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The Buddhist Concept of Happiness

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

Happiness in Pali is called *sukha*, which is used both as a noun meaning “happiness,” “ease,” “bliss,” or “pleasure,” and as an adjective meaning “blissful” or “pleasant.”

There are two types of happiness—one is experiential (*vedayita*) and the other non-experiential (*avedayita*). Non-experiential happiness is attained after eradicating all the defilements in the mind. As long as defilements are not destroyed, all happiness is subject to change. Experiential happiness is thus considered a lower degree of happiness, for it constantly changes. Whereas non-experiential happiness is a higher degree of happiness for it does not change.

To understand precisely the nature of the first type—experiential happiness—a brief discussion of the Buddhist analysis of feeling is necessary. Feeling (*vedanā*) is a mental factor present in all types of consciousness, a universal concomitant of experience. It has the characteristic of being felt, the function of experiencing, and as manifestation the gratification of the mental factors. It is invariably said to be born of contact (*phassa*), which is the coming together (*saṅgati*) of a sense object, a sense faculty, and the appropriate type of consciousness. When these three coalesce, a feeling arises.

Since contact is of six kinds by way of the six sense faculties, feeling is also of six kinds corresponding to the six kinds of contact from which it is born. There is feeling born of eye-contact, feeling born of ear-contact, feeling born of nose-contact, etc. Feeling is also divided by way of its affective tone into either three or five classes. On the threefold division there is pleasant feeling (*sukha-vedanā*), painful feeling (*dukkha-vedanā*), and neither pleasant nor painful feeling (*adukkhamasukha-vedanā*), i.e. neutral feeling. The pleasant feeling may be subdivided into bodily pleasant feeling (*kāyika-sukha*) called “pleasure” (*sukha*) and mental pleasant feeling (*cetasika-sukha*) called “joy” (*somanassa*). The painful feeling may also be subdivided into bodily painful feeling (*kāyika-dukkha*) called “pain” (*dukkha*) and mental painful feeling (*cetasika-dukkha*) called “displeasure” (*domanassa*). In this system of classification the neutral feeling is called “equanimity” (*upekkhā*). Thus in the fivefold division we find the following five types of feeling: pleasure, joy, pain, displeasure, and equanimity. According to the Abhidhamma, pleasure and pain are found only in association with body-consciousness, joy and displeasure only in association

with mind-consciousness, and equanimity in association with body and mind-consciousness and the other four classes of sense consciousness.

As Sāriputta said to his brother monks, “There are, reverend sirs, these five strands of sense desire. What five? There are forms, cognized by the eye, longed for, alluring, pleasurable, lovely, bound up with passion and desire. There are sounds cognized by the ear... smells by the nose... tastes by the tongue... contacts, cognized by the touch, longed for alluring, pleasurable, lovely, bound up with passion and desire. These, reverend sirs, are the five strands of sense desire; and the happiness, the well-being arising therefrom is called sensuous happiness.”

If enjoying sensual pleasure is called happiness, to be born as a human being with all the senses complete is a happy occurrence, for one can experience a very high degree of sense pleasure through the sensory stimuli. A man can be happy thinking that he has plenty of wealth, for the very thought “I have enormous wealth” gives him a secure feeling. This feeling of possessiveness is his happiness (*atthi-sukha*). He can be happy consuming his wealth in any manner he deems secure, entertaining his senses in any manner he wishes, or sharing with his relatives, friends, or giving in charity to whomever he pleases, or saving as much as he pleases, so he can use whenever he or his family members need (*bhoga-sukha*). He can be happy thinking that he has earned his wealth honestly (*anavajjā-sukha*) and he can be happy thinking that he is free from debts (*anana-sukha*) (A II 69).

For these reasons, happiness has been defined by some as a satisfaction of the will. If you obtain what you have been dreaming, you are said to be happy. Pursuing this definition of happiness, you may do countless things to fulfil your wishes so you will be happy. You may spend all your time, money, energy, skill and all the opportunities to do your best to make your life happy, or to bring happiness to the lives of your family members, your friends, your relatives, and probably to your country.

