

A BUDDHIST VIEW OF HAPPINESS

Whenever someone is pressed to tell you what their ultimate goal in life happens to be, inevitably, after mentioning things like health, wealth, long life, or having good friends and companions, success, children and grandchildren and so on, they will say, “You know, when it gets right down to it, I just want to be happy.” That wish has driven most of humankind for thousands and thousands of years: “I just want to be happy.”

And yet happiness is sometimes a very difficult thing to possess. It’s difficult because we don’t always have a good idea of what true happiness really is. We usually project our own ideas of what happiness is onto our everyday existence, then we try to make sure that our life meets those same criteria.

The object of this evening’s discussion is to look at happiness from the point of view of the Buddhist tradition. We can correctly say that happiness is truly universal: it’s a universal goal, while at the same time being a universal mystery. We talk a lot about happiness, and yet our definitions of happiness are many and varied. It’s the subject that fuels religion, philosophy, economics, even sports and recreation. But even with all of this, happiness boils down to how each of us as individuals perceives it.

In its over 2500 year run, the Buddhist tradition has had a lot to say about happiness. But interestingly enough, the Buddha’s first teaching was about the fact that woven into the fabric of life is something called suffering, something which we see as being the polar opposite of happiness. The Buddha went on to say that we cause our own suffering, unhappiness if you will; but he also said that we can get beyond this unhappiness, transcend our own mistakes made over many, many lifetimes, and ultimately experience true happiness, something we call Nirvana.

First of all, let’s look at what true happiness is and what it isn’t from a Buddhist standpoint. A famous Buddhist saying goes, “Happiness (*sukkha*) is that which can be borne with ease; suffering (*dukkha*) is that which cannot be borne with ease.” This is about as simple and direct a definition of happiness as you can come up with. Buddhist teaching says that what is not happiness, false happiness if you will, is the gratification of desires, because for one thing, desire is rooted in the delusion of the discrete self, and for another, this kind of gratification only leads to more desire. The more one wants the more one gets, and the more one gets the

better one gets at wanting, and so we become stuck in a seemingly never-ending spiral of want-it, get-it, want-some-more, get-some-more, and so on. All of this wanting and getting has a built-in frustration factor that only grows with each repetition, and so, not having satisfied all of our wants sufficiently, we experience un-satisfied-ness, or more correctly, un-satisfactory-ness. This unsatisfactory state is the mental and spiritual breeding ground for all of those things which cannot be borne with ease.

True happiness can be broadly defined as a mind-state. The characteristics of a mind-state include a sense of universality, continuity and endurance. The mind-state we call true happiness is not temporary, not hit-and-miss; it is not grounded in purely sensual gratification; it does not deal in extremes. It is constant and all-pervasive, and above all it is that which can be borne with ease.

In order to attain this mind-state, according to Buddhist teaching, we must literally begin at the beginning. In other words, we must have a starting point. This starting point is what Buddhist teaching calls *samvega*. *Samvega* has four basic elements.

1. The first element is that we see the ultimate futility of a life that centers only around the satisfying of sensual desires.
2. The second element is that we see how complacent we are when it comes to finding true happiness and to not be satisfied with indulging that complacency.
3. The third element is the development of a feeling of urgency. We must feel an urgent need to break out of this futility.
4. The fourth element is to accept that Samsaric existence, going round and round in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, is ultimately self-defeating.

We need to say to ourselves something like, “It’s pretty silly for me to base my entire life on indulging my impulses. I know that I’ve been pretty slack when it comes to pursuing what really means the most in life, and I’ve got to do something about it now because if I don’t, I’m still stuck on the same old cosmic merry-go-round!”

The Buddha put it another way. He said, “Happiness is in the mind which is released from worldly bondage. The happiness of sensual lust and the happiness of heavenly bliss are not equal to a sixteenth part of the happiness of craving’s end.”

With that quote from the Buddha we can now delve a little deeper into how the Buddhist tradition views happiness and the path to that happiness. As many of you know, the Dhammapada is a famous collection of the Buddha's sayings taken from various points in his 45-year teaching career. One of the chapters of the Dhammapada is titled, "Happiness" in which some of the Buddha's teachings about happiness are listed. In this chapter the Buddha described elements of a happy life:

- Living without hate among the hateful.
- Living without domination of the passions among those who are dominated by the passions.
- Living without yearning for sensual pleasures among those who yearn for sensual pleasures.
- Living without being impeded by the Three Poisons of craving, anger and ignorance which are seen as hindrances to spiritual progress.
- Giving up thoughts of winning or losing.
- Overcoming the Five Aggregates (a sense of objects, emotional attachment to those objects, categorization of those objects, mental states arising from contact with those objects, a dualistic view of a perceiver and that which is perceived).
- Subjugating the passions.
- Not being in the company of the foolish but being with the wise.
- Attaining the final happiness which is Nirvana, sometimes referred to as Bliss.

