

Olympia Zen Center
December 8, 2010
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Kinds of Happiness

Today is December 8th, and this is the day when all around the world we celebrate the Buddha's Awakening. This morning the Buddha looked up at dawn and saw the morning star and was Awakened! That is the story we carry. It must have been quite an experience to go through that day and the following days, when he saw through all of the realms of conditioning and through the structure and the mechanism of suffering. He saw through all of that, and he saw how to go beyond that.

So, I wonder what that was like for him. I can imagine the powerful nature of the moment when he looked up and saw the morning star, how profound that was, but the rest of the day, the following weeks, the remainder of his life always makes me very curious about how it was for him as he lived to be an old man. He had come through so much, he had worked hard over many years to try and find an answer to suffering. Can we suppose that was profoundly happy?

This word "happiness," in our own culture has come to be a bit trite. But the Buddha payed some attention to the word 'happiness' and thought that it was an important factor in our lives. He said that there were four kinds of happiness. One kind is the experience of virtue into old age, another is the realization of wisdom, another is steadfast confidence, and another is to not do harm.

The four kinds of happiness which the Buddha spoke of have much deeper resonance than the notion of going to the mall and shopping, or winning the lottery or some event like that.

Sometimes we look into our lives and we wonder “Am I happy? Am I really truly happy?” I think it's a fair thing to ask, a fair thing to consider as we reflect on these four kinds of happiness.

This virtue into old age is about how we understand Buddha-nature, how we understand the function of Buddha-nature in our lives, the function of wisdom, which is simply a moment by moment appearance of the Dharma. It's changing and appearing, and the Dharma is Emptiness Itself, so we cannot say what that is, we cannot put words on it. Yet if we let go a little of the hold of our grip on the phenomenal world, and we stand in balance between Emptiness and the phenomenal world, or Suchness and the phenomenal world, perhaps then we can see that life is simply moving forward. It is simply the continuing appearance of life from one moment to the next.

Wisdom is the appearance of Dharma. This is simply Buddha-nature, the appearance of life moment by moment, life in it's continuous flow. To be able to see that, and to be able to understand that that is Buddha-nature is of course itself virtue. To be able to live that, as best we can into old age, is great happiness as the mind blossoms and opens wide as we become older. It becomes less interested in the bits and pieces of the details of life.

Experiencing steadfast confidence! This word steadfast in Sanskrit really means faith. When we talk about faith in Buddhism, we don't mean some kind of particular thing that we believe in. It is essentially a steadfast confidence in our own Big Mind, in our own Self. It's truly faith in the Self, steadfastness about that, about carrying the Self forward in a confident way. Confidently walking with the Big Self in life, is also the moment by moment appearance of Buddha-nature, and having confidence that we will be able to respond to anything that comes up for us, because of our rootedness in Zazen. We could say that Zazen is faith itself. Zazen itself is steadfast confidence.

Knowing that we walk through life in that way is to walk in the realm of happiness. In walking in this way we can also feel confident that we will not cause harm in the world. We will not cause injury. The idea of harming doesn't come up when we know a rootedness in Emptiness, walking in balance in this visible world that is simply space. Of course all of this requires us to engage deeply in practice. We can't simply come to practice and say "well I do Zazen because I'm a zen student." It has to be something deeper. We would very quickly give it up if it were simply that superficial.

But I think we also have a right to expect - if we bring ourselves into real clarity of the Dharma, clarity in our own lives - I think we can expect happiness. We can expect to be happy as we continue in our deep examination of the Self, surely all this suffering peels away. Our own simple contrivances simply fall away, we discover ourselves clearing out, and becoming lighter

and lighter enjoying the true virtue of lightheartedness as we go along and as we feel ourselves really wrapt in the arms of Zazen.

I think the Buddha must have been very happy that day ! Of course the Buddha lived all the rest of his life with many great difficulties organizing the people he had to take care of, the physical ailments that came to him, the intrigues of the Sangha and so forth. I doubt that it was easy. But I think through all of that, the Buddha was quite happy. I mean, how could we not be happy to see into True Reality ?

And we can't forget that the Buddha continued to practice. Here he had this amazing Awakening that would feed out through history and to this time twenty five hundred years later. We continue with the Buddha's Awakening which is present with us. Even after that, the Buddha practiced! And Dogen too reminds us again and again, there is no separation of Practice and Awakening. Zazen is Awakening.

