

## Well-being and Self-Preoccupations Falling Away

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So, I feel very fortunate at the moment that the topic is happiness, and I feel happy. So that's a nice coincidence. I should make the most of it. And so the sixth factor in the 12-fold list is happiness. And it's kind of, in a very wonderful way, this very honest willingness to see suffering, to name suffering, be present for suffering, is onward leading. And at some point it leads to various forms of happiness.

And happiness is not incidental. It's not an indulgence, but rather it's a condition that allows for a real turning point in this 12-fold list. We're almost at the halfway point, and the halfway point is as we go from today to tomorrow. And tomorrow will be *samādhi*. And *samādhi* is a very significant state change, where we start tasting something of what it's like to be a Buddha, where we start tasting something about the qualities or characteristics of freedom, of awakening. *Samādhi* itself is not awakening, but it has some of the qualities of it.

And these qualities, characteristics of freedom, non-clinging, awakening, begin to grow and begin playing themselves out as we move forward into the second half. And that happiness is the precondition, is the supportive condition, for this path to *samādhi* to arise. And there's this marvelous story that's told, that the Buddha says, about how he discovered the path that was going to take him to awakening. And it was a story about how he discovered that joy and happiness could serve, does serve, that path. And this was quite different from the religious environment of his times.

He had done deep meditation practice where, in deep empty states of nothingness, there's kind of no happiness in those. The humanity of our full, embodied emotional life is not really there in these deep states of nothingness that are possible. And he found that that wasn't the way to freedom. And he tried to do ascetic practices, which apparently were popular in

his time. And there it was fairly important not to be happy. So, you know, that was specializing in being, I don't know if unhappy is the right word, but specializing in not indulging in happiness.

Happiness is seen as kind of indulgence and pleasure. Part of the idea of asceticism at that time was that you wanted to exhaust all your bad karma. And so the more you suffer, the quicker you'd exhaust that. So let's get on with it. But he did that, and he did it, apparently, to the brink of death. And he said, this is not the way either. And he didn't know what to do.

He had tried the ways that were available to him at that time. And then he remembered a story of when he was a child. Most people assume that he was six or seven in this story. And if you remember, I told those stories when I was six and seven underneath the table, you know, with a sheet over it. And I have other stories like that that I kind of recovered as I started to meditate. And so occasionally there are people who have a reference point for an inner goodness, a peace, a happiness. Maybe one that has no reason. It just feels like everything's good in the world.

That maybe they've tasted as a child. And one that I didn't know at the time would have a huge impact on me in my life. It kind of nourished or fed something, or was a reference point that I think kind of was there to affect me, to grow. And it took me decades to realize that this one little event had any kind of real role in my life. But so in Norway back then, kind of, there was a lot of wood.

And so I might have stayed at my grandmother's house. There was this bedroom where I stayed, and it had a wood bed, wood window, probably wood walls. It was all very cozy wood, kind of natural. And there would be sometimes this nice, beautiful morning light that would come into the room, light it up. And in Norway, people, because it's so cold there, they have down comforters. So I would stay in bed in the morning, under the down comforter in this lit-up room, and read Donald Duck magazines in Norwegian. That was kind of a good time.

And then my grandmother would come with a tray, with toast and goat cheese on it, and some milk. And she would come and carry it in, me laying in bed there. And maybe, I don't know where she put it, on the bed or a chair next to me. I don't know where it was. And I would so happily eat this toast and have this milk, and I kind of took it for granted, because Donald Duck was the thing that was happening. Yeah.

But years later, her love, that represented love for me in some kind of simple, ordinary way, kind of went in deep and lived in me and kind of guided me and supported me for decades

until I remembered, oh, that's where that first feeling was. So the Buddha had something like that. And his story was that it was the springtime, apparently nice. I imagine it was really nice weather. The deciduous trees had leafed out beautifully with bright, fresh leaves.

And they were getting ready for the planting season, for the farming season. And so they were doing a ceremonial first plowing of the field. And there was a festival kind of situation, and all these people gathered to walk together with the plow and just kind of break the soil ceremoniously. But they kind of left the young kid alone, and he sat under that rose apple tree, sat there quietly, and just watched all this, watched what was going on around him, watched the ground and the worms moving around. And he was kind of left alone, but in this wonderful setting where there were people, family, community, kind of nearby. And he just got kind of settled and quiet and peaceful, absorbed in this setting, in this situation.

