

14. What Is “Happiness” in Buddhism?

Introduction

Let me discuss one of the most basic questions in our life, “What is happiness?”

About ten years ago, after a seminar held in a Buddhist temple in Seattle, a university student approached me and said to me, “Dr. Haneda, I am writing a paper on happiness. I am comparing various religious definitions of happiness. Could you give me a Buddhist definition?” I answered, “If you can forget your individual happiness, that’s the happiness defined in Buddhism. If the issue of your happiness ceases to be an issue, that’s the happiness defined in Buddhism.” Then the student asked me, “How, then, can we forget ourselves, our individual happiness?” I answered him, “If you intentionally attempt to forget yourself or your happiness, you will not be able to do so. But if you encounter something more powerful than yourself, something more important than your happiness, then you will be able to forget yourself and your happiness.”

From morning to night, we are concerned with our individual welfare, with questions such as what we should eat and wear. Many of us believe that our happiness depends on how successfully we satisfy our personal needs. But is it really the case that our happiness depends on that? No, I do not think so. Actually, the more self-centered we become, the less happy we become.

Generally speaking, who is an unhappy person? An unhappy person is a person who cannot forget himself, being always concerned with his individual happiness and welfare. Probably the Buddhist concept of hell symbolizes the condition in which one has only himself, only his self-concerns such as what he should eat and wear. Then, who is a happy person? A happy person is the person who can forget himself, his individual happiness. He is so fascinated with something outside himself that he can forget himself. A lover is happy because he is thinking of his girlfriend, forgetting himself. An artist is happy because he is absorbed in creative activity, forgetting himself.

Dogen’s Definition of Buddhism

Now let me further discuss what “happiness” means in Buddhism. The following words of the Zen master Dogen are probably the best definition of human happiness as well as of Buddhism:

Studying Buddhism means studying the self. Studying the self means forgetting the self. Forgetting the self means being attained by [the spirit that is one with] tens of thousands of dharmas (things).

—“The *Koan* of Present Becoming”ⁱ

The first sentence, “Studying Buddhism means studying the self,” clearly defines Buddhism as nothing but self-examination. However, two ways of understanding the first sentence are possible. Depending on which way of understanding we have, we will end up in taking two totally different directions.

First way: When a person is told that Buddhism is a way of self-examination, he thinks that he should focus his attention only on the pursuit of his personal happiness. He

thinks that he should be exclusively concerned with the issue of his individual salvation all the time. Thinking this way, he deepens his self-love and self-centeredness.

Second way: When a person is told that Buddhism is a way of self-examination, he focuses his attention on examining the real nature of the self. Then he discovers that the self is nothing worth loving or cherishing. Thinking this way, he becomes less self-attached, less self-centered.

When we start to study Buddhism, it is often inevitable that we take the first way. We initially study Buddhism because we are concerned with the issue of our individual happiness. But Dogen says that in the course of self-examination, the initial self-centered mentality that seeks individual happiness alone must be transformed. When he says, “Studying the self means forgetting the self,” he indicates that true self-examination should end up in discovering the self as something worth forgetting.

The most crucial question is “How can we forget the self?” The answer is that we must meet something powerful and overwhelming. Then, what is powerful and overwhelming in Buddhism? It is the spirit of the bodhisattva. Nothing else can make us forget the self. When Dogen says, “Forgetting the self means being attained by [the spirit that is one with] tens of thousands of things,” he means that the self should meet the spirit of the bodhisattva and be replaced by it. Then, what is the spirit of the bodhisattva? Dogen defines it as follows:

Awakening “the spirit of the bodhisattva (*bodhicitta*)” means awakening the aspiration (or vow) that says, “Before I myself cross over to the other shore, I will take all sentient beings across first.”

—“Awakening of the *Bodhicitta*”ⁱⁱ

The bodhisattva spirit is the spirit that is concerned with the happiness of all sentient beings, forgetting one’s own happiness. This self-forgetting spirit of the bodhisattva is powerful. Only when we meet this spirit and become overwhelmed and permeated by it can we forget ourselves, our own happiness. We usually do not think it possible to identify with such a noble spirit. But, when we *actually meet* a person who possesses the powerful bodhisattva spirit and become overwhelmed by it, we can experience a spiritual transformation and forget the self.