So I just wanted to talk a little bit tonight, about happiness on this night of the Buddha's Awakening.

Maybe you have some questions or some thoughts about happiness or the Buddha's Awakening ?

Student Question

A history question that has to do with Buddha's Awakening. If the Buddha was the first one to be Wake up and see Reality for how It should be seen, how did he know to get there ?

Teacher

You know, I don't think he knew ahead of time how to get there! Of course in Buddhism there has always been an Awakened person among us – there always has been. But Buddha functions as one who historically Awakened. I don't think the Buddha knew what to do or what path to take. He searched, he's tremendously human, and I think that he stumbled and he took different routes, to examine, to try out various ways. I don't think he knew at all. But I think there was something so profoundly insistent within him that he must find out, he must see why we are suffering. So he found this way to sit and to be with himself in such a profoundly deep way that he saw through. I'm not equating myself with the Buddha, but certainly I have had that in my experience, where I did not know what else to do and I said "I will not get up from this place, I will die here if I do not get the answer to what I need to know to be able to go forward." I was not at such a profoundly major problem that the Buddha was looking for. The Buddha was looking to answer the problem of the entire human complex. For me, I was concerned about my own personal suffering. I did that before I knew anything about Buddhism. I simply said, "there must be a way for me to be able to see, to be able to go, and I will not move from here. I will die if I don't get that answer!" I had absolute faith also that that would come, but I was also prepared to die. And I think that's what the Buddha did, only of course he was looking for the answer to everything, I was just looking for my small life.

And the Buddha tells us, it's up to each one of us to do that. With his last words: "Please go and find out for yourself!" So it's up to us to be so hungry for some understanding of life that

we will not give up. We will absolutely insist upon an answer. So, I don't think he knew, he just refused to not get an answer. You can do the same. If you ever have any problem. You can do the same, even if you sit up all night and the next day do not leave that place until you know. Sincerely ask, because it is all within.

I don't think that we are left here to just founder and not get answers to our lives. I really believe that everybody, everybody is a different flower and everybody has a way to bloom. I can't answer everybody's way to bloom, but everybody's got a way to bloom. Sometimes we get stuck and we really need to fight our way through, or commit and hold firm in our lives to absolutely demand an answer from the Universe, from the Big Self. I don't think we are left to founder. Everybody is already the Big Self, we already are, and we must call upon ourselves for the answer. That is the point of faith in Buddhism. That is the central nugget of faith in one's own Self, not our ego, to call on that Big Self which is so much beyond the ego, where our true life moves forward. Do not hesitate. Do not hesitate. Thank you so much for that question.

Buddha loved humanity so much that he sat and sat and sat and practiced just for many, many years. It wasn't just a three night deal! He sat for a long time, many years before he came to be able to resolve this. It was a big problem, this is a huge thing. So he was asking to solve something that was rather extraordinarily huge.

Student Question

The Buddha, say, out of love, looked for the answer for all of us. Why do we do it ? Are we doing it to benefit everyone else or just me ?

Teacher

When Dogen Zenji went to Japan, a Zen Master said to him, “What are you doing ?”

Dogen answered, “Well, I came to sit Zazen.”

The Zen Master said “What for?”

Dogen said, “Well, I wanted to come here, to study the Patriarchs and to study about Buddhism”

The Zen Master said, “Well, what for?”

Dogen said “You know, I wanted to be able to study Buddhism and to be able to bring Buddhism back to Japan.”

The Zen Master said, “Well, what for?”

Dogen replied, “So that I can teach it to all of the people in Japan and we will be able to have this practice.”

The Zen Master said, “What for ?”

Dogen finally could not answer!

What for? Did you think that I would tell you what for?

What for, is a big Koan. And it was Dogen Zenji's Koan.

What for? What is it that keeps you going all these years? Your Big Self. Our Big Selves are essentially leading us, but it's like a little shadow that goes ahead of us, into the next moment, and says “Come on, come on, you can do it!” Just like that.

It's the Self that cannot speak that enters the moment, the moment before speech. Each moment is like that. So the Big Self is there prior to any speech, prior to thinking, prior to

anything else, is there first. So the Big Self brings you to the cushion, again and again and again and again. That's the function of wisdom, bringing us to this Awakened practice and we are lucky then and happy if we get into old age with it.