Considering the possible variables available for the will to desire, this definition is inadequate. If you will to procure something perishable, changeable, impermanent and subject to slipping away from your grasp, procuring that particular object makes you more unhappy than not procuring it. Or if you obtain something and you have to spend your time, energy, peace, skill even at the risk of

your health to protect it, safeguard it, and secure it, then you experience more unhappiness than happiness.

Generally, people misconstrue the source of happiness. They think by pleasing their insatiable desire they can be happy. They do not realize that the means available to them to please their desires are limited by time and space. When you try to obtain happiness by pleasing unlimited and insatiable desire by means limited by time and space, you end up in frustration and losing whatever little relative happiness you have.

Does wealth really bring happiness? Obviously not, for there are many wealthy people who live miserable lives, unhealthy lives. Does education bring happiness? Apparently not, for there are many well-educated persons who are more unhappy than those who are not educated. Does this mean that the poor and uneducated are happier than the wealthy and educated? No, not at all. Does marrying someone whom you are passionately attached to bring happiness? No. Does divorce make you happy? Apparently not. Does living single bring happiness? No, not at all.

Some people believe that revenge makes them happy. Revenge never brings any happiness to anybody, for, in reality, an eye for an eye makes everybody miserable, not happy. It is not by cultivating but by destroying hate that happiness grows in our minds. “The victor creates an enemy. The one who is neither a victor nor a defeated sleeps happily.” (Dhp 200) “To live without anger among the angry is, indeed, happy.” (Dhp 197)

Suppose a person thinks of making himself happy by killing, stealing, committing sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicating drinks and drugs causing infatuation and heedlessness, would he really be happy? Certainly he is not happy, for the reason that his mind is confused by what he is doing. How can a man who is full of hatred, greed and delusion be happy? How can a man who kills anyone be happy?

Pointing out how unhappiness or suffering is causally conditioned, the Buddha said in Mahānidāna Sutta: “Thus, Ānanda, in dependence upon feeling there is craving; in dependence upon craving there is pursuit; in dependence upon pursuit there is gain; in dependence upon gain there is decision-making; in dependence upon decision-making there is desire and lust; in dependence upon desire and lust there is attachment; in dependence upon attachment there is possessiveness; in dependence upon possessiveness there is stinginess; in dependence upon stinginess there is safeguarding; and because of safeguarding, various evil unwholesome phenomena originate—the taking up of clubs and weapons, conflicts, quarrels, and disputes, insulting speech, slander, and falsehoods.” (*The Great Discourse on Causation*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, pp. 55–56).

It follows, then, that by putting this in reverse order, happiness is obtained, for it is from total elimination, complete eradication and total absence of craving that happiness is ensured. In no other way can one obtain real happiness.

It is by giving up, not obtaining, sense pleasure that one gains real happiness. Therefore, “By giving up a little pleasure, if one sees much happiness, the wise man would relinquish that little pleasure in view of the great pleasure” (Dhp 290). “To live without possessions is a happy life like that of radiant gods.” (Dhp 200)

One gains happiness through association with the wise and the avoidance of fools: “Good is the sight of the Noble Ones; happy always is it to live with them; away from the sight of fools, one would always be happy.” (Dhp 206) “All dukkha comes to one not from the wise, but from the foolishness of foolish people. Therefore we should not associate with a man with little morality, little concentration and little wisdom, “for the same reason that we most carefully avoid an enraged elephant, a mettlesome horse, a mad bull, or a snake.... Just as a man of intelligence avoids all these things, so also does he avoid those men who are not fit to associate with.” (*Happiness and Immortality*, by P.J. Saher, p. 25; MI 11).

Generosity makes us happy, for it is always the giver, rather than recipient, who is happy. The recipient is obligated to the giver. One who is obligated to someone is not happy. For this reason the Buddha very wisely made desire analogous to indebtedness. We know when we borrow something from someone, we are not happy until we pay back what we have borrowed. One who gives away his own possessions has no obligation to the recipient. Therefore he is happy. The Buddha said: “He rejoices here, he rejoices in the hereafter, seeing the pure deeds he has done.” (Dhp 16)

The Buddha never praised sensual pleasure (*kāmasukha*) as happiness. Instead, he said “One should know how to judge what happiness is; having known how to judge what happiness is, one should be intent on inward happiness” (M III 278).

