, and smiling. You can read that in the ancient texts. But it's easy to read those ancient texts, especially in an English translation, without picking up on how integral to the Buddha's teachings joy, happiness, and well-being were. They are central to the spirit of what the Buddha was trying to do.

Many words about well-being in Pali are integral to the path of liberation. Last week in these 7 a.m. sittings, we talked about the gladness pentad: gladness, joy, happiness, contentment, and the bliss of blamelessness. I love the topic of contentment. Contentment is a wonderful feeling of well-being.

There are also words that reflect concepts or experiences not automatically associated with well-being or happiness, but which provide a tremendous sense of well-being, like "tranquility." The embodied tranquility that comes with practice is like a healing force within the body, it feels so good. The embodied peacefulness that it is possible to experience feels so good. Some of these experiences of joy and happiness are described in the ancient texts as quite intense. Some of the most intense forms of joy, rapture, and happiness a person can experience come from Buddhist practice.

Here in the modern world, many people have an ambivalent relationship with happiness. Some people are afraid of it. They are reluctant to feel too happy because they're afraid it's a setup – if they're really happy, they're going to be disappointed, betrayed, or have to experience something opposite that's difficult. It is better not to be happy to begin with because then they won't be disappointed.

Some people feel that they don't deserve to be happy because other people are suffering so much. In a context where other people are miserable or challenged a lot, it feels wrong to be happy. There are certain social situations and some families in which love is conveyed by worrying about each other. Bonding and connection within the family occurs only by worrying, or sometimes only by being angry at the world around them. So they have to participate in the shared complaining or the shared hostility to the world around them. This is how they create their tribe – how they create a sense of being united.

There are many reasons, more than I can mention, that happiness is not prioritized or not allowed. I'd like to suggest that Buddhist practice and teaching is a challenge to all of that. It challenges us to take a risk and take a chance by cultivating well-being and happiness. Sometimes it takes courage to do that. Sometimes developing happiness goes against many of the currents of what's expected, what's wanted, what's valued, or what we think is important.

Many of us also have a lot of negativity bias, where we tend to notice what's wrong. We tend to be worried that something bad, some difficulty, is going to happen. The chronic anxiety that many people have brings feelings

and sensations that don't allow room for happiness. Anxiety kind of crowds the psychic mental space so we don't notice the simple happiness and well-being that is here.

I've been doing a lot of biking. That's my main mode of transportation these days. I find a lot of joy in biking. But yesterday I had an occasion to drive my car. I thought to myself, "I enjoy riding the bicycle so much. Is it possible for me to relax while driving and enjoy driving in a way that I normally don't?" I found it was relatively easy for me. I felt kind of cozy in the little cab, safely flowing along. I imagined I was someone from 120 years ago, maybe when the first cars were being made, who was thrilled at the ability to roll along the streets at this amazing speed. (I was probably going 25 miles an hour.)

It didn't take much to get a whole different perspective on driving. I felt delight in sitting back in the comfortable chair and being carried along by the four wheels. In this seven-minute drive, the question is, was it unrealistic of me to allow myself to feel delight, happiness, and contentment just in going there? Was it selfish and self-indulgent? Was it ridiculously sentimental or kind of a waste of time to enjoy and appreciate a little drive? After all, I was polluting the air. I was using up resources, and I was contributing to climate change and the decay of the earth.

I could just as easily have been depressed. I could have thought, here I am, driving a car and causing all these problems; I'm responsible and I need to take responsibility and feel the weight and the burden of the damage I'm doing. How could I ever do it differently if I don't get really depressed about driving?

In those five minutes that I had, what was the best use of that time? Was it better to be preoccupied with the next activity I was doing and barely take in the opportunity to drive in a happy way? Was it better to be depressed about all the harm that I was doing in those five minutes? Or was there something valuable about taking those five minutes of driving to feel some sense of delight, contentment, and joy?

I think there are times when the last choice is the best choice. The last choice prepares us for the world in a better way. The last choice might allow us to address some of the important, difficult challenges of our life much better than if we're burdened, suffering, and feeling heavy and depressed all the time.

I used that example because enjoying driving was a relatively small incident in the course of the whole day. I think often I wouldn't have availed myself of enjoyment when driving. I wouldn't have allowed myself that possibility. But there it was. It was nurturing, nourishing, and satisfying. Enjoying driving created a very different feeling in my mind and heart than if I was driving in other ways.

Developing happiness and well-being is necessary in order to begin to let go of clinging, grasping, and resisting. It is not possible to have a healthy sense of joy, delight, gladness, and happiness without moving in the direction of liberation, freedom, and openness, where we allow energies and forces within us to bubble up and move through us without controlling them.

It's often thought that we can control how much pleasure we feel through food and drink, paying someone to give us a massage, or something else pleasant and physically enjoyable. But we can't do the same for happiness. Happiness must include some kind of willingness to open and allow a deeper source within us than simple pleasure. Our capacity to feel happy, to feel joyful, is a precious resource. And it's not a crime to be happy. Being happy is not an incidental thing. It brings all kinds of good qualities to our attention to the world, to our mindfulness. The deeper realms of Buddhist practice are built on a foundation of well-being.

Once when I was practicing in Burma, during a long Vipassana retreat, I was starting to have a lot of joy and happiness. Every time I sat and every time I did walking meditation, there was a strong surge of happiness and well-being. They came largely because I'd given myself over so fully to being absorbed in the activity of walking or sitting. This was just like when we are absorbed in a good craft, playing an instrument, or reading a good book, there can be a sense of contentment and well-being.

I was just really there. Then one day when I was doing walking meditation, something opened in my mind in a new way. I was kind of stunned and in awe, shocked almost, at seeing the nature of my own suffering in a deeper, fuller way than I'd ever seen it before. I had no idea how pervasive suffering or stress is in the whole mental system. But more importantly for me, I realized, "Wow, if this is true for me, there's so much more suffering in the world than I ever imagined."

That could be a depressing thing to experience, but it was actually the opposite. I mean, it wasn't inspiring. It didn't make me happy to see it. But because I was feeling so much happiness and joy, that was the container, the context in which I saw this immensity of suffering. The happiness made it more okay to see the suffering. It was as if this was the truth, and it is good to see the truth. I wasn't burdened by it. I wasn't diminished by it. It wasn't exactly painful to see – it was the opposite. It was inspiring for me. To be honest and see this world clearly for what it is – that's the way forward. That's onward leading.

Cultivating and developing well-being, allowing that to arise, is partly a result of availing ourselves of the amount of well-being, joy, and happiness that might already be here. We might not have found it because of our negativity bias, our preoccupations, and because we haven't trained ourselves to be willing to be open and recognize that we can be content, happy, and joyful here. This is not Pollyanna-ish. We train ourselves to open our eyes, hearts, and minds so we can see this world realistically, and so that we can open to suffering and plumb the depths of it. This is where we'll find our freedom and liberation, the *mahasukha*, the great happiness.

Thank you. And I hope I haven't made you unhappy with a talk like this.