So long as we seek our own happiness, we will never be able to attain it. But when we meet the bodhisattva spirit, we can forget our own happiness. This self-forgetfulness, however, is actually the experience of our true happiness. This true happiness (or self-forgetfulness) is nothing that we can actively realize or “attain.” It is something that is realized from the side of the Buddha or Dharma, without any recourse to our own practical abilities. That is why Dogen uses the word “attained” in his statement, “Forgetting the self means being attained by [the spirit that is one with] tens of thousands of things.”

Now let me discuss the same issue within the context of the Shin Buddhism. The bodhisattva spirit (that aspires to take all sentient beings across first before doing so oneself) is the spiritual basis of the bodhisattva Dharmakara and of his vows that he made to become Amida Buddha. If I summarize in one sentence the gist of Dharmakara’s

vows, he is saying, “If all sentient beings are not liberated, I will not attain liberation.” Here he is expressing his aspiration to “take all sentient beings across first before doing so himself.”

Dharmakara is not concerned with his own individual liberation. He is concerned with the liberation of all sentient beings, forgetting his own liberation. But his being concerned with all sentient beings’ liberation is actually his liberation. Being able to forget his own liberation is itself his liberation.

Ajatasatru’s Encounter with Shakyamuni’s Compassion

Now let me talk about King Ajatasatru. Shinran identified himself with this king. The famous story of King Ajatasatru is told in the *Nirvana Sutra*.ⁱⁱⁱ

King Ajatasatru is a historical example of the most evil person (*icchantika*). When he was a prince, he killed his father, the king, and usurped his throne. Further, he attempted to kill his mother. Although he did not kill her, he imprisoned her. But later he started to feel tremendous remorse for having committed such hideous transgressions.

Several spiritual teachers attempted to console Ajatasatru, but his spiritual sickness was not cured. Finally, when Jivaka, a Buddhist physician, advised the king to visit Shakyamuni, he decided to do so. When the king and Jivaka started to travel, the king asked Jivaka to ride on the same elephant because he feared that he might fall off the elephant, die, and go to hell. The king said to Jivaka, “Please hold me and keep me from falling. For I have heard in the past that the person who has attained the way does not fall into hell.”

While the king was traveling to see Shakyamuni, he learned of Shakyamuni’s words, “For the sake of Ajatasatru, I will not enter nirvana.” Jivaka told the king that although Shakyamuni was concerned with the welfare of all sentient beings, he was particularly concerned with people like Ajatasatru, who have committed evil.

Having learned about the compassionate heart of Shakyamuni, the king was deeply moved. Having recognized the remarkable contrast between Shakyamuni’s mind (that was concerned with the welfare of suffering sentient beings) and his own mind (that was concerned only with his personal welfare), the king became ashamed of himself. When the king met Shakyamuni, he received teachings from him and experienced liberation. The king then awakened the bodhisattva spirit. He came up with an extraordinary statement, “World-honored one, if I can thoroughly destroy the evil minds of sentient beings, it is all right with me if I dwell in the Avici hell constantly for innumerable *kalpas*, undergoing great suffering for the sake of sentient beings. I would not consider it pain.”

Initially, when the king was concerned only with his individual welfare, he was afraid of falling into hell. But now when he had awakened the bodhisattva spirit, he was concerned with the welfare of all sentient beings, forgetting his own welfare. Now he said that he would willingly go to hell if he could help sentient beings.

The king compares his old self to an *eranda* tree, a tree with the worst odor, and his new *shinjin* self to a *candana* tree, a tree with the most exquisite fragrance. He said, “Now for the first time I see a *candana* tree growing from an *eranda* seed.” In this way, the king describes the spiritual miracle that he has experienced, having met Shakyamuni.

Shinran's Encounter with Bodhisattva Dharmakara's Compassion

Now let me talk about Shinran. For twenty years, from age eight to twenty-eight, Shinran engaged in various practices on Mt. Hiei in an attempt to attain Buddhahood. But those practices did not lead him to Buddhahood. Not only was he unable to become a Buddha, but he was also feeling more and more depressed, frustrated, and miserable as he intensified his practices. He could not understand what was wrong.

