

Nibbana and the Paradox of Happiness

Ajahn Jagaro

I think that all of us here this evening would share, with every other human being, the aspiration to happiness. Even a masochist wants to be happy – it's just that his or her idea of happiness is rather different. But how difficult it is for us to *achieve* happiness!

We have moments of happiness – or at least we think we do. We associate happiness with the feeling we have when everything is going well – when everything is going our way. Then we think "Well, *this* is the way to happiness; just make sure that everything goes my way, make sure I get everything right, then I can be happy". But of course we all realise that such an attitude is not practical. We can move towards the goal, but never achieve it. Yet we all yearn for, and desire, happiness.

One of the most interesting statements the Buddha made about happiness was with regard to *Nibbana* – the goal of Buddhism. He described *Nibbana* as the highest happiness. He also described *Nibbana* as the highest peace; the giving up of all desire and aversion; the relinquishment and abandonment of any form of personal, separate entity. This description does not fit our usual concept of happiness. When we think of happiness, we don't usually think of peace. Happiness is usually associated with a sense of excitement, like joyfulness, exhilaration or exuberance.

So we may be a little perplexed as to what the Buddha meant by the statement that *Nibbana* is both the highest happiness, and peace. If, by simple logic, peace is the highest happiness, that's not very acceptable according to our normal understanding. It's nice to be peaceful, but it gets rather boring, doesn't it? How do we come to terms with this? Why should the goal of Buddhism be peace? If the Buddha had said that the goal of his teaching was love or compassion, this would have sounded more inspiring, but he made peace the goal. Whether peace can really be happiness is something for each of us to contemplate.

To understand *Dhamma* – to see and understand the way things are – we must use our reflective ability to look and know directly, with a bright, reflective mind; with bare awareness. We can use this quality of awareness to observe that which arises, that which happens around us, when we just stop and *be*, rather than *become*. We practise meditation in order to abide in this awareness so that we can contemplate and reflect.

When you feel happy, what is that feeling? If we look at happiness, we will clearly see that within it are the seeds of unhappiness. Every happy state depends on this or that; on this person or that person. With reflective awareness we can look at our experiences and see that even when we get what we want, we are still not completely happy – just a bit more happy. How can we reach the goal of complete happiness? Can the mind *be* completely happy? This is why the Buddha said "the mind can be perfectly peaceful". For it is in this perfectly peaceful state that the mind is perfectly happy.

There are different types of peace. Living in a quiet, secluded environment gives you a sense of tranquillity, a sense of peace. Making the mind concentrated and withdrawing from the complexity of the sensory world, as in meditation, can also give you a sense of peace. But these are very conditioned and vulnerable states. The peace that the Buddha was referring to as *Nibbana*, is the peace of the mind that has given up preference, liking and disliking, chasing and fighting, desire and aversion and duality. It is the peace of the mind which needs nothing and lacks nothing.

Nibbana and the Paradox of Happiness

Of course, this is a great mystery to us. The only way to find out what it is like is to *realise* it. Before you will strive to realise it, you must consider whether or not it is a worthwhile cause. Is the peaceful state of mind really happiness – ultimate happiness? Or is it just a dull and boring state of mind? I think that most people are not convinced that peace is happiness.

If we contemplate, we can see that the Buddha pointed to peace, rather than love or compassion, because if the mind is not at peace, then those qualities cannot bring us true happiness. If the mind is clinging, chasing, fighting and biased, then love and compassion will lead only to suffering.

Why, if love is such a happy state, does so much pain arise from it? Could it be because that kind of love is not the love of a peaceful mind? The Buddha pointed to the peaceful mind because, if one achieves it, the rest comes automatically, spontaneously and naturally. Love and compassion are natural expressions of the peaceful mind; they are pure and result in no suffering.

When we are not peaceful we see the mind moving, chasing something, because we need to be reassured and loved. We need to have and achieve and be successful. We need praise and recognition. We need all of this because we feel insecure. When we are not peaceful, the mind is generally fighting. It fights that which threatens our self, our self-esteem, our pride or our ego. And what's the response? The need to conquer, to defeat, to annihilate. This is not a peaceful existence. When we live this way we are living in hell – in a constant war zone.

One of the realms of existence in Buddhist cosmology is that of the Hungry Ghosts, the Petas. Symbolically they are represented as gigantic, bloated bodies with very small mouths. They can never get enough of any food or liquid to feed themselves and are always hungry, always thirsty. We may not look like them, but quite often – to a lesser degree – we live that way. In another realm are the Green Giants which, unsurprisingly, are green and giant-size. They have fangs and big eyes, like Titans – big, ugly, monstrous, warrior types of beings.