And he felt very settled and joyful. Yeah. And so when he gave up, as an adult, his ascetic practice and wondered what to do, he remembered that experience of goodness, of well-being. And he said, oh, that's the way. Rather than denying this pleasure, this happiness and well-being, that's the way of freedom, he said. And so then he sat down and engaged in that form of practice.

It wasn't a practice that was cutting off the human world. That's the experiences of nothingness that people can have. But rather it was an experience that, in some ways, was the culmination of the human world. It was like bringing together the wholeness and all of who we are without the fragmentation of self-preoccupation, concern, self-fear, self-anxiety. The whole world of self is so powerful. And to put this down enough so that something else has a chance to surface. And in this nice, simple environment, this simple thing happened to him.

And so I love this story, partly because it was to a child. He wasn't trying to do something. He hadn't read, you know, 10 books on the *jhānas* and compared them to exactly how you do it and the techniques and memorized exactly what's supposed to happen in those *jhānas* so he could measure himself and know that he was on track. The kid was just a kid, just kind of being peaceful and quiet, absorbed in what he was doing. And he felt this great sense of well-being that he thought, oh, this is the way forward. Maybe because he felt that in this state, there's already a quality of freedom there.

And then there's another story that's told in the *suttas*, that he had a son. His name was Rāhula. And his son, when he was relatively young, they think maybe seven or something, became a novice monk under his father's care. And so we don't have many stories from that, except at some point when he was maybe 13 or 14, a young teenager. And maybe teenagers

were the same back then as sometimes they can be now. Right.

So he was on alms rounds, walking with the Buddha, right behind him. And it seems what happened was that he kind of looked like his father. And he was, after all, the Buddha's son. So he got a little bit full of himself. He thought he was kind of special. He looked special. He was kind of proud of his looks. He wanted people to see him as the son of the Buddha and, you know, maybe like a young version of it or something.

There was a certain kind of conceit. And somehow his father got wind of that and turned around and said to his son something like, when anyone is concerned, preoccupied with their appearance, they're not really living a monastic life. That's a rough paraphrase. And his son took it a little bit as a serious admonition, because he'd been busted for what he was doing. And so he got the message, I guess. So he went back to camp. He went back to where they were, the monastery or the forest where they had been living then.

And he told this to the Buddha's disciple Sāriputta, who said to him, "Well, then, when the Buddha comes back, ask him to teach you meditation, meditation on breathing." And the Buddha did. And he gave him instructions on mindfulness of breathing. And I love this story because here we have a teenager who's caught up in the issues of their appearance, which is very external, external world, how people are seeing you and all this. And what he's being offered is something that begins settling the internal world. That brings a kind of inner well-being from the inside out that's not dependent on what people think about you and your status and how many likes you have.

And so the Buddha is offering a whole different approach to discovering a happy life that is not dependent on this world around us. And then when the Buddha gave his son this instruction on mindfulness of breathing, he gave the full 16 steps of *Ānāpānasati*. The last thing in this text that the Buddha says, if you do this, you'll know your last breath as you die. Kind of a powerful statement. You'll know your last breath as you die. And I think he says it as if that's a really good thing.

And I think it is really good. I think it's not just simply knowing your last breath, but if you're able to kind of have a sense of the inner goodness, the warmth, the happiness, the freedom of mindfulness of breathing, this is a great way of dying. You'll be very lucky to die this way. And so that's what he was offering his son. So tranquility is the precursor that sets the stage for this happiness. Sometimes people say that there's joy, the excitement of the joy quiets down, and the excited joy kind of falls away.

And in the middle of it is where this warmth of *sukha* is, this more embodied, subtle, sublime

kind of feeling of well-being that they call *sukha*. And so, as we settle further, there's this *sukha* that arises. I like to see this, the whole path of meditation in Buddhism, and what we're talking about here, starting with suffering at the beginning, as a path of simplification, becoming simpler and simpler. This is not a path of becoming more and more sophisticated. It's not a path of becoming more technically capable of doing complex things in meditation. It's the opposite.