When Shinran was twenty-eight, he met Honen. It was through this meeting that Shinran was liberated. When Shinran met Honen, he saw in him the bodhisattva spirit of Dharmakara. Honen was permeated with the bodhisattva spirit. He was concerned with the happiness of all sentient beings, forgetting his own happiness. I believe that Honen's spirit, the self-forgetting spirit, shouted at Shinran this way:

Shinran, what are you doing? You say that you are seeking Buddhahood. But, after all, aren't you thinking only about your individual happiness? Aren't you concerned only with your individual liberation? Shinran, you are dead wrong in your approach. You are just using Buddhism for self-enhancement, for self-love.

Listening to the voice of Honen, Shinran was deeply shaken by it and recognized his mistake. He realized that he was no different from Ajatasatru. Just like the king who saw the bodhisattva spirit in Shakyamuni and became ashamed of his self-centeredness, Shinran saw the bodhisattva spirit in Honen and became ashamed of his self-centeredness.

Before Shinran met Honen, Shinran lived in a world of self-love, but he did not know it. Honen's spirit of the bodhisattva challenged Shinran and made a crack in his world of self-love. Then cool fresh air started to gush into his world. When Shinran experienced the cool fresh air gushing into his world, he realized that he had been living in a world of self-love.

Honen's spirit, the cool fresh air, made Shinran recognize that he had been living in "a garbage can" and that the entirety of the self had been nothing but "a garbage can." He had earlier believed that he could find something pure and fragrant in the garbage can and could increase its purity and fragrance. But now he recognized it was a mistake. He realized that there was only stinkiness in the garbage can. Even what he considered purity in it was another form of stinkiness.

Thus he no longer considered the self, the garbage can, important. Now he considered the self worth forgetting. Being overwhelmed and permeated by Honen's spirit, the fresh air, Shinran shifted his focus from the self to the spirit that Honen embodied, from the garbage can to the fresh air. In this way Shinran's spiritual basis was totally changed.

Shinran called the spirit of Dharmakara that he saw in Honen "Innermost Aspiration." He considered the power of the Innermost Aspiration the most important thing in Buddhism. He believed that it alone could bring about spiritual revolution in human beings and could make them fulfill their lives. He also referred to this power as the Power Beyond the Self (*ta-riki*) and the Inconceivable Power (*fukashigi-riki*). Since

this power is the basic theme of the *Larger Sutra*, he considered this *sutra* the most important text for him.

Conclusion

Initially, when we are told that Buddhism is a way of self-examination, of self-focusedness, we think that we should pursue our personal liberation. Thus we engage in various practices. Many people continue this orientation throughout their lives and never recognize the deep self-love that exists at the basis of their practices.

But Buddhist teachers tell us that a radical transformation of our spiritual basis must take place. We must know that our ultimate liberation is not realized through the efforts we make on the basis of self-love. True liberation is nothing we can “attain.” It is realized and “attained” from the side of the Buddha, or the Dharma. We must experience a total transformation of our spiritual basis by encountering the spirit of the bodhisattva.

As long as the power of the Innermost Aspiration remains a mere doctrinal concept, it does not mean much to us; we cannot experience any deep spiritual transformation. But if we, like Ajatasatru or Shinran, *actually meet* a person who has the power of the Innermost Aspiration, a spiritual revolution that our ego-consciousness would never have considered possible takes place. When we are shaken and overwhelmed by this power, we resonate with it and can forget our individual happiness or liberation. This self-forgetfulness is actually the realization of our true happiness or liberation.

ⁱ *Taisho*, Vol. 82, p. 23 c19-23. Cf. Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross (tr.), *Master Dogen’s Shobogenzo* (London: Windbell Publications, 1998), Book 1, p. 34.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 240 a26-27. Cf. Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross (tr.), *Master Dogen’s Shobogenzo.*, Book 3, p. 266.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. *CWI*, pp. 125-43.