

Finding Our Way (4 of 5) With Happiness and Suffering

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In finding our way in this challenging world, with the personal challenges we have and with our minds, one of the things we're navigating is the terrain of happiness and suffering. Buddhists talk a lot about suffering. Suffering is a big word for some people. Sometimes people, who are new to Buddhism, can be a little disturbed by how often we talk about suffering because the topic seems like such a monumental thing. But we use the term in a wide way.

One of the ways I'd like to speak about happiness (and suffering) today is something deeper than contentment, gladness, and joy. Happiness is something deeply personal. Its opposite, suffering, is also something deeply personal. Some of the greatest suffering that people experience is when there has been a real personal violation, such as a physical violation against the body, a violation of some deep sense of trust, or a deep violation of who you are as a person or in relationship to others. Many years ago, a friend of mine had her car broken into. She felt that it was a deep violation – her car represented much more than just a car.

Our sense of safety and place in this world, our sense of belonging, is a very personal issue. So to have our sense of belonging, meaning, purpose, and connection to the world somehow dismissed, destroyed, or threatened can cause a lot of suffering. It isn't just simple suffering like "I had a flat tire and so I arrived late to an important meeting." The suffering can be deeply personal, and with that, there can be deep conditioning factors within us.

On the corollary, it's the same for happiness. It's not the happiness of "Oh, now I fixed the tire, that's great, I think I'll get to the meeting on time." Certainly, you can be happy about it, but by the time you get to the meeting, you've probably already forgotten about your tire.

But the real happiness of the Dharma, *sukha*, is very personal. This happiness touches something very deep within us, a fullness. It overlaps with a deep feeling or sense of belonging, meaning, or purpose. This happiness overlaps with a sense of worth and value – a sense of personal confidence. There's a fullness to it, a depth.

Some people might take exception to my repeated use of the word "personal" today. I do it a little bit because it's something that Buddhists don't tend to use. I do it to really challenge you to look deep into yourself, into that fullness.

Of course, a common teaching in Buddhism is not to take things personally. I understand that to mean the taking – the appropriation of things and saying, "This is who I am." The act of defining ourselves by something, the act of proving ourselves or building up a self, building up this edifice of ego that we have, which keeps us in some way superficial. The happiness of *sukha*, this happiness of the Dharma, is something that is fuller and deeper than anything that you could take personally or define yourself by. It's not about definitions.

The happiness of the Dharma is more like being so comfortable with yourself that you don't need to be defined by anything. You don't need to prove yourself to anyone. You have nothing to fear because it is so deep, the personal is so deep. It's like we tap into some depth inside of peace, well-being, "personalness" that can't be touched or hurt, no matter what other people do to us. Maybe this place is a reservoir of well-being. So it's very personal.

Part of the theme this week is the pendulum. There is a kind of happiness and suffering that live in relationship to each other. It is almost like one prepares the ground for the other to come, and back and forth it goes. This

happens when we take things personally in a superficial way. We take things personally through an appropriated identity or definition that is not really who we are.

For example, if I define myself as a producer of YouTube shows, I can feel happy with myself when the technology works well. But when I forget to push the right buttons, the happiness that comes from the praise I get from others and the delight others have with my great capacity on YouTube doesn't come. Then I feel unhappy, and I suffer because I forgot to push the right buttons. So this pendulum of happiness and suffering that is dependent on superficial, fragile things happens because reality is always changing. It sets us up for crashing and then building ourselves up again.

So finding a way with the superficial will keep us superficial. Dharma practice is to connect to something deep, something that's not defined by superficial things. Dharma practice is not influenced or affected by what happens. It's not affected by what other people think about us, believe it or not. Dharma practice is not affected by whether we succeed or fail in the things that we do. We do things sincerely and honestly. Some things succeed and some fail. But the depth of our being, where we really reside and live inside, where we're comfortable with ourselves, that is not touched, that stays intact.

To not know the depth of our being, to not be comfortable, resolved, and healed there, can leave that depth in a place where there's a lot of suffering. But if we heal it, work with it, and relax and open in it, this deep personal place where we can find peace, trust, and refuge is not exactly a pendulum anymore. It abides by itself. And if it falls away, we don't necessarily go into despair or deep suffering. Deep suffering is there if we take things personally. Deep suffering is not there if we *are* personal, if we abide and rest in that which is deep, full, and complete inside of ourselves.

In Buddhism, we're quite fond of talking about not-self. One way to bring these two things together – today's topic and not-self – is that when we are so personal, so at home, so resting in what's most personal, most intimate, most full that flows from within us, it's so full and complete that there's no tendency or desire to define a self out of it, to find a self in it, to want a self in it, to hold on to a self there. The concerns of me, myself, and mine fall away. This might be like a person so involved in playing a sport or making music that they are completely absorbed in what they're doing. It feels so complete and good to be there. While they're doing the activity, the usual thoughts of me, myself and mine don't occur.

So in that same way, there is a deeply personal place, in meditation or in the Dharma, where we can find comfort, belonging, healing, happiness, and well-being. If we can learn to be there, to trust it, and allow ourselves to get quiet enough to be absorbed in it, there's no movement or tendency of the mind for me, myself, and mine. When I say these things, you might immediately reply, "But I am me and there are things that are mine." And from the logic and point of view of the superficial world, where we think a lot about me, myself, and mine – "yes."

Maybe what I'm saying doesn't make sense. But that superficial world is where the pendulum of suffering and happiness live in relationship to each other. We can get trapped in that pendulum. We can swing back and forth, and maybe it never ends. But the depth of who we are, the depth of well-being, the peace of the Dharma is within us.

So when you become yourself fully in this personal way, then it is said that the Dharma becomes itself. When you are yourself, the Dharma is the Dharma. You are the Dharma then.

Thank you and I look forward to coming back tomorrow.