It's kind of a little bit just letting go and quieting and settling and just kind of arriving here, just being here more and more in a simple way, like a six-year-old sitting under that tree in the park and feeling content and happy. And so one of the things that gets simplified is the little universe, the big universe, of self-concern, self-preoccupation, self-aggrandizement, self-degradation, self-protectiveness, self. There's a whole world of self, me, myself, and mine, my appearances, my opinions, my future, my security. Some of these things, of course, we should take care of. Of course, we want to be concerned with them. But it's the tension, the contractions, the anxiety, the despair and discouragement, the loneliness and the feeling somehow out of place in this world that can come with this excessive concern with the self.

Right? Then that is going to become quieter, quieter. I remember my second year in college, I had a lot of concern about my self-concern, and I was very concerned about how people saw me. And everywhere I went, I was concerned. Anybody, strangers, everybody was, you know, judging me, and this and that. It was kind of crazy-making to me how much I was concerned with what people thought about me. So I made up an exercise, and I remember doing it mostly on my bicycle.

I had a bicycle that barely worked, but people could walk faster than I could pedal it. But anyway, I was on my bicycle and going down the street, and I imagined that I was invisible, and that no one could see me. And that gave me relief from all this social self that I was so concerned with and caught up in. And so that part of this process of simplification is not to do away with the self or to deny whatever the self is, but rather to simplify that sense of self, that idea of self. So it's not something that we're caught in, caught up in, preoccupied with. It's not the source of so much suffering.

And it's probably fair to say that a fairly high percentage of human suffering is tied to this idea of me, myself, and mine. The idea, the whole little universe around self. And again, it's not to get rid of that or deny any of it, but rather to quiet it, to simplify it, to refine it, to let fall away all the selfing that's unnecessary. That's unnecessary on the way to feeling this very simple sense of well-being that a child can feel when they're left alone and engaged simply

with what's happening here and now.

The well-being at first is the sweetness. So there's kind of five, I think I've come up with these five levels of this happiness that can evolve as we become simpler, as we become more present for our experience, entering into the present in a deeper way, entering the present and abiding there, entering the present, abiding there, and opening to the experience there. In a very simple way, without demands, trying to make something happen, entering the present, abiding in the present, and then opening to the present here. And it's in the continuation of this whole process, beginning with suffering, faith, appreciation, joy, tranquility. It's becoming simpler and simpler, especially with tranquility. The agitation falls away. And a lot of agitation has to do with self. And so self-concern begins to lessen.

So the five are sweetness, by forms of happiness, sweetness, well-being, medicine, happiness as medicine, fullness, the fullness of happiness, and then freedom, the happiness of freedom. So, sweetness. I don't know how many of you have had this experience, but sometimes there are things we get absorbed in doing, reading a good novel, a book, maybe doing a craft, some people maybe playing music, some people singing, some people dancing. There are things we can, sometimes maybe some certain sports can do this, that somehow in giving ourselves over to doing the activity, or we're absorbed in the activity so that self-consciousness, self-preoccupations fall away. Not because we're trying to, but because we're doing something nice and fun and it engages us and absorbs us. And it can feel quite sweet, warm-hearted, nice, cozy, pleasant.

I remember, I read a lot of books when I was a teenager, and I still remember the cozy feeling of being absorbed in them. And sometimes my mother would call me to dinner. I kind of didn't, I don't think I heard her. At least that's what she thought. But, you know, it was something like that. I was so absorbed, and I probably didn't want to be here. It was so good to be there. And so I hope that you all had something like this that maybe some of you can see as a reference point.

It doesn't have to be dramatic, but something was cozy, sweet, nice. And that can happen in meditation, that you're sitting here at IRC. It's kind of the equivalent of under the rose apple tree. You're sitting in very good circumstances, beautiful nature around you, kind people who are with time to practice. It's pretty special. And to kind of take in the goodness of the situation you have and let that support letting go, settling, and becoming simpler.

Not to hang on to the goodness of the situation, but rather to help settle something. You can let go. You can just be. You can just be here. You have nothing to prove to anyone. You have nothing to have to show for yourself. You don't have to attain anything and accomplish

anything, really.

