

## *Becoming Capable of Happiness*

*May 19, 2018*

“Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?” That’s a question the Buddha has you ask yourself every day. And the reason he has you ask it is because you can do something about it: What you’re becoming comes from your actions. The person you are right now is the product of actions of the past plus actions in the present moment. If what you’re doing right now couldn’t be changed, if you couldn’t change it, then the Buddha wouldn’t have you ask the question.

When we change the way we act, we change who we are. This is good to keep in mind when, as you look at the practice, you get discouraged. You’re thinking that it’s beyond you. You won’t be able to do it. Well, the “you” right now is not the person who’s going to be able to do it all the way. As you practice, you change. You become a different person. Remember the image of the relay chariots. The first chariot doesn’t make it all the way to Savatthi. The last chariot is the one that does. But if you hadn’t ridden the first chariot in the right direction, you wouldn’t have been able to get into the last one.

Keep this in mind when you look at your behavior and aren’t inspired by it, when you look at your weaknesses and say to yourself, “How can a person with these weaknesses ever reach there?” You don’t reach there with those weaknesses. You look for your strengths. And you build on those.

And as you develop skills—the skills of generosity, virtue, and meditation—they can overcome those weaknesses, change you into a different person. And they *are* skills. Generosity is a skill. At its very least, it’s an exercise in free will. So many of the Buddha’s lists of teachings start with generosity because an act of real generosity—when you give something, not because you have to, not because someone tells you that you should, but simply because you want to—enables you to gain a sense that you have some freedom of choice. You could take the chocolate yourself, or you could give it to somebody else. If you give it to somebody else, you become a different person. You have the freedom to take it, but you’re also not a slave to your desires. This is why, when the Buddha is asked, “Where should a gift be given?” he says “Give where you feel inspired, or you feel it would be well used.” In other words, he doesn’t place any shoulds on the act of giving.

However, if you want to turn generosity into a skill, then you have to start thinking about what you’re going to give; why you’re going to give it; who you’re

going to give it to; what kind of motivation and attitude you're going to bring to the act of giving. And here again, you can choose. The Buddha points out that some motivations are higher than others. The lowest one is giving with the idea, "I'll get this back through the force of karma." But after a while, you get tired of thinking in those terms because you begin to realize, "Well, I'll gain this some other time. But once I gain it that next time, I'll have to give it away again if I want to maintain the generosity of virtue." So you start thinking about other reasons: deeper reasons. For one, it feels good in the mind to give. That's when the happiness that comes from generosity begins to get internalized. And the motivations go higher and higher until finally giving is just a natural ornament for the mind.

The precepts are a skill as well: They provide training in mindfulness, alertness, ardency, and all the other qualities you're going to need to get the mind into concentration. You have to remember the precept. You have to watch your actions to make sure you're following it. And you have to want to do it well, realizing that you need to develop the discernment that sees how to hold to them well without their forcing you into doing things that will be detrimental. After all, there are times, say, when you're asked a question about some information. You suspect that the person who's asking the question might misuse the information. So how do you not give the information while at the same time not lying? That exercises your discernment.

Over time, you begin to reflect. As you stick with the precepts, you can look at your life and begin to see that you're leading a life that's less and less harmful for yourself, for other people. You have become a person of principles, and not just another mouth in the food chain. A sense of well-being comes from that.

And, of course, meditation is a skill. It's probably the most difficult skill there is. When we're first getting started, it can seem pretty daunting. But, bit by bit by bit, as you work at it, the skill develops. As it comes, there's a sense of well-being that comes along with it. In this case, the quest for happiness turns from "how can I consume happiness" to "how can I produce it?" There's a sense of satisfaction that comes from being a producer of good actions. This is why the Buddha said acts of merit, which these three activities are—generosity, virtue, and meditation—acts of merit are another word for happiness. The act itself is the happiness, when you see that you're able to do it.

On top of that, there's the happiness it produces. This is going to take patience, because this kind of happiness is something that grows over time. This kind of gradual growth comes with gradually improving skill. It's the most solid way to improve the level of happiness in your life. They've done studies showing

that most people have a certain happiness quotient: in other words, a certain level of happiness that may be disturbed by really good events or really bad events, but then the mind, after those events, tends to return to its original level of its sense of well-being, higher or lower. The happiness that comes from things outside happening to you doesn't bring long-term changes to that habitual level of happiness.

But the happiness that comes from your own actions and changing your own actions: That's something else entirely. That's how your happiness quotient can be raised, because your actions are what's going to change it. Events happening outside may mark you in some ways, but the mind has a certain way of recovering its original equilibrium, wherever that equilibrium was, because its internal actions are still the same as they were before. It tends to digest sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas as it did before. But if you can learn how to change the way you digest your experiences, change the way you act in shaping your experiences, that's how you change the basic level of your happiness.

So, given that we're working on skills, be prepared to be patient. Here again, patience is something you may not have much of start out with. This is why you have to motivate yourself with thoughts of heedfulness, realizing that if you don't change your actions, no improvements are going to come. So you have to keep at it, keep at it. This is why we have those reflections about aging, illness, and death, the world being swept away, the reflection the Buddha has you make every day that this could be your last day. In fact, this breath right now could be your last breath. If you have one more breath, make use of it. The next breath: Make use of that too. You passed over the potential for death, at that moment. But the potential for death at this moment keeps going and going and going on. You've made it this far. Well, make good use of it. Make good use of the time that you've got right now. If you learn how to focus on your actions right now, instead of on the big results you're hoping for at the end of the path, you'll find that, over time, almost insensibly, you begin to change and your level of happiness begins to rise.

Dogen, the Zen master, gave a comparison. He said it was like walking through mist. Even though you're not conscious of the fact that you're getting rained on, your clothes do get wet. It's a gradual soaking up. He mentioned this in the context of being around a good person—and this helps an awful lot, being around good people, getting out of your ordinary environment for a while. But those two external aids on the road aren't enough. You've got to make up your mind that you're going to change the way you act and speak and think. And here, the image of gradually getting wet in the fog also applies. Almost insensibly, you become a different person. A better, more capable person.

This way, when the Buddha asks, “What are you doing right now, what are you becoming right now?” You can say, “Well, at least I’m working in the right direction.”

And learn how to develop a craftsman’s attitude towards the practice. In other words, you work at it bit by bit by bit, and you see gradually your mastery beginning to grow. You learn to look for the little signs that things are getting better, and not to get discouraged when the signs are not all that clear.

One of the Buddha’s images is of a handle of a hammer. We know that if you hold the hammer and use it long enough, eventually the handle gets worn down. But you can’t measure how much it’s gotten worn in one day, yet still, over time, it happens.

He also gives the example of a ship. The ship gets docked on the beach and, over time, the ropes begin to wear away in the wind and the sun. But if you were to measure them day by day as to how much they’re getting worn away, you couldn’t measure it. Still, over time, it happens. You’ve got to keep these images in mind, because the way the mind talks to itself is very important in how it’s going to act.

As you learn these new habits, you find that you can develop more difficult skills, better skills, over time. You become a different person. So the person who’s facing the path and saying, “I can’t do this,” well, that person can’t do all the steps of the path at that moment. But that person can take the first step, and then the next step and the next step. And the person that he or she becomes at that point can take the following steps. This is how you become someone who’s capable of the practice, capable of being happy, even though where you are right now doesn’t seem promising. But when as the new person develops, you’ll be right there. You’ll be a different person at a different place.

It all starts with what you decide to do. And keep doing. Results will have to come over time.