

Mundane and Genuine Happiness and Unhappiness

in the Teachings of the Buddha

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Mundane Happiness and Genuine Well-Being

- Dharma is a way of viewing reality and engaging with reality in ways that lead to sustainable, genuine well-being.
- “There are, mendicants, these two kinds of happiness. What two? Mundane happiness (*āmisa-sukha*) and genuine well-being (*nirāmisa-sukha*). These are the two kinds of happiness. The better of these two kinds of happiness is genuine well-being.” (*Sukhasutta, Discourse on Happiness, Aṅguttara Nikāya, 2.68*)
- Then the householder Anāthapiṇḍika approached the Blessed One.... The Blessed One said to him:

“Householder, there are these four kinds of happiness that may be achieved by a layperson who enjoys sensual pleasures, depending on time and occasion. What four? The happiness of ownership, the happiness of enjoyment, the happiness of freedom from debt, and the happiness of blamelessness.

(1) “And what, householder, is the happiness of ownership? Here, a clansman has acquired wealth by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his arms, earned by the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained. When he thinks, ‘I have acquired wealth by energetic striving ... righteously gained,’ he experiences happiness and joy. This is called the happiness of ownership.

(2) “And what is the happiness of enjoyment? Here, with wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his arms, earned by the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, a clansman enjoys his wealth and does meritorious deeds. When he thinks, ‘With wealth acquired by energetic striving ... righteously gained, I enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds,’ he experiences happiness and joy. This is called the happiness of enjoyment.

(3) “And what is the happiness of freedom from debt? Here, a clansman has no debts to anyone, whether large or small. When he thinks, ‘I have no debts to anyone, whether large or small,’ he experiences happiness and joy. This is called the happiness of freedom from debt.

(4) “And what is the happiness of blamelessness? Here, householder, a noble disciple is endowed with blameless bodily, verbal, and mental action. When he thinks, ‘I am endowed with blameless bodily, verbal, and mental action,’ he experiences happiness and joy. This is called the happiness of blamelessness.

“These are the four kinds of happiness that a layperson who enjoys sensual pleasures may achieve, depending on time and occasion.”

Having known the happiness of freedom from debt,

one should recall the happiness of ownership.

Enjoying the happiness of enjoyment,

a mortal then sees things clearly with wisdom.

While seeing things clearly, the wise one

knows both kinds of happiness.

The other is not worth a sixteenth part

of the bliss of blamelessness.” (*Ānanya Sutta, Discourse on Freedom from Debt,*

Anguttara Nikaya 4.62)

- There are three kinds of genuine well-being for the contemplative: (1) well-being of blamelessness (2) well-being gained through samādhi, and (3) supreme well-being through knowing reality as it is. (*Kandaraka Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 51)

Mundane Unhappiness and Genuine Unhappiness

- Three Kinds of Suffering
 - Dukkha-dukkha – the suffering of suffering
 - Vipariṇāma-dukkha – the suffering of change
 - Saṅkhāra-dukkha – the suffering of conditioned existence
- Mundane unhappiness arises in response to not getting something we want (e.g., the four positive mundane concerns) and getting what we don’t want (e.g., the four negative mundane concerns). Further, it is so called for such kinds of unhappiness are relatively easy to identify: We can often point to what makes us unhappy, which many people regard as the primary causes of their unhappiness. But in reality, the primary causes are always our own mental afflictions, while the physical and mental influences that trigger our unhappiness are merely contributing conditions, which may or may not catalyze unhappiness, depending on whether or not they arouse mental afflictions.
- Genuine unhappiness arises from a deeper source, manifesting intermittently as the suffering of change and constantly as the ubiquitous dissatisfaction of conditioned existence. Genuine unhappiness is the exact counterpart of genuine well-being, and both are authentic responses to different aspects of reality. That is, in both cases, they are not emotions triggered by some internal or external event, but rather stem from balances and imbalances in the mind, without reliance upon other mental or physical stimuli. Just as genuine well-being is symptomatic of a balanced mind rooted in an authentic view of reality, so is genuine unhappiness symptomatic of an unbalanced mind, that is, one that is under the domination of mental afflictions, rooted in delusion.
- While all unhappiness comes about due to mental afflictions and their resultant actions and consequences, not all unhappiness has a referent or a sensory or mental appearance