All of us without any exception have within us the root of happiness. It, however, is buried under the heap of our hatred, jealousy, tension, anxiety, worry and many other negative states of mind. In order to find out the root of happiness we have to remove the very root of unhappiness and cultivate and nourish the root of happiness.

No matter how long our list of happiness is, we will continue to be unhappy, frustrated and suffering without ever being successful in experiencing happiness unless we add the most essential and absolutely necessary item to our list and execute it with diligence. And that item number one in your list of priorities is the purification of mind. As the Buddha said, “Our actions are all led by the mind, mind is their master, mind is their maker. If one acts or speaks with a pure state of mind then happiness follows like a shadow that trails constantly behind” (Dhp 2).

Happiness is most certainly generated by the mind free from the factors that oppose it. The very source that generates happiness is the purified mind, not the impure mind. Repetition of doing good deeds with a pure mind is a source of happiness. “If a man does good, let him do it again and again and let him take delight in it; the

accumulation of good causes happiness” (Dhp 118).

How does one purify the mind? In the Buddha's blueprint of happiness there are three stages—moral behaviour (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Whatever else you do, without these most essential and absolutely necessary components, you are not going to experience happiness, but just the opposite of it. You will never find happiness in a greedy mind, a hateful mind or an ignorant mind, for these are the very roots of unhappiness, pain and suffering.

The foundation of happiness lies in the practice of moral principles. This means happiness comes from living a good moral life, not from immoral life. Therefore, suppose somebody, realizing the impediments of sensual pleasure, becomes a bhikkhu, a homeless one entirely dependent upon people for his livelihood. He practises principles of wanting less not more, contentment, solitude, perseverance, constant mindfulness, concentration, and cultivates wisdom to free the mind from all defilements. He really and truly enjoys the higher degrees of happiness. This practice leads him to realize the Dhamma and to give up craving, pursuit, gain, decision-making, desire and lust, attachment, possessiveness, stinginess, safeguarding and various evil unwholesome phenomena causing taking up of clubs and weapons, conflicts, quarrels, and disputes, insulting speech, slander and falsehoods. This practice will most certainly bring him an enormous degree of happiness.

“That monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side owing to his being restrained by morality. Just as a duly anointed Khattiya king, having conquered his enemies, by that very fact sees no danger from any side, so the monk, on account of his morality, sees no danger anywhere. He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble morality.” (*Long Discourses of the Buddha*, transl. M. Walshe, p. 100; DI 69–70)

The next stage in the development of happiness is concentration (*samādhi*). Describing a meditator's rapture and happiness, the Buddha says: “When a monk takes up meditation seriously and overcomes greed, he is happy like a man who has paid his debt; free from ill-will, he is happy like a man who is free from sickness. Free from sleepiness and drowsiness, he is happy like one free from imprisonment. Free from restlessness and worry he is happy like one free from slavery, and free from doubts he is happy like one who safely crosses a desert. And when he knows that these five hindrances have left him, gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in his mind his body is tranquillized, with a tranquil body he feels joy, and with joy his mind is concentrated.

“Being thus detached from sense-desires, detached from unwholesome states, he enters and remains in the first jhāna, which is with thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with delight and joy. And with this delight and joy born of detachment, he so suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates his body that there is no spot

in his entire body that is untouched by this delight and joy born of detachment. (*Long Discourses of the Buddha*, p.103; DI 207).

The happiness of the concentrated mind is causally conditioned. In the Upanisa Sutta the Buddha says: “Gladness (*pāmojja*) is the supporting condition for rapture (*pīti*); rapture is the supporting condition for tranquillity (*passaddhi*); tranquillity for happiness (*sukha*); happiness for concentration (*samādhi*).” Tranquillity is the calm that emerges through the subsiding of defilements. The happiness to which it leads reaches full maturity in concentration. When happiness gains in force, it exercises the function of suppressing the hindrance of restlessness and worry, which causes unhappiness through its agitating nature.

