

HAPPINESS: MUNDANE AND SUPRAMUNDANE

Y. KARUNADASA

1. The Buddha says: “All living beings (both human and non-human) desire happiness and recoil from suffering” (Sabbe satta sukhakama, dukkha-patikkula: Majjhimanikaya, PTS I, 342). Pursuit of happiness is common to Buddhism and to the other two world-views from which it keeps equally aloof. If Spiritual Eternal-ism (sassatavada) advocates self-mortification, it is precisely in order to experience happiness in the distant future. If Annihilationist Materialism (ucchedavada) advocates sensual indulgence, it is precisely in order to experience happiness in the immediate now.
2. Happiness means many things to many people. It is not possible to define happiness with mathematical precision.
3. The Buddhist position is that there is a necessary causal correlation between morality and happiness. What is morally good, leads to happiness; what is morally bad, leads to unhappiness. The Buddhist term for what is morally good is “skillful” (kusala) and the Buddhist term for what is morally bad is “unskillful” (akusala). A mind poisoned with the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion, is a mind, that is “unskillful”, a mind that is “defiled”, a mind that is “ill”, a mind that is “in bondage” – a mind that “suffers.” In contrast, a mind that is free from the three poisons, is a mind that is “skillful”, a mind that is “pure”, a mind that is “well”, a mind that is “in freedom”—a mind that is “happy”. Here, the Buddhist idea is that when we have “skillful” qualities we experience mental health (arogyā), mental purity (anavajjata), mental ability (cheka), all resulting in happiness (sukha-vipaka): Dhammasangani Atthakatha, PTS, p. 63.
4. To be happy there are two options. One option is to change the world to conform to our desires. The other option is to change ourselves to be in harmony with the nature of the world. It is the second option, though difficult, that Buddhism adopts, because the first option is simply not possible.
5. As Buddhism says, it is only when we have a mind under our own control that we can be truly happy, not when we come under the control of our own mind. We find this idea clearly articulated in the Buddhist theory of the cognitive process. A cognitive process begins with sensory contact and proceeds by degrees until it reaches the final stage called conceptual proliferations (papanca).

(a) At the first stage of the cognitive process, eye-consciousness, for example, arises according to the principle of dependent arising.

(b) At the second stage, called “feeling” up to the last stage, called “conceptual proliferations”, the individual assumes the role of an agent and directs the cognitive process.

© At the third stage, the individual loses his control as an agent, and becomes an object of his own uncontrollable conceptual proliferations: This means that he does not have a mind under his own control; he is being controlled by his own mind (Madhupindika Sutta in Majjhimanikaya).

6. To have a mind under one’s own control, one should develop mindfulness (sati) and clear comprehension (sampajanna): “When one is going forward or coming back, when one is looking ahead or looking aside, when one is drawing in or extending out the limbs, when wearing one’s clothes, when eating, drinking, chewing and tasting, when defecating and urinating, when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, speaking, and keeping silent” – in all these occasions and activities one should have mindfulness and clear comprehension (see Satipatthana Sutta in Majjhimanikaya).

7. To be mindful is not the same as to be self-conscious. When we are self-conscious, we are obsessed with ourselves. Then we react to situations, rather than responding to them. It is by letting go the self-idea, that we become truly active and creative.

8. What prevent us from experiencing true happiness are the three poisons: greed, hatred, and delusion. Of these three, hatred is the most dangerous, the most poisonous, and the most corrosive. A mind primarily motivated by greed, gives rise to some kind of pleasure (somanassa) or indifference/ equanimity (upekkha). But it never gives rise to displeasure (domanassa). Greed is due to some kind of attraction to someone or something, judged as pleasant and appealing. In such a situation the object of cognition, gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. A mind primarily motivated by delusion, gives rise to some kind of indifference (upekkha). The reason for this is that, a deluded mind is unable to judge something as pleasant or unpleasant. On the other hand, a mind primarily motivated by hatred always gives rise to displeasure (domanassa). Hatred arises when someone or something is judged as unpleasant, or repulsive. In such a situation, the object of cognition triggers some kind of displeasure (domanassa). Greed, as noted above, means the desire to possess an object. The moment that desire is frustrated, it will be immediately followed by a moment of hatred. It is not at the moment of greed, but at the immediately succeeding moment of hatred, that one experiences displeasure. What correspond to greed and hatred are attraction and distraction. Since they are mutually exclusive, they cannot activate at one and the same mind-moment (see: A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma (Abhidhammatthasangaha), tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi, p. 32).