that arouses the unhappiness. Likewise, not all happiness has a referent or a sensory or mental appearance that arouses the happiness. Happiness and unhappiness that do have such a referent generally fall into the category of the kinds of happiness and unhappiness that are among the eight mundane concerns.

- A sense of well-being that arises from the cultivation of ethics, samādhi, and wisdom does not necessarily have a referent, nor is it a response to some agreeable stimulus. So that is genuine happiness that we bring to the world, not something we get from the world.
- Likewise, the unhappiness belonging to the category of the “suffering of change” may occur in the midst of very pleasurable sensory stimuli, but this unhappiness stems from within, rooted in the mental affliction of craving/attachment. So that is a kind of genuine unhappiness that we bring to the world, not something we get from the world.
- The same is true of the yet subtler, ubiquitous dissatisfaction of conditioned existence, rooted in the delusion of appropriating our bodies and minds as “I” and “mine” and of grasping to our own personal identity as being inherently real and independent.
- To probe more deeply, among the three kinds of dukkha in Buddhism, the suffering of suffering, or blatant suffering, physical or mental, is triggered by some unpleasant stimulus; so it is experienced by all kinds of sentient beings, and it is especially triggered by the mental afflictions of anger and hatred.
- The suffering of change applies even to pleasurable feelings in response to agreeable stimuli, but it is implicitly a form of dukkha, for it is characterized by a sense of dissatisfaction even in the midst of felicity. It is rooted in the awareness that whatever one has acquired that supports one’s present happiness, will be lost: it is only a matter of time, hence “the suffering of change.”
- As with the six aspects of mental balance, with regard to wealth, power, and fame, there can be imbalances of excess, deficiency, and dysfunction. While wealth, power, and fame can be put to good use for one’s own and others’ well-being, they become dysfunctional when they are used for one’s own self-aggrandizement and for the manipulation and exploitation of others.
- Regarding those who achieve an excess of wealth, power, and fame, such people have fulfilled their hopes driven by craving/attachment, but true satisfaction eludes them. So they are prone to having high rates of depression, often driven by extreme, relentless pressure, intense isolation, and the immense stress of maintaining their status. The “Über-Success” burden of excessive wealth, power, and fame often results in enormous pressure to maintain high-functioning, successful roles, which can be intensely isolating and “depressogenic.” Such high-profile individuals often struggle to find genuine connections, leading to profound isolation and paranoia; constant public scrutiny and the need to meet unreasonable expectations can trigger anxiety and depression. The high toll of success can act similarly to substance addiction, leading to a need for increasing stimulation.