Now we know that we need to "endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" without complaining, that we have to stay disciplined in the midst of the undisciplined, that we have to stop being so competitive all the time, that we can't give in to anger and delusion, that we have to look at the process by which we stay deluded, that we need to find wise spiritual friends to guide us, and that there is something transcendent to which we can aspire.

Of course, the way in which we can do all these things was outlined by the Buddha. He called it the Noble Eightfold Path. But while the Noble Eightfold Path is the path that leads to the ultimate happiness, Nirvana, the ultimate Bliss, it is also the path of the ultimate happiness. Besides being a path, the Noble Eightfold Path is also a state...a state of mind, a state of happiness, something which is universal, ongoing, consistent, enduring. It's the practice of happiness in our daily existence. Let's look at this Noble Eightfold path in terms of each of its elements. By examining each step of the path (remembering of course that each step is

interconnected with all the other steps), we can see how each one produces its own kind of happiness:

1. **Right Understanding.** This of course is the understanding of the Buddha's teachings. These teachings appeal to us on many levels: intellectual, emotional, logical, spiritual. They are very straightforward and specific in that they spell out very painstakingly how and why we suffer and how this suffering can be cured. This is the happiness of encountering a path that will allow us to liberate ourselves from the round of birth, suffering, aging, death and rebirth. It's the happiness of finally getting to the bottom of our problems and of being able to see things exactly as they are.
2. **Right Intention.** This means the utilization of the Buddha's teachings to end suffering for ourselves and for others. It produces the happiness of mutual benefit. We always feel good when we do good for others; even when we're forced to do good for others we're also forced to admit that there's some kind of a good feeling associated with it. This is where compassion and wisdom come together.
3. **Right Speech.** Whenever we lie, whenever we speak harshly or gossip there's a negative energy that goes along with it. When we look at it closely, we really don't feel happiness when we speak that way; at best it's a feeling of smug satisfaction which is inevitably sad. Don't we feel better when we tell the truth, when we come clean? Doesn't it feel better when we speak with a friendly demeanor, when we're talking up someone because we really mean it? This is the happiness of Right Speech.
4. **Right Action.** The happiness of Right Action lies in knowing that whatever we do with our words, with our deeds and with our thoughts is respectful of peoples' lives, property, sexuality, dignity and so forth, and it helps them to ease their suffering. It's like "Truth, Justice and the American Way," right? It feels Super! People whose actions hurt or demean others in any way carry at least a subconscious echo of those hurtful acts, not to mention all the other things that go with it such as guilt, remorse, fear and so on.
5. **Right Livelihood.** We usually find that people whose jobs don't cause suffering and only serve to create peace and harmony are happy, even though they may be overworked, underpaid and underappreciated. Any job that uplifts humanity, respects life and promotes the welfare of all is ultimately the most satisfying despite a lack of economic benefits. That's why so many people with these kinds of jobs stay with them so long. When we deal in firearms or other such harmful industries, even though we may not be directly involved in their manufacture we tend to sweep that aspect of our company's activities under the rug

so that we don't get our hands dirty. This is a form of shame and fear that isn't experienced by someone who is engaged in right livelihood.

6. **Right Effort.** Like they say, "If you're going to talk the talk, you have to walk the walk." What they don't say is that walking the walk feels good! You just want to go, "Yeah!" "All right!" When we play sports, whether we win or lose, if we've put absolutely everything we have into our game we don't really care about the outcome. This is the happiness of Right Effort. It makes us feel like a real hero because it's for the whole team...in this case the ultimate team: all sentient beings.
7. **Right Mindfulness.** How about the happiness of never having a "senior moment?" You know how you feel when nothing gets by you, right? "Hey, I'm awake and alert! I'm on the ball! I can count on me!" Being able to keep an eye on your body, your mind, and those things that your mind is trying to hold on to is a happy thing, a noble thing. You are the guardian of yourself, protecting yourself from that which causes delusion and suffering. It's not smugness or pride, but rather a calm certainty that, as the Buddha said, "Just as rain cannot enter a well-roofed house, delusion cannot enter a well-trained mind."
8. **Right Concentration.** All kinds of happiness comes from meditation!
 - The happiness of possessing calmness and insight.
 - The happiness of a state of mind that is balanced and alert, calm and energetic.
 - The happiness of doing just what our Fundamental Teacher the Buddha did to become liberated from suffering.

Have you ever seen a statue or picture of the meditating Buddha that featured a frown???

Now that we've looked into the Noble Eightfold Path in terms of happiness there are some other examples from the Buddhist tradition that we may examine. For example, the principle of **Loving-Kindness**. Love is great, there's no doubt about it. But unless that love is extended to others, its power is going mostly unused. Extending Loving-Kindness to others is one of the most uplifting things we can do. The Buddha expounded on Loving-Kindness many times, saying that by extending it to others we also cultivate it within ourselves.

There's a happiness that comes from the realization of what we may call **selflessness** or **nonattachment** or **nonduality**. Seeing directly that there's essentially no difference between ourselves and others is the ultimate sense of community. Imagine knowing that all sentient beings are your family!