Student

The shadow, walking ahead of you,(somebody) tells how she finds that in her books she's always a couple of years ahead in her writing, of where she was in her living. She didn't know until a couple of years later when she looked at what she wrote and it was where she was going !

Teacher

That's right. That is amazing isn't it ! The Big Self is doing the writing, if we let it happen. That's great happiness.

Student

Why do we breath? Somehow that feels..We don't have a control over it..

Teacher

No, thank goodness! If you try to control your breath you will be very sorry, because you won't be able to do anything else except worry about whether you're breathing or not. It's good that we have this autonomic system of the body. Otherwise we couldn't sleep.

That is just the nature of being human. Everything breathes, everything that is alive in this particular phenomenal world

breathes. So why ? Because that's what it is on this planet! It's the nature of life.

Student

I'm relating it to the cushion, because I started coming to the cushion with no intention of staying on the cushion, but I can't imagine now not to be with the cushion.

Teacher

I didn't sit Zazen with the idea that I was going to do that forever. Maybe I still feel that way. I'm not sure. I don't worry about it.

Let me just clarify. If I sit here and I think “OK, I am going to sit here every single day for the rest of my life and that's what I'm going to do,” I think that's a wrong way to approach practice. Practice is following wisdom, and wisdom is simply to do and not to think about it – not to create the notion of some big avenue that we are absolutely going to do in a particular way forever. I think that's a misunderstanding. But to allow the Big Self to live, means you probably will continue to sit. If I sit and think and about it, maybe I'm too scared to come to Sesshin. The Big Self brings us to Rohatsu Sesshin. So we just do it, and we just breathe because breath is life.

Student

With a new comer of meditation I often recommend the people follow their breathing. In my mind breathing is something we do automatically, we don't think about it. So it's neutral, is that one of the reasons that we focus on our breath ?

Teacher

Well, we do that for a time, but truly we don't teach techniques. Zazen is not a technique. But it is helpful for a newcomer to be able to locate themselves somewhere and the breath is one way to do that, because you're totally in the moment focusing on your breath. You're just there, you can't think about anything else and think about your breath at the same time, and you breathe only in the moment. You don't breathe earlier and you don't breathe later. Only in the moment can you breathe. Those are some reasons for that. It's very helpful to a beginner.

Student

I sometimes think that my breath is a place I can come back to, when I realize I'm out there somewhere.

Teacher

That may be but we essentially don't teach that. We don't make that a technique . We essentially don't return to the breath as a technique.

I will tell you. If you sit Zazen, and you can focus only on your breath, for one period and do nothing else, it's a kind of a kensho, it's called a sussokan, a type of breathing kensho. But you have to not do anything else. Just stick to that focus, like the Buddha. The Buddha really with such tremendous fire, with such profound intention sat with such focus to get that answer. The same with us. If you focus on the breath for one period of Zazen, you'll have a kensho. And I know it can be done.

Student

What is a Kensho ?

Teacher

It's an opening, Awakening, the mind falling away, and insight into Buddha-nature.

Student

I just got confused. Are we still sitting Zazen if someone is focusing not on the breath, but focusing on some other question, or some thing ?

Teacher

Yes you are still sitting Zazen, even if you are thinking about your trip to India or even if you are sitting here and you are thinking of something else. We are still sitting Zazen even when we don't know we're sitting Zazen. Now, there are some more wonderful ways to sit Zazen in which we are able to release ourselves into the present moment. I really do mean, release oneself to being in the present moment, because that's where life is, in the present moment.

This is what our practice is, to let go of the stories and to let go of all these other things, but even if those other stories occur, we are still sitting Zazen. Let us say, Zazen is sitting us. It's not something that we have to worry about and question, "oh, this was a good Zazen, that was a bad Zazen!" there is no such thing, as a good or bad Zazen. Zazen is just Zazen. We don't evaluate and we later say, "How was yours? How was it for you?" We don't do that. We don't talk about that because it just Is. It is Awakening.

If we are sitting Zazen and our thoughts are on an airplane or somewhere else, then it's not Realized, we are not practicing Realization. So we do our best to Realize, to be Realized.

So we land on the cushion, and we can't go wrong! If we practice long enough we discover we've always been sitting Zazen, and that we always are, in everything we do. The question is to Realize that. We can see and experience deeper happiness then.