The idea is just to really be here fully. Enter this moment of your experience, rest in it, and open wider here, staying with the breath. Doing this, entering the breathing, abiding in the breath, opening further to the body breathing. It's like the breath then becomes like reading a good book. Not because the breath is so interesting by itself. What makes the breath interesting is when the mind gets settled and quiet on the breathing, when there's a continuity.

And it's kind of like the continuity of breathing in and breathing out starts feeling like you're a cat being petted. And the sweetness is the purr that starts coming up. And when you do something equivalent to purring with the breathing, that's when the sweetness begins arising in practice. But you have to kind of really stay there in touch with it closely, which is why I like the metaphor of petting a cat. Because, at least some of the cats that I've known, they seem to purr when my hand is stroking them. And then if my hand stops, they stop, and then I come back and they do it again.

And if I brush my hand against the hair, instead of with the hair, they don't like that at all. Then they stop purring. You have to do it just right. Not too hard, not too soft. Right? But you have to stay, as much as you can, in this continuous contact. So the same thing with the breathing. Can you have that continuous contact? Or can there be a continuous contact with the body around the breathing and the breathing?

And eventually, if you get absorbed in that, really, that's your simple world. You've become so simple. That's your simple world. Something begins to purr. Something becomes sweet. Right? One teacher I know describes it not as sweetness, but as beauty. The breathing becomes beautiful.

It doesn't have to be the breathing. It could be other things. But this sweetness, this little bit of being cozy, some people feel that the whole feeling of it is one of beauty. And there's starting to be an alternative to being self-preoccupied. Okay. Maybe there's a little pause from doing it. So then the next level of happiness is something stronger than that that I call well-being.

I like the word well-being rather than happiness because it kind of is not as precise as the word happiness. So many things can qualify as well-being. So maybe I use it sometimes as a way of hoping that everyone can find themselves in that word well-being, that maybe they can't with the word happiness or joy. But it grows, and the well-being grows and becomes stronger, and becomes now just a clear antidote to the anxiety around self, for the despair around self, for the criticism around self. So all this kind of self-world begins to just quiet and

settle.

And it just feels good to enter again, this enter into, abide in, open into, this inner physical feeling of well-being. Yes, here, let's enter it, settle in it, open to it more, as a way of simplification, becoming simpler and simpler. And part of that simplification is the quieting of the thinking mind. So much of the self-preoccupation that many people have has a lot to do with the thinking mind, the story mind, the constructing mind that constructs ideas around what the self needs and doesn't need. So to have that quiet is a real delight.

And then this sense of well-being can grow, expand, and it can become medicine, medicine for ourselves. There are so many ways that we have been hurt, so many ways that we've been broken, struggled, so many ways that we've been afraid. Some people talk about the fear body, the anger body, the despair body, because the mood, it's so big, it's not just a little idea, it's like the mood that fills us. What's happening at some point is we have the happy body, the body of well-being. Right? That it's going to help something to relax.

Something begins softening and relaxing and melting. The attachments we have, the clings we have, are closely connected to the ways in which we tense up in our body. And some of us will carry for decades deeply embodied tensions. And it's kind of like the heater's been turned on and the ice begins to melt. It's kind of like the heater, this inner well-being. It becomes medicine that kind of begins spreading into the places of tightness, holding, the places of fear, the places of hurt, places of anger.

And just most tenderly, gently, kind of touches them and quiets them and just feels like they're being cared for in a very deep way. It's a medicine. It's also a medicine we bring to the world. I think of this kind of when the well-being becomes strong enough, it in itself is kind of opening, partly because when we're closed, generally a closed human being is caught in some challenging area around self, me, myself, and mine, some challenging area that they're protecting themselves or denying themselves. And of course, that's necessary at times. But the cost of it is we're not connected to others so much.

As this medicine of well-being moves through us, we become more open because the boundaries, the barriers, the ways we're closed, the armor we have on begins to dissolve. And then we become medicine for the world because we're kind, because we're unthreatening, because it turns out people like happiness, to be happy. So sweetness, well-being, medicine. The fourth is a fullness. And this is when we come into the *jhānas*, this very deep welling up of well-being that becomes very calm, very calm, kind of very still, but kind of wonderfully vibrating, warm, happy, contented, sublime.

