

Buddha's Steps to Happiness

The Evolution of Happiness

-Joseph Goldstein

It is said that after his enlightenment the Buddha was motivated to teach by seeing that all beings were seeking happiness, yet out of ignorance were doing the very things that brought them suffering. This aroused his great compassion to point the way to freedom.

The Buddha spoke of different kinds of happiness associated with various stages on the unfolding path of awakening. As we penetrate deeper into the process of opening, the happiness of each stage brings us progressively closer to the highest kind of happiness, the happiness of nibbana, of freedom.

What are the causes and conditions that give rise to each of these stages of happiness? How does this joy come about? The events and circumstances of our lives do not happen by accident; rather they are the result of certain causes and conditions. When we understand the conditions necessary for something to happen, we can begin to take destiny into our own hands.

The first kind of happiness is the one that's most familiar to us—the happiness of sense pleasures. This is the kind of happiness we experience from being in pleasant surroundings, having good friends, enjoying beautiful sights and sounds and delicious tastes and smells, and having agreeable sensations in the body. Even though these pleasures are impermanent and fleeting, in the moments we're experiencing them, they bring us a certain delight.

According to the Buddha, each of the different kinds of happiness is created or conditioned by a different level of purity. The level that gives rise to sensual happiness is purity of conduct, sometimes called purity of action. Purity of conduct is a fundamental way of coming into a true relationship with ourselves, with other people, and with the world. It has two aspects. The first is the cultivation of generosity—the expression of non-greed and non-clinging. It is greed or attachment that keeps us bound to

the wheel of samsara, the cycle of life and death. With every act of giving we weaken the power of grasping. The Buddha once said that if we knew as he did the fruit of giving, we would not let a single meal pass without sharing it, so great is the power of generosity.

The Buddha spoke of three levels of generosity. He called the first beggarly giving—we give the worst of what we have, what we don't want, the leftovers. Even then, we have a lot of doubt: "Should I give it? Shouldn't I? Next year I'll probably have a use for it." The next level is friendly giving—we give what we would use for ourselves, and we give it with more spontaneity and ease, with more joy in the mind. The highest kind of generosity is queenly or kingly giving. The mind takes delight in offering the best of what we have, giving what we value most. This is the perfection of generosity.

Generosity takes many forms—we may give our time, our energy, our material possessions, our love. All are expressions of caring, of compassion, of connection, and of renunciation—the ability to let go. The beauty of generosity is that it not only brings us happiness in the moment—we feel good when we give—but it is also the cause for happiness to arise in the future.

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The other aspect of purity of conduct is sila, the Pali word for morality. In the Buddha's teaching there are five precepts that lay people follow: not killing, not stealing, not committing sexual misconduct, not using wrong speech—false or harsh speech—and not taking intoxicants, which cloud or delude the mind. The underlying principle is non-harming—of ourselves, other people, and the environment.

Just as generosity is a practice, so, too, is commitment to the precepts. Consciously practicing them fosters wakefulness and keeps us from simply acting out the habit patterns of our conditioning. The precepts serve as a reference point, giving us some clarity in understanding whether our behavior is wholesome or unwholesome. They are not a set of commandments—"Thou shalt not do this"

and “Thou shalt do that”—but rather guidelines for exploring how our actions affect our mind: What happens when we’re in conflict with the world? What happens when we’re in harmony with other people and ourselves? In the traditional teachings of the Buddha, morality is the foundation of concentration, and concentration is the foundation of wisdom. When the mind is in turmoil, it’s very difficult to concentrate. The power of virtue is a steadfastness and ease of mind. And when we’re in harmony with ourselves, we give a wonderful gift to other people—the gift of trust. We’re saying with our lives, with our actions, “You need not fear me.” Just imagine how the world would be transformed if everybody observed one precept: not to kill.

The joy we experience when we’re practicing generosity and morality gives rise to the second kind of happiness, the happiness of concentration. The Buddha called this purity of mind. When the mind is steady and one-pointed, there’s a quality of inner peace and stillness that is much deeper and more fulfilling than the happiness of sense pleasures. We enjoy sense pleasures, but at a certain point we tire of them. Just how long can we listen to music or eat good food? By contrast, the happiness that comes with concentration of mind is refreshing. It energizes us.

There are many techniques for developing concentration. We can focus on the breath, on a sound, on a light, on a mantra, on an image, on walking. We can practice metta, lovingkindness, or karuna, compassion. We can each find the way that for us is most conducive to strengthening the state of collectedness. We learn how to still the inner dialogue. As concentration becomes stronger, we actually start living from a place of greater inner peace. This is a source of great happiness, great joy.

The happiness of concentration makes possible the next kind of happiness, the happiness of beginning insight. When the mind is still, we can employ it in the service of awareness and come to a deeper understanding of who we are and what life is about. Wisdom unfolds in a very ordered way. When we sit and pay attention to our experience, the first level we come to is psychological insight. We see all our different sides—the loving side, the greedy side, the judging side, the angry side, the peaceful side. We see parts of ourselves that have been covered up—the jealousy, the fear, the hatred, the unworthiness. Often when we first open up to the experience of who we are, we don’t like a lot of it. The tendency is to be self-judgmental. Through

the power of concentration and mindfulness, we learn how to rest very naturally in the simple awareness of what’s happening. We become less judgmental. We begin to get insight into the complexities of our personality. We see the patterns of our thoughts and emotions, and the ways we relate to people. But this is a tricky point in the practice. Psychological insights can be very seductive—who’s more interesting than oneself?—so it’s easy to get lost on this level of inquiry. We need to be watchful and keep coming back to the main object of meditation. Through the practice of very careful momentary attention, we see and connect very directly with the nature of thoughts and emotions, not getting so lost in the story. What is the nature of anger? What is the quality of happiness? What is the quality of compassion? The momentum of mindfulness begins to build.

Vipassna Happiness.

At this point there’s a real jump in our practice. The Buddha called this level purity of view, or purity of understanding. We let go of our fascination with the content of our minds and drop into the level of process, the flow of phenomena. We see clearly that what is happening in each moment is observer and the observed, arising and passing away. This insight leads to an understanding of the characteristic that is most difficult to see—anatta, or selflessness. There is no one behind this process to whom it is happening; what we call “self” is the process of change. This is Vipassan happiness.

From this point a string urge for deliverance arises. From the urge for freedom emerges another very happy stage of meditation, the happiness of equanimity. This is a far deeper, subtler, and more pervasive happiness than the rapture of the earlier stage of seeing things rapidly arising and passing away. There is softness and lightness in the body. The mind is perfectly poised—there is not even the slightest reaching for or pushing away. The mind is completely impartial. Pleasant or unpleasant, whatever arises is fine. All the factors of enlightenment are in the final maturing stage.

It is out of this place of equanimity that the mind opens spontaneously and intuitively to the unconditioned, the unborn, the unmanifest—nibbana. **Nibbana is the highest happiness, beyond even the happiness of great insight or understanding, because it transcends the mind itself.**
