

A Pure Happiness

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Meditating is a big job that requires all your attention and willpower to resist your typical ways of doing things, and it requires you to question a lot of things that you've left unquestioned in your life.

When you think about how big it is, it can get intimidating. When you think about the obstacles you're going to have to overcome, sometimes you just give up.

That's because you don't break them down. As with any big job, the only way to complete it is to break it down into little jobs, manageable bits and pieces.

This is why we're focusing on the breath. This is our manageable bit, our manageable piece right now: this breath, right here, right now; this moment of mindfulness right here, right now. And whatever comes up in terms of an obstacle, it's just that little bit of a thought right here, right now.

If you start thinking about it in big terms—like a huge mass of greed, huge mass of desire, huge mass of anger or whatever it is—it'll knock you over. But if you realize you can break it down into little bits and pieces—just *this* particular thought right here, right now—you realize that that particular thought is not so difficult, not so hard to overcome.

It's the same when dealing with pain. If you think about how much pain you've been through or how much pain you're going to go through on into the future, the present breaks down because you've placed the whole weight of the past and the future on the present moment and it breaks through. It can't hold up all that weight.

But if you're dealing simply with the pain as it's experienced right here, right now, it's manageable. You can deal with it; you can handle it.

So whatever comes up in the meditation, learn to break it down to precisely what it is: the event right here, right now.

The word "dhamma," which is often used to describe what you experience, can mean "action"; it can mean "event." And you notice after a while that the big abstractions that threaten to overwhelm you actually come down to just little movements in your mind: little actions, little events. A little bit of distraction, a little bit of greed, a little bit of sleepiness, whatever. It's just a little moment.

One way to see this clearly is when you wake up in the morning and you tell yourself, "I just cannot get up. I'm too tired to get up." After all that night of sleep, it's still not enough sleep. You want some more. But then you can't get back to sleep, and yet you still don't want to get up. Well, ask yourself,

“Precisely what is so heavy in your body that you can’t lift it up?” And you look around and test different parts—an arm, a leg, your torso—by lifting them, and you realize there’s nothing at all. So you get up. That’s it.

So try to reduce the big issues to precisely what you’re experiencing right now and you’ll find that it’s manageable.

This process is called “appropriate attention.” The word in Pali is *yoniso manasikara*, which means looking at things in an appropriate way, a helpful way, a way that enables you to strengthen the skillful qualities in the mind and work through the unskillful ones. And a lot of it is just this question of breaking things down.

In the Buddha’s discussion of the truth of suffering and pain, he says that it has to be comprehend. He starts with the obvious forms of suffering—birth, aging, illness and death, not getting what you want, having to be with things you don’t like, being separated from the things you do like—and then he finally boils them all down to the five aggregates of clinging or the five clinging-aggregates.

What are they? There’s form, which is how you’re experiencing the body right now; feeling; perception; thought-constructs; and consciousness.

The point of this is if you look at what you’ve got in these five terms, you realize there’s not that much there to cling to, not that much there to hold onto.

Form is just a sense of the form of the body.

Feelings come and go. If you look very carefully at your feelings, you can hardly grab onto them at all. In fact, usually what you grab onto is the shape of the hand that’s grabbing. As for the thing you’re trying to grab onto, it’s gone, while you’re still maintaining that stance of grabbing. But look at the feeling itself: that little bit of feeling of pleasure, that little bit of feeling of pain. These things come and go, come and go, come and go very fast.

The same with perceptions: the labels you give to things. You say, “Oh! There they go. There’s another label. This is this. That’s that.”

Thought-constructs; moments of consciousness: These things come and go very fast when you look at them.

And you begin to realize that there’s not that much to cling to. This whole mass of suffering that we tend to carry around comes down to these little tiny things that come and go, come and go, come and go.

So the problem’s not with them: They’re not all that heavy. It’s the clinging that makes them heavy. You hold onto this stance of clinging, you hold onto this hand that’s clinging, as a habit. That’s what turns these things into suffering. If you don’t cling, they don’t cause you to suffer. There’s nothing in them inherently that makes you have to suffer.