Another means of experiencing happiness in the Buddhist tradition takes the form of **accepting one's karma**. If we embrace the truth of cause-and-effect, we realize that whatever happens to us is not necessarily bad or good, but that it is the end of a karmic cycle. Since it's karma that keeps us bound to what we call the Wheel of Birth and Death, this is a cause for celebration.

A famous Buddhist story deals with a young mother named Kisagotami, whose only child had died. Since she had never really seen death before, she carried her child's body on her hip thinking that the child was ill and searching for a cure. The Buddha told her to collect some mustard seed from a household where no one had died. When she couldn't find such a household, she realized the truth of the situation. After the Buddha taught her the Dharma she became a nun. Then one day she observed the flickering of a lamp and reflected on the impermanence of life, happily realizing that conditioned life is indeed impermanent and that to hold on to it only increases one's suffering.

In Mahayana Buddhism, happiness is being on the Bodhisattva path, the path to Buddhahood in which we help all sentient beings on the way. Acting with compassion and wisdom is happiness, as we've mentioned before.

The Four Immeasurables, which we chant here often, could also be thought of as the Bodhisattva Mission Statement:

1. The first Immeasurable is, "May all beings have true happiness." This wish is the Bodhisattva's declaration of Loving-Kindness to all.
2. The second Immeasurable is, "May all beings be free from suffering and its causes." This is the Bodhisattva's expression of universal compassion.
3. The third Immeasurable is, "May all beings be one with the Highest Perfect Joy." This is the Bodhisattva's realization of sympathetic joy, the happiness that comes from the happiness of others.
4. The fourth Immeasurable is, "May all beings dwell in equanimity, freed from discrimination and attachment." This is the Bodhisattva's expression of happiness that comes from the peacefulness experienced by others. For a Bodhisattva, my happiness and your happiness are the same happiness.

In Pure Land Buddhism we talk about the Pure Land as both a land of happiness and a state of happiness, only we usually use the term, "bliss" to describe it. When we have purified our

mind we become one with the Buddha of boundless light and life, boundless compassion and wisdom, and so we are blissful and happy whether we are reborn into that Buddha's realm or whether we are experiencing that purified mind right here and now. In Pure Land Buddhism we also use the term "serene trust" to describe our faith in the boundless compassion and wisdom of Buddhas. This serenity, this calmness and assuredness, are hallmarks of the bliss of the Pure Land, the happy land.

From the Zen perspective it is exactly that here and now that is seen as happiness. Whether it's profound or mundane, sweet-smelling or foul, things are exactly as they are; things are empty of self-nature, and so are not subject to that which causes suffering and misery. That is Zen happiness...the happiness of everyday life itself.

And of course, the ultimate happiness is Nirvana, the cessation of suffering, the end of the round of birth-and-death, the realization of perfect oneness, perfect joy, perfect peace....and yes, perfect happiness.

I'd like to close with some words which were written by Ven. Narada Mahathera, a famous Buddhist teacher and author from Sri Lanka, who was talking about acting in ways that promote happiness. He said:

The world is full of thorns and pebbles. It is impossible to remove them. But, if we have to walk in spite of such obstacles, instead of trying to remove the, which is impossible, it is advisable to wear a pair of slippers and walk harmlessly.

The Dharma teaches:

- *Be like a lion that trembles not at sounds.*
- *Be like the wind that does not cling to the meshes of a net.*
- *Be like a lotus that is not contaminated by the mud from which it springs.*
- *Wander alone like a rhinoceros.*
- *Being the kings of the forest, lions are fearless. By nature they are not frightened by the roaring of other animals. In this world, we may hear adverse reports, false accusations, degrading remarks of uncurbed tongues. Like a lion, we should not even listen to them. Like the boomerang, false reports will end where they began.*

- *Dogs bark, but the caravans move on peacefully. We are living in a muddy world. Numerous lotuses spring therefrom without being contaminated by the mud; they adorn the world. Like lotuses we should try to lead blameless and noble lives, unmindful of the mud that may be thrown at us.*
- *We should expect mud to be thrown at us instead of roses. Then there will be no disappointments.*
- *Though difficult, we should try to cultivate non-attachment. Aloen we come, along we go. Non-attachment is happiness in this world.*
- *Unmindful of the poisonous darts of uncurbed tongues, alone we should wander serving others to the best of our ability.*

And so we can ascribe a number of qualities to happiness from a Buddhist perspective:

- It is that which can be borne with ease.
- It comes from a desire to improve our life by getting beyond the creation of suffering.
- It is a state of mind, not a state of sense-gratification.
- It free of craving, anger and ignorance.
- It is the wisdom that sees our true, interdependent, enlightened nature.
- It is compassionate, loving and kind.
- It is serene and not overly boisterous.
- It is shared with all.
- It is the path to liberation.
- It is simultaneously Nirvana, the ultimate state of joy and bliss, and our everyday existence.