The average person often equates excitement with happiness. Happiness and excitement do not exist together in the same mind at the same time, for these are diametrically opposite mental factors. The excited person's behaviour is quite different from that of a happy person. When someone, for instance, is excited he or she expresses his or her excitement by smiling, laughing, whistling, singing, dancing, kissing, hugging, running, crying or even saying things which he or she would never otherwise say under any circumstance. When the real happiness arises, however, the person does not express anything either verbally or physically, but remains calm, peaceful, composed, and serene, for it is this real happiness that leads his mind to true concentration. It is not excitement but just the opposite of it that leads the mind to concentration. As the concentrated mind generates sufficient quietness of the mind, instead of expressing any mental agitation, a truly happy person sees the truth as it is.

The knowledge of the truth that all conditioned things are in a state of flux is the third stage in the Buddha's blueprint of happiness: wisdom (*paññā*). The real knowledge of the truth makes a person wise enough to be happy in the deepest sense of the word. It is the knowledge of the truth we experience, not the ignorance of it, that makes us joyful and happy. Experiencing the truth of life is not accidental, but an occurrence taking place every moment in our life, although we may never be ready to accept it. As our wisdom is not sharp enough to welcome the truth of life, we rather look the other way or try to pretend that it does not exist or try to run away from it. However, it catches up with us by surprise. No matter how hard we try to escape, most certainly, it follows us reminding us of its presence in us all the time. The wise, however, delight in reflecting on the truth that all conditioned things are impermanent. The Buddha equates the joy and gladness gained through this reflection with Nibbāna (Dhp 374).

The Buddha said just as in the great ocean there is but one taste, the taste of salt, so in his doctrine and discipline there is but one taste, the taste of freedom (*vimutti-rasa*). When someone tastes the taste of freedom from all

bondage he experiences real happiness called happiness of calmness (*upasama-sukha*). It is happiness that brings peace.

The Buddha has prescribed a very practical way of cultivating happiness through the practice of loving-kindness. One who practises loving-kindness should wish, “May all beings be happy and secure! May all beings have happy minds! Whatever living beings there may be without exception, weak or strong, long, large, middling, short, subtle, or gross, visible or invisible, living near or far, born or coming to birth—may all beings have happy minds! Let no one deceive another nor despise anyone anywhere. Neither in anger nor ill will should anyone wish harm to another. As a mother would risk her own life to protect her only child, even so towards all living beings one should cultivate a boundless heart. One should cultivate for all the world a heart of boundless loving-kindness, above, below, and across, unobstructed, without hate or enmity. Whether standing, walking, or sitting, lying down or whenever awake, he should develop this mindfulness; this is called divinely dwelling here. Not falling into erroneous views, but virtuous and endowed with vision, removing desire for sensual pleasures, he comes never again to birth in the womb.” (Karaṇīyametta Sutta)

Loving-kindness is a universal emotion the root of which lies in every person's mind. As it is buried under

various unwholesome conditioning, most people are unaware of its presence in their minds. Moreover, all kinds of fear, anxiety, tension, worries, etc. keep it repressed. Once they are removed from their minds, loving-kindness starts to operate freely, manifesting itself in compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity, all of which are the sources of happiness. Once the hatred is removed from the mind, loving-kindness grows up freely, unhindered by any of its opposites. It is the one who practises loving-kindness all the time who experiences true happiness.

The highest happiness, of course, is the happiness of Nibbāna, which is not a feeling. As Venerable Sāriputta says about Nibbāna: “That very absence of feeling is the happiness herein” (A IV 414). Nibbānic happiness is not a feeling for it is feeling that generates desire. For instance, if the feeling happens to be pleasant, desire arises in the mind for obtaining what is felt. All happiness derived from any feeling may turn into unhappiness. If happiness turns into unhappiness, then what we experience is suffering or *dukkha*. True happiness is the happiness attained by eliminating *dukkha*. The cause of suffering should be eliminated totally, completely, never to return again, in order to eliminate suffering. With total annihilation of the cause of suffering, permanent happiness is possible.

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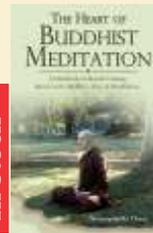


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