Hungry Ghosts and Green Giants symbolise the two realms of desire and aversion, those movements of the mind that fight, chase, want and need. Of course you have to eat, you need clothing, medicine and shelter, but a lot of our chasing is not for these basic needs, but from an emotional need; from a lack of peace. We chase things for reassurance. People find reassurance in many different areas – food, for example. Eating sweets is emotionally reassuring. It appeases our insecurity. We seek after praise, too. Why? Again, reassurance. To be attractive is reassuring because *I* am then worth something. *I* need this reassurance continuously because *I* am a separate entity – a little *me* who feels vulnerable. This process drives the movement of the mind. You must contemplate for yourself just how much of the lust for power, gratification, praise and position comes from this process. Each person must discover the answer alone.

This process sets up an opposite one. With the movement to chase and seek because of inner insecurity, there also comes, automatically, the fighting tendency. Anything that threatens me, or tends to increase my insecurity, is my enemy. If someone challenges you, what is your response? If they say "I don't agree with that... I think that is wrong... I don't think that's a good way to do it..." – what happens in that moment? The mind goes into an alert, defensive posture. What are we defending – the view? Most of us don't really care so much about the view. What we are really defending is the self – *myself*, and the more insecure we are, the more strongly we react to any challenge. That is why people who are very aggressive are quite often the most insecure, because they are the ones who feel the greatest threat from any challenge.

That's the Titan, the green colour, with the fangs and bloated eyes. Notice how that image makes us very aware of how we feel when challenged. We start to get very hot, our eyes begin to bulge and we grit our teeth, ready for a fight. This is suffering – it is not peaceful. Whether we win or lose, it's suffering. This is why the Buddha said "***The victor only gains enmity, the longer he dwells in his hatred. Happy live the peaceful, for***

Nibbana and the Paradox of Happiness

they have given up victory and defeat".

To get an idea of this peacefulness, we practise meditation. We begin to see that the peaceful mind is actually a very, very happy mind. The mind that is not chasing or fighting is self-sufficient and free from fear. It is both peaceful and happy. This does not mean that it is passive or dull, only that it is no longer under a state of siege. Now there can be *real* love and compassion – the natural expression of the mind when there is no self to get in the way.

Now one begins to think that peace is a desirable thing, a worthwhile goal to strive for. It seems so far away – how do we get there? Life seems so complex, it seems to demand that we chase and fight. Is the attainment of peace really possible for a human being, or is it just a fantasy that will remain forever unrealised?

Well, why not try it and see what happens? How much peace can you bring into your life? Whatever extra peace one can bring in must be worthwhile. You can see the peacefulness of the mind right now, when you stop chasing and fighting. You are not dead – just peaceful. And if you can do it for this moment, you can do it for every moment.

We have to develop this practice of remembering to be peaceful in the moment, by remembering that being peaceful simply means not chasing, not fighting; being *aware* in this moment, so that our natural wisdom can operate. Then our natural wisdom, our natural love, our natural compassion, can all arise spontaneously. It is greed for self that makes us go around chasing and fighting; that makes us into Hungry Ghosts and Titans; that makes us unpeaceful.

Try to remember, do it now and do it every moment. This is the goal, the purpose of the spiritual life – to be peaceful. It's enough that conditions can make you uncomfortable, why allow them to make you miserable? Why should you allow so many things to have power over your heart?

How many things cause the mind to race out and become this craving and wanting Hungry Ghost? What trivial, useless things? And why should some other trivial thing cause you to become a Titan, this aggressive person caught in a battle to prove that you are right and you are better? And when you win, what do you win? The enmity of the other. And what do you feel when you win? Quite often you feel sorry that you were so harsh, so cruel, that you beat somebody. It is not a very joyful or happy feeling, especially if you beat somebody you care for – and they are so often the people with whom we have most of our arguments. The person who has been defeated feels hurt and resentful. Is all that worthwhile? Why do we allow that to happen when we could live so much more peacefully? It is because we *forget* to be *peaceful*. It is because we *forget* to be *awake*. It is because the mind clings; the mind gets lost chasing and fighting because of its insecurity.