The metaphor, the analogy for this is this lake, completely still. And there are lotus flowers of all kinds of different colors floating under the water, on the surface of the water. But the ones under the water are what's emphasized. And they say that no part of the flower, the beautiful flowers, is not touched by this refreshing water. So I think that our inner life gets simpler and simpler. And with this sense of well-being and happiness, it's kind of like that together with being aware, happy awareness, aware, attentively happy.

It feels like a wonderful pool or lake. And everything we experience, everything we perceive, seems like it's beautiful. We have a thought and it's just a beautiful thought. We have an emotion, no matter what, beautiful sensation. Everything has kind of a... Sometimes people describe it like everything is gold, golden, or everything's a treasure. The stereotypic kind of example of this would be you see some kind of silver candy wrapper that's been thrown on the ground, and you stop and you look at it and you go, wow, it's so beautiful.

Wouldn't occur to you that's trash. Just it's like, wow. It can seem kind of silly to have that with the candy wrapper. But it's possible to have this fullness of happiness that really changes how we perceive everything. It's kind of like there's a Midas touch where everything we touch, everything we see seems beautiful. And this can be a great relief to have this. Because at this fullness, there's not really any space anymore for self-preoccupation, self-concern, self-building up a self, planning for a better self, trying to make a better self, trying to resolve the self, all things that might be necessary in other states of mind.

But to have that simplification process become simpler and simpler and simpler, quieter and quieter. Here, here, here, just here. Now, now, just now. And to appreciate that this path of *ehipassiko* is not only a path of simplicity, but a path of increasing simplification. To be here in our experience in the simplest possible way. And then at some point, that ripens into the happiness of freedom.

Sometimes it's called great happiness, *mahā-sukha*. The happiness that comes when there's no clinging. We're no longer attached to anything. There's no limitations to the heart. There's no closing down of the heart. There's no contraction of the heart in any kind of way. The heart, in a sense, is completely open.

And at this point, with freedom, there's a kind of tremendous insight that can see through the ideas of self, through the attachments of self, through the constructs of self that we have, and see right through it, see how transparent it is, how porous it is, how light it is, how provisional it is, how it's a construct of the mind, so much of it is. And not to deny any of it, but to not be caught by any of it, to find freedom with it. So the *mahā-sukha*, the great happiness, that is the culmination of a process of becoming simpler and simpler, not more sophisticated,

not needing to have great earth-shattering insights, understandings that the newspaper reporters from all over would love to interview you about and think how wonderful you are and write you up in the *New York Times* for your great insight.

If they did find you for an interview, what is it, your insight? Oh, it's okay to be simple. It's okay just to be alive and breathe. Okay. Well, we can't write that. That's not going to get more people to buy the newspaper. And you say, oh, maybe you'll apologize. I'm sorry. That's all I got. And they'll look at you and see you're so happy. So *mahā-sukha*.

So one of the things I'm trying to get across here today is don't be too concerned about self, not self. There is a self, there is no self. Trust the process of becoming simpler, simpler and simpler on this whole topic of self. Maybe shedding what's obvious to you is not needed anymore in this process of just being able to be at peace under the rose apple tree of IRC. The other thing I want to convey through this talk is that you're allowed to notice the well-being that's here for you.

And I learned at some point that I was ignoring the well-being that was here because I thought I had to get somewhere, do something, I had to be busy, or there was something really important to attain and get to, and this happiness was kind of like just a distraction or something. That's not the real thing. It's invaluable. It's invaluable to avail yourself of the gladness, the joy, the happiness that might actually be here. If you took a little bit of time to notice it, there might be more happening here than you've appreciated.

It might just be one or two breaths away. Settle back, relax, and feel. Is there any even smallest idea, feeling, of sweetness, of well-being, of contentment, coziness, your equivalent of purring? If you quiet the distracted mind and feel into what is here, is there anything here that feels good to stay close to, that helps you to enter into the present moment, abide in the present moment, open further into the present moment, enter the breathing, abide in the body breathing, and open more fully to the full experience of breathing? Is there any sense of well-being, beauty, goodness, wholeness?

And even if it's just little hints of it, allow yourself to feel it. Maybe as a support for wanting to stay present here. It's easier to be present if it feels good. Maybe as medicine. Maybe so you can be a gift to this world that needs us to help. Thank you.