

# Freedom is Happiness, Happiness is Freedom

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What is the definition of happiness? There might be as many definitions as there are people. What seems to be happiness for some can seem to be a prison for others. So maybe there are two types of happiness, there is one form that is related to situations or objects or people, such as “I’m happy to see you” or “I am happy that I got this job”, and these could be called conditioned happiness because they depend on a certain situation. The other type of happiness is unconditional. It does not depend on situations and objects but rather on one’s state of mind, as in “she is a happy person” or “he has a positive outlook.” This has nothing to do with having a lot or not, it is the result of an undisturbed mind. We have different aspirations, sometime we may want to attain this very free, unconditional form of happiness or peace of mind, but some other times we are more down to earth and we aspire to have a basic happiness that comes from having a roof, a good meal or good company. In itself, this wish for basic happiness is fine, but because it is conditioned to the presence of somebody, or a certain time or places it is not really producing a sustainable happiness. All that was gathered will some day be dispersed; it is in the nature of reality. Everything is constantly changing; nothing stays forever. There is always a watermark of sadness in the cloth of life. For example, when we receive our friends at home and we are having a good time. We are very happy to have them, but we know that very soon they will go and we will be left with the dishes.

Maybe in this process we come to realize that change is a natural movement and we could let go of our grasping and accept this moment as impermanent. But it’s not easy if we have based all our hopes for happiness on this situation. When it goes we are totally lost. But what is the alternative? We cannot make

ourselves very unhappy so that we won't suffer from the loss of happiness. As a French poet, wrote, "Flee happiness lest it leaves us." It will not make us happy either. It's a catch 22, either way it's wrong. We may try to find solace in drinking, but hangover is announced. We are really trapped. This is one of our main suffering, it *seems* that we are trapped. We cannot conceive the alternative option.

Things are changing and its painful, we are trapped and it hurts. As we are dealing with this, we are also getting older, we get sick and eventually we die. It seems that there is no way out of this pit of suffering. So what shall we do? Most of the time we try to forget. We have a little happiness, when it goes away we go through the bad weather hoping for a little more happiness in the future as we keep coping with the bad weather, and that until we die. Just as when we are hungry and we are dreaming of a sausage, we get a sandwich, but we must eat a big chunk of bread to eventually get to this little sausage; sometimes we find out that there was only bread. We might feel depressed. How can we talk about happiness in such a context?

When we realize that we are trapped, we may be able conceive that we want to go out; it is the beginning of our freedom. Being trapped ignites the motivation to use all of our intelligence and all of our resources to find a way out. As long as remains the slightest illusion that there may be some sausage in some bread, we keep eating it.

Maybe it's a paradox: to find the true happiness--unconditional happiness--we have to give up the obsession to be happy. I have seen people engaged on the path because they were obsessed by the quest for spiritual happiness. They were not happy meditators. As long as we objectify, we miss the point. We cannot turn a state of being into a graspable object. This kind of happiness is like a wet soap bar in a bathtub, it is ever elusive. We are left with a little bit of useless soap under our nails. Happiness is more about being than having.

The Buddha would say, why don't you open your hand and let that be? If a happy circumstance comes our way we don't have to push it away, but we don't have to close our hand on it. We enjoy, celebrate and then we acknowledge its departure, because everything is impermanent. It is not easy because we don't want the good times to roll away, we want them to stay. We don't want the challenging time to stay too long—and if possible we would like them to take the beltway and go around. This attitude of mind comes from an attachment to a concept of happiness and an addiction to comfort. It is a denial of reality, and things never go right when you are in denial.

The Buddha's teaching can be summarized in two parts: *first how can I find contentment? Secondly, how can I help everybody to arrive there?*

I cannot make them happy. I can contribute to their liberation, but they have to do their fair share of the work. We are walking together; still they have to make their steps. You are tired? I can carry your bags for a while. As I help you, maybe your mind becomes a bit lighter; you might find a bit more courage to walk, I can do that; but still I cannot walk instead of you.

These two projects should be combined. I cannot find real contentment as I see the rest of the world in total chaos and sorrow.

As we become more acutely aware of our interdependence, a basis for our interaction is born. Our project is the common benefit, peace and contentment for everybody. How are we going to implement it? Through three trainings.

*The first one is fair trade*, or harmonious exchange between the world and us. We don't need to wait for the other side to be fair before we decide to be fair. We start, no matter what the others do. Even if the world is not yet fair with us, it already feels much better when we are fair on our own.

*The second one is familiarization*, which is to become comfortable with the process of fair trade. To master it, we have to tame our mind. The mind is anxious, the mind is impatient, we have to learn patience, free ourselves from anxiety, and

cultivate mental quietness. If our mind is impatient or restless we simply cannot work on the fair trade project. We cannot immediately extricate ourselves from old die-hard habits. We must first develop the right motivation and cultivate proper attentiveness. This is facilitated by the regular exercise of meditation. How do we do that? The answer is: as regularly as possible. (Laughs). It doesn't require a special place or time—do it whenever you have free time. Find a place clear, fresh and luminous; it could be indoors or outdoors.

We simply sit, not doing anything special, for a while--10 minutes or 20 minutes--. We free your mind from the concerns about the past. Knowing that, as it is gone, it's too late to do anything about it. It was good, it was bad, and it could have been better—whatever: it's gone. The future will come at the end of your sitting period; you can forget it for a while. We can disappear from social engagement for 10 minutes without fearing that the world might fall apart during this time.

We sit with dignity, with a straight back. We are touching the earth; we are really grounded, not flying in the sky. We feel our body, and our breath. We notice the thoughts connected with our past, our future and what we should be doing right now, instead of doing nothing. We let them come and let them go, like clouds passing in the sky. Like a discussion in the distance, we don't try to grasp the words, we just hear the sound coming and going. If we want to taste the peace of mind, we will have to sit as often as possible.

*The third training is insight or wisdom.* We realize that all phenomena are truly impermanent, and we are more and more at ease with groundlessness. When we look at phenomena, we can see their insubstantiality, how ungraspable they are. We begin to see that there is no inherently pleasant object outside of our subjective appreciation of it as such. Pleasant and unpleasant are not absolute realities, they are subjective realities. Therefore, we realize that we have a great influence on our pleasant and unpleasant experiences of the world. When we decide to use any situation to promote fair trade, we find out that we are able to

recycle what was so far seen as unpleasant into something beneficial. It is a very pleasant experience.

This new outlook liberates our mind from the pleasant/unpleasant duality trap. We become free to choose to use every situation to sustain the fair trade project. Nevertheless we remain the one who will make the decision. We have to recognize it, we have to want it and we have to implement it. When we are distracted and we forget it, we have to come back to it.

This is how the Buddha described the progressive path to unconditional contentment or peace. Out of the duality of the roller coaster of conditioned happiness.

This is not an otherworldly project. It is totally feasible at our own scale, at our own pace. Of course we are going to fail sometimes. Remember that F.A.I.L. means *first attempt in learning*. Keep going. Be happy.