We need to understand this whole process by observing ourselves. It's not just a matter of *wanting* to be happy or *wanting* to be peaceful. We have got to see *why* we are not happy, *why* we are not peaceful. The more we see it, of course, the more we can solve the problem. And solving the problem doesn't necessarily mean going anywhere or doing anything very special, other than remembering to be *peaceful*.

This is why the practice of meditation is so important. It is a training of the mind to be awake, to see clearly, and to have the wisdom that enables us to be peaceful. Every meditation is a training. You sit there, you have pain in your legs, is that peaceful? Is that suffering? Normally, if there is pain in the legs, we try to get away from it – we either move or do something, because it is annoying. But in meditation, we don't do that immediately. If one is able to remember, to abide in mindfulness, then it's just pain in the legs. We experiment with developing peace by not chasing and not fighting for a pleasant, comfortable posture. Can the mind be peaceful while the pain is still there? Experiment. Just stop and be awake, and don't chase or fight, or dwell on aversion. Then the mind remains peaceful. Extend this to more and more opportunities that arise during the day.

Nibbana and the Paradox of Happiness

In Thailand, if they really want to insult somebody, they call him a dog. Ajahn Chah used to say "If somebody calls you a dog, you just look around and see if you have a tail. If you have got a tail, then you know they are right. If you can't see a tail, then don't worry about it. You are not a dog, so what's the problem?". Normally, if somebody insults us, we have to fight to reassert ourselves. We dwell on the aversion and spend a lot of time building anger, preparing for war. You have got to get all your ammunition ready if you are going to war. We start thinking negative, aggressive thoughts and shoot our mouths off with aggressive, hurtful words. And this is not at all peaceful – nothing is achieved, no peace. Dwelling on anger not only creates more anger within yourself, but in the other person as well.

Stop the mind from dwelling on anger and negative thoughts. Allow the mind to be peaceful and not to fight. From a peaceful mind there may be something to say – but not in anger or hatred.

There are many opportunities to be peaceful in our lives. It is only required of us that we remember to be peaceful. It's not a secret, it's just this much: remembering, and being awake enough, to be peaceful; not allowing the things around us to have power over our hearts. If the mind abides in this peacefulness, it will begin to experience the happiness resulting from being free; the happiness that has no blemish because it has no fear.

I would like to encourage all of you to try to begin each day by making the mind peaceful. The meditation exercise that we do is just a skilful means for getting to know the peaceful mind. The peaceful mind is sensitive to the moment. Get a feel for that in the morning, say, when you practise meditation. Get a feel for the mind that is quiet, that is not chasing, is not fighting, is not anxious, is not frightened. Get a feel for the mind that is just peaceful, awake and sensitive.

Try to maintain that awareness during the day. Of course, you will forget, but try to remember again, and centre yourself in this peacefulness. Don't worry that you won't be able to deal with life, that you won't be able to do the things that you have to do. You will do everything, and you will do it better. The more we do this practice, the more skilled we become; the more peaceful and happy our lives become. The happier our lives become, the more peaceful and happy become the lives of everyone around us. Have you noticed how people respond to you when you feel peaceful and happy? But if you feel happy in an unpeaceful way, how do people respond to you then? Just notice it. Sometimes, people who are very happy but are not peaceful are very irritating. And, if they are miserable and not happy, then they are even more irritating. But, if they are peaceful and happy, other people have quite a good response. They are positively affected because a peaceful and happy person is also a very sensitive, balanced person. The excited, exuberant, over-active, happy-go-lucky, party behaviour which we commonly associate with happiness, quite often comes from insecurity. It is a movement of the mind that attempts to reassure oneself that one is a particular type of person, and it comes from insecurity, not peace. That is why it irritates so many people.

When we are peaceful and happy we can live our lives fruitfully. Don't think you won't be able to do anything. You can do everything quite well, everything that is worthwhile doing, anyway. Maybe you won't be able to get into those heated arguments and fighting confrontations, but do you really need that? When we are peaceful, we are happy, and when we are happy and peaceful, the people around us will benefit from our happiness and peacefulness.

So try to establish this state of peace from the very beginning of your day. Try to sustain it throughout the day. Try to end the day in this way. And, every day, take one more step, and cultivate this path – the path to peace and happiness. Don't be disappointed by failure. Don't be disappointed by forgetfulness. Just remember, and start again.

I offer these reflections and contemplations for you this evening, just as a suggestion, so that you may consider it and do as you think fit.

Nibbana and the Paradox of Happiness

*From a talk given by Ajahn Jagaro
(BSWA Newsletter, July–Sept 1995)*