This is an important insight, because if you think of suffering as an

enormous monolithic block you've got to chip through, if you think of your defilements as huge monolithic blocks you've got to chip through, you give up. It just seems way too much to handle. But if you look very carefully at them, you see that they're just these tiny moments. The more precisely you get into the present moment, the more you see how quickly they come and go.

This is why we focus on the breath: to bring ourselves as much into the present moment as possible. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment. The more fully you are with the breath, the more fully you are in the present, and you don't have to hold anything back.

Just allow yourself to fully sense the breath as it's coming in, fully sense the breath as it's going out, wherever you can feel it in the body. And then there's the next breath, and then the next: always another chance to be as fully immersed as possible.

But it's not a totally passive process, because you begin to see that you're doing something with the breath all the time, even when they tell you, "Don't do anything with the breath. Just experience it as it is, in and of itself." If you deny the choices you make in how you breathe, they go underground. You don't see them, which makes it even harder to understand them.

But if you're open and above board about the fact that, yes, you are shaping the breath, you can learn how to be more aware of how you shape it. This actually opens up parts of the mind that you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

What kind of sensations do you want out of the breath? What would be a really satisfying breath right now? Ask that question and look into it. This enables you to get more and more immersed in the breath, because it feels better and better to be immersed here. It's not a constant struggle against your old habits of running off to the past and future. You begin to find that the present can be made into a pleasant place, an interesting place, a place where it really feels good to stay totally immersed, totally open to what's coming in, going out in terms of the energy in the body.

As you do this, you're developing *the* two basic things you need throughout the practice: the doing side and the watching side. In terms of the doing side, it's always striking to see how much emphasis the Buddha places on doing things that lead to happiness, doing things that lead to a sense of well-being.

How many times do you hear that the Buddhism is pessimistic, that it focuses on suffering and all the problems of life? People say, "Well, it doesn't really appreciate the good things in life."

Around the turn of the last century, Westerners went over to Asia and were always mystified at how happy Buddhists were. It didn't seem right. Obviously, they didn't understand the true teachings of their teacher, otherwise they wouldn't be so happy. That was the attitude they had from reading Buddhist texts in a cursory way.

But if you actually look into the texts, there's so much on how to be happy. The Buddha gives advice on how to have a good family life, how to get along with other people, how to manage your money so that you can find happiness in the present moment and also have a few things socked away for the future. How to find happiness in being generous, how to find happiness in following the precepts, how to find happiness through meditating: It's all there in the texts.

His first instructions to his son were to watch his actions. And if the actions didn't lead to happiness, okay, you know that you've done something wrong.

That introduces, though, the second element, which is the watching.

The Buddha says it's perfectly fine, it's a good thing to pursue happiness, but you also have to watch what you're doing. Watch how you pursue happiness and see what results you get. Step back a little bit and take a good honest look at what you're doing, a good honest look at the results. Are they satisfactory? If they're not, what can you do to make them better?

When the Buddha talks about suffering and especially emphasizes, say, the three characteristics that things are inconstant, stressful and not-self: It's in the watching side that these teachings play their role.

In other words, you do something and the question is, "How long-lasting is the happiness you get from this action?" If there's no happiness at all, you drop it totally and don't do it again. If there is some happiness then the question is, "How solid is this happiness, how reliable is it? Is it something you can really depend on? Does it lead you to do skillful things or unskillful things? Does it cause harm to anybody else?" If it causes no harm to anybody, you can continue doing it.

But you have to realize that it's not the ultimate happiness. Because if it's something that changes, then there's going to be an element of stress. And where there's an element of stress, is this something you really want to identify with? If not, look deeper.

So throughout the practice, the basic motivation is to find true happiness. After all, the Buddha says nibbana is the ultimate happiness. That's what we're working toward. So we use these teachings on stress and inconstancy and not-self as ways of watching and judging our actions, and peeling away our attachments to things that get in the way of nibbana.

And it's usually not horrible things that get in the way. It's our satisfaction with lesser forms of happiness. Those are the big obstacles.