- Looking to entire nations, data suggests that U.S. happiness peaked around the late 1950s and has remained largely constant or decreased, despite astronomical growth in wealth and consumption. As of May 2026, research indicates Americans are at their least happy point in a 50-year history, with a significant decline in happiness observed after 2020. On the other hand, New Zealand consistently ranks among the top 15 happiest countries in the world, and yet it has consistently recorded some of the highest teenage (15–19) and youth (15–24) suicide rates according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Psychologists report that this crisis is driven by a complex, interconnected web of social, economic, and systemic factors rather than a single cause. The highest rates of suicide for ages 15-19 are found in New Zealand, Finland, Norway, and Canada, while Finland is rated the happiest country in the world, with Norway ranking #7, and Canada ranking #18.
- Chronic restlessness and dissatisfaction are symptoms of genuine unhappiness that we bring to the world, not emotions we get from the world, as though stimulated by unpleasant circumstances. A synonym for the term “sentient being,” (literally, “mind-possessor,” or “semchen” in Tibetan) is “one who is on the move” (“drowa”). Sentient beings are constantly on the move or about to move because we are dissatisfied with our present circumstances, and that is one more expression of the ubiquitous dissatisfaction of conditioned existence, the fundamental root of genuine unhappiness.
- Seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal: “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” Written in his *Pensées* (thought 139), he goes on to suggest that people fear boredom and self-reflection, leading them to seek distractions that create misery.
- Regarding the suffering of change, in the *Vajra Essence* revealed by Dūdjom Lingpa in 1862, the Lake-Born Vajra comments that even if people practice Dharma, “when many of their friends get together, they become wearied and fed up with them and so retreat into solitude with the earnest desire to accomplish Dharma. But once they are living alone, they wander everywhere, like calves separated from their mothers. Like weasels burrowing into holes in the ground, they cannot stay where they are. Like stray dogs in search of food, they restlessly roam about in towns. Attracted to conversation and chitchat, they seek out someone to talk to, thereby interfering with others’ spiritual practices. Having many plans, even if they have identified their own essential nature, they have no confidence in meditation and think instead of going on pilgrimages. When they are actually wandering on pilgrimages, they wish they were staying in one place or else they yearn to be back home. Those unfortunate ones are making nothing of this life or their future lives. They do not follow the practical advice they have received.”
- Śāntideva (*A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, VIII:1): “Upon developing zeal in that way, one should stabilize the mind in samādhi, since a person whose mind is distracted lives between the fangs of mental afflictions.” But we can then ask, “Why is the mind so naturally prone to this OCDD, or Obsessive-Compulsive-Delusional Disorder?” This

tendency stems from underlying genuine unhappiness that compels the mind to fall into obsessive-compulsive conceptualization, which—rather than alleviating genuine unhappiness—compounds that fundamental dissatisfaction with thoughts and emotions that can be so uncomfortable that, when people are placed in a situation with nothing to distract them from this agitation, they may seek physical pain to take their attention off their psychological distress.

- The root mental affliction of anger/hatred inevitably leads to the suffering of suffering; the mental affliction of craving/attachment inevitably leads to the suffering of change; and the mental affliction of ignorance/delusion inevitably leads to the suffering of conditioned existence. If there were no ignorance/delusion, there would be no craving/attachment, and if there were no craving/attachment, there would be no anger/hatred.
- The ubiquitous suffering, or dissatisfaction, of conditioned existence is the deepest form of dukkha and is the fundamental root of genuine unhappiness. It is rooted in the delusion of appropriating, or identifying with, one's conditioned body and mind, which makes one perpetually vulnerable to all manner of blatant suffering. This results in a kind of underlying anxiety and dissatisfaction, which may lead to chronic depression. Modern psychology addresses mundane unhappiness, while many spiritual traditions commonly address the suffering of change, and Buddhism specifically presents effective remedies for the suffering of conditioned existence through the cultivation of ethics, samādhi, and the wisdom of thoroughly knowing the actual nature of reality—as empty of any inherent nature.
- The cultivation of ethics leads to the alleviation of the suffering of suffering, the cultivation of samādhi alleviates the suffering of change, and the cultivation of wisdom culminates in the complete eradication of the suffering of conditioned existence and can lead to supreme, genuine well-being (*nirāmisatara-sukha*) in this lifetime.
- The entire Tibetan Buddhist tradition of Mind-Training (“lojong”), as illustrated by Dodrupchen Jikmé Tenpé Nyima’s text *Transforming Felicity and Adversity into the Spiritual Path*, is designed to transform mundane happiness and unhappiness into genuine well-being.
- Insofar as you prioritize the cultivation of genuine well-being over the pursuit of mundane happiness, you may find that with the blessings of the buddhas, “reality rises up to meet you” in all circumstances.