

It's Not So Mysterious

by Ajahn Chandako

At Vimutti the annual rains retreat (vassa) is a time of quietude and introspection. When lay supporters drive out of the city to bring food to the monastery and discuss the Dhamma, they get a taste of that quietude. Making the effort to physically come to a place of tranquil, natural beauty is symbolic of the effort we need to make to arrive at a similar refuge in our hearts—an internal place of peace. It is so easy to lose touch with a sense of serenity. With the pressures of the workplace, raising a family, managing relationships, property maintenance and planning for old age, it's easy to stop enjoying life. Then you have to stop and ask yourself, "Well, what am I doing all this for?" We want to be happy, right? But is what we assume we need to do in order to be happy actually destroying our happiness?

Happiness is a relative description of our condition and exists in a broad spectrum of degrees. Many people will say they are happy but still regularly bicker with their partners or are plagued with worries. They may have no tragic pain, but humans can do a lot better. I think the Buddha must have seen the average person's life as a bit sad. He would try to snap people out of their preoccupied daydreams, but he could only do so much. As long as we do not have a taste of a more refined and satisfying pleasure, then we tend to define less suffering as being happy. The difference between an Arahant's* happiness and the rest of us, is mainly due to the degree of purity of consciousness. To the degree that negative mental states** are absent in our mind, happiness shines forth naturally.

If, however, what we say and do is motivated by selfish gratification, irritation or harming others, even if we ostensibly wish to be happy, we end up creating the causes for its opposite. Where we live, the type of dwelling we inhabit, our health and who we live with are definitely factors that influence our well-being, but they guarantee nothing. It all comes down to how strong our mental defilements** are. Reducing greed encourages contentment and gratitude for what we have. Reducing angry reactions encourages patience, caring and empathy towards others. Eliminating the delusion of identifying with nearly everything in our field of perception as me or mine...this is peace.

Mental and Emotional Training

Meditation is an activity that is truly a friend. Like a true friend it will force us to be honest with ourselves. It will point out the areas where we fool ourselves, are inconsistent or actually cause the problems we complain about. The instructions for meditation are fairly simple. Doing it however, with persistent long-term dedication, requires substantial integrity. Because real meditation isn't just about temporary stress relief, but is a process that will challenge all of our cherished causes of suffering. Like a thorough house

cleaning, the effort initially creates more mess while forcing decisions on what to throw out. But the end result is very satisfying, revealing a beautiful and pleasant place to dwell.

Buddhist meditation is, to a large degree, about adjusting our perceptions so that they align more and more with reality. For example, the majority of what we perceive as 'another person' is actually a projection from our own mind. It's sad to see intelligent people stuck in ruminating circles because they can't let go of certain perceptions of other people. 'This person said this and she's like that.' Even if it was many years ago, they can keep the hurt alive and fresh by reanimating the memories through unwise attention. It all serves to bolster who we think we are while reinforcing our opinions and views. This is what it's like to have an untrained mind. It's scattered, restless, thinks inefficiently, is prone to emotional swings and is generally mired in self-centeredness. In short, it's a recipe for disaster. At minimum it's a poorly conceived life strategy that undermines the very things we most dearly wish for: a sense of deep peace, contentment, belonging and love.

If we habitually look at or remember something that irritates us, then that is unwise attention. It perpetuates the irritation. It's normal that someone important to us will eventually say something we feel is hurtful. We can't control what other people say, but we can gradually learn how to hear it without making a problem out of it. With a bit of effort we can focus our attention on the things in life and in other people that inspire wholesome states of mind: positive emotions such as gratitude, appreciation, contentment and forgiveness—or simply a good laugh. This is attention used wisely.

Wise Action

Sometimes we do have to make changes in life: end a relationship, move out of our parents' house or confront someone at work who is taking advantage of us. Being mindful of our emotional reactions doesn't mean being an impassive doormat. But mindful action is taken while being more clearly aware of our motivations, not out of a blind rashness but a place of strength and balance. Taking action then goes hand in hand with educating our perceptions.

If we care for ourselves, then we make an effort to create living conditions that are supportive and reasonably pleasant. But we have to practice wherever we are. That means using our intelligence, sensitivity and intuition to understand and learn from every life experience—whether pleasant or not. Sometimes we learn more from the difficult ones. This is what our Forest Ajahns meant by using mindfulness and wisdom every moment. Buddhist practice is not simply about sitting and developing a meditation technique. It is an all-encompassing cultivation that is fertilised by a continuity of mindfulness. Each time we get up, sit down or drink tea, are we grounded in awareness of our own body? Or does it feel like our head is floating away on a tide of worries and scattered concerns? Can we see

these thoughts as merely thoughts, without getting absorbed into a flow of projected unreality?

We need to use our intelligent contemplation all day long to activate the seeds of wisdom out of their dormancy. A probing mind that wants to understand, not just with the intellect but also with a quiet seeing that applies attention deeply... this is where insight arises; and insights accumulate to form a mature and wise human being. Wisdom then begins to manifest in our long-term goals and how we define 'success'. For example, in Ajahn Chah's time, Forest Monasteries in Thailand used to define success mainly in terms of people's progress in cultivating the mind and heart. These days success is more often measured in terms of elaborate building projects and large ceremonies. When the daily lives of the Sangha are dominated by ceremonies, or when laypeople's daily economic and social rituals, performed in devotion to a vision of worldly success, begin to dominate and burden life, then our lifestyles are no longer conducive to the happiness we seek.

Joy, Clarity and Calm

Even if it feels like personal happiness is not really an option at this point in our life, we can still make an effort to help other people be happy through some form of service. A small act of kindness on our part can sometimes be so touching to another person that it can restore their confidence in humanity—and restore our confidence in ourselves. It is a well-tested truism that helping others brings joy to the giver. Through renewed self-esteem and empathy, we can momentarily set down the burden of preoccupation with our own problems.

For discovering a place of inner quietude, it helps considerably to come to terms with death. It puts things in perspective. We don't sweat the minor stuff. We clarify and focus on what we feel is most important. Life seems strangely designed to surround us with some wonderful, caring people only to then snatch them away without much or any warning. While we may not know what happens after death, we know that we are alive now. We know that peace is available to us here and now if we look at life in the right way. Most of us have everything we need to be happy, so if we're not, then what's going on? Worry, anxiety, frustration, exasperation, insecurity, obsession and fear are all rooted in causes that we ourselves create or perpetuate. Joy, clarity and calm also have their causes. That's what Dhamma practice is all about. It's not so mysterious.

*an Arahant is the term the Buddha used to describe a fully enlightened person, including himself.

**mental defilements: states of mind that arise from the roots of greed, anger and delusion.