Now there are some forms of stress and pain that will come with practicing the path, but they're balanced with the forms of happiness and well-being that are integral parts of the path itself. A sense of well-being that comes from being generous, that's part of the path. A sense of well-being that comes from having

principles in your actions, knowing that no matter how much people will pay you, you just will not lie, you won't steal, you won't cheat, you have worth inside you: That's a form of happiness and well-being.

And then there's the happiness that forms the heart of the noble eightfold path itself: the sense of well-being, rapture, pleasure that comes as the mind begins to settle down into good, strong states of concentration. This is a form of happiness that the Buddha says to develop, work on it. Don't be afraid of being attached here.

After all, the nature of the mind is that it's going to hold onto things, so give it something good to hold onto. And think of letting go of this only when you've let go of other things, the things that are lesser forms of happiness.

So remember, as you practice, that the Buddha is encouraging you to pursue true happiness. After all, you look at his life: The reason he left home was because he saw that all the things that he was enjoying at that time were going to let him down. And he was determined to find a happiness that wouldn't let him down.

His friends and companions all said, "You're crazy. This is as good as it gets." But he wasn't willing to listen to them. He said that if human life has any meaning, it's got to be more than just this. There has to be the possibility of a true happiness, a reliable happiness, that's not dependent on having a young body or a healthy body. There has to be a happiness that doesn't depend on all these undependable things.

That attitude is what pulled him out of his house and into the wilderness. And when he found that happiness, that's what brought him back: the desire to show others the way to that happiness.

So think of this practice as the genuine pursuit of true happiness with the emphasis on the "genuine" and the "true." You've got to be honest about what you're doing: That's the second part, watching yourself as you pursue happiness to see, one, if what you're doing really is in line with your own best interests; and two, if you've received the results that you find satisfactory.

If they're not satisfactory, go back and rethink what you've done. That little question mark that you put by the results of your actions: It's in the little question mark that awakening will come, the little question mark that's willing to question, "Okay, is this as good as it gets? Could there be something better?" Of course the question mark implies that you're not totally tied down to what you're doing, you're not totally tied down to the results you're getting. There's part of you that's willing to pull away and look. And the part that pulls away and looks is what's going to get you to where you really want to go.

So as you're working here with the breath: I don't know how many people have asked me, "Is it okay to change the breath? Are you sure?" Well, of course it's okay to change the breath. Who's going to put you in chains, who's going

to throw you in jail if you change your breath? If you don't work at changing your breath, how do you learn? Basic learning psychology says the person who learns is the one who experiments.

If you simply do what you're told, you follow the recipe, you follow the instructions, that's one level of learning. But if you're willing to experiment, try something else, see what that does, you learn a lot more. And it's in that quest for making things better—a deeper, more satisfying sense of pleasure, deeper more satisfying more harmless sense of happiness: That's how you learn.

It's interesting that when the Buddha described that process to his son about looking at your intentions then looking at your actions, along with the results they give immediately as you do them and as you do them over the long-term, he said that it's through this process that people purify themselves.

That's interesting: The pursuit of happiness properly done is a method of purification. What that means is that our mind's become purer, not simply through pursuing happiness but also questioning what we're doing, questioning the results. It's the questioning that allows for the purifying process.

But it doesn't have to be a process of self-torture. It's just developing a more and more refined sense of what true happiness is, what the potential for happiness is in the human heart. This is probably one of the most radical aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

So don't be afraid to enjoy your breathing. Don't be afraid to play with it. There will come a point where the Buddha tells you to step back. There's a term, *atammayata*, which means "not made of that-ness." Sounds pretty weird, doesn't it? What he's getting at is that a lot of people, when they get in a really good strong sense of concentration, totally identify with what they know, what they've attained. They've made a sense of self around what they've done. This is *them*.

And yet if you've been very skillful as you've developed the path, beginning as the Buddha recommends with his son, you're always stepping back and looking at the results. Even with these strong states of concentration, there comes a point where you have to step back a bit and watch, to realize that you're not made of that state of concentration. It's something that's there but there's also an awareness that's separate, that can watch, question, look.

It's that ability to pull back a little bit that enables concentration to become a basis for awakening.

So value both sides of the path, the quest for happiness and the willingness to step back and look at how you conduct your quest. Because it's the combination of the two that makes the path.