9. Hatred can range from mild irritability to uncontrollable rage. What is called righteous anger or moral indignation is another form of hatred, though very subtle. So is a sarcastic remark with ironic intent.

“When anger does possess a man,
He looks ugly and lies in pain.
No being but seeks his own self’s good,
None dearer to him than himself,
Yet men in anger kill themselves,
Distraught for reasons manifold:
For crazed they stab themselves with daggers,
In desperation swallow poison
Perish hanged by ropes,
Or fling themselves over a precipice.
Yet how their life-destroying acts
Bring death unto themselves as well,
That they cannot discern, and that
Is the ruin anger breeds.

(Anguttaranikaya, PTS. VII: 60; Bhikkhu Nanamoli, Four Sublime States, Wheel Publication, No 6, BPS. Kandy 1958).

10. The most effective antidote for the poison of hatred is, loving kindness (metta). This is how, says the Buddha, one should develop loving kindness:

“Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, let one cultivate a boundless heart of compassion towards all beings. Let one’s thoughts of boundless compassion pervade the whole world: above, below and across without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity. Whether one stands, walks, sits or lies down, as long as one is awake, one should develop this mindfulness. This is the noblest living here” (Metta Sutta in Suttanipata).

11. As the Buddha says further, there are eleven blessings, which one can have by developing loving kindness:

“One sleeps in comfort; one wakes up in comfort; one dreams no evil dreams; one is dear to human beings; one is dear to non-human beings; the gods protect him; no fire or poison or weapon harms him; one’s mind can be quickly concentrated; the complexion of one’s face becomes serene; one will face death with no mental confusion; and even if one fails to realize the highest goal in this life, one will pass on to the world of High Divinity (Brahmaloka).”
Anguttaranikaya, Buddha-Jayanti Edition VI 644).

12. Obtainment of happiness by developing the Four Sublime States or Divine Abodes (Brahmavihara):

(a) Loving Kindness (metta): Developing love, without the desire to possess, without selecting and excluding. It is love embracing all living beings. Compassion is not the same as selfish affection, which is accompanied by sorrow.

(b) Compassion (karuna): Compassion to all suffering living beings. Compassion is not the same as sentimentality, a state of mind accompanied by sorrow.

© Altruistic Joy (mudita): It is the ability to feel happy and joyful at the success of another. It is the sharing of others’ happiness as if it were ours’. Altruistic Joy is the best antidote for the poison of jealousy. Jealousy is the resentment and bitterness one experiences, when another succeeds.

(d) Equanimity (upekkha): It is the perfect, unshakeable balance of mind. It is not negative indifference; it is a positive social virtue. Equanimity is our ability to remain calm and unruffled, when we face the eight vicissitudes or, the “eight ups and downs” of life (attha loka-dhamma). These are gain and loss, blame and honour, insult and praise, delight and despair. When we face these “ups and downs” of life, it is instructive for us to remember what the Dhammapada says:

Indeed, this is an ancient practice,

Not one only of today

They blame those who remain silent.

They blame those who speak much.

They blame those who speak in moderation.

There is none in this world,

Who is not blamed.

There never was,

There never will be,

Nor is there now,

A person who is wholly blamed,

Or a person wholly praised.

Dhammapada, verses 227, 228; translation by Venerable Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita).

13. Equanimity also means an attitude of impartiality. It transcends all divisive thoughts and feelings based on class, caste, race, religion, nationality, ethnicity and all forms of parochialism, as well as gender distinctions.

14. There are two levels of happiness: mundane and supra-mundane. Mundane happiness is the happiness we experience until we realize supra-mundane Nibbanic happiness.

15. One of the most important requisites to lead a happy life is adequate wealth. As a religious teacher, the Buddha never praised poverty. As a matter of fact, he singled out hunger to be the “worst disease” (jighaccha parama roga: Dhammapada, verse 203) and poverty, to be the most destabilizing factor:

“When there is no proper distribution of wealth, poverty grows rife; from poverty growing rife, stealing increases; from the spread of stealing, violence and use of weapons increase; from violence and use of weapons, destruction of life becomes common; when destruction of life becomes common, people’s life span decreases, their beauty decreases.” (Dighanikaya, PTS III 58).

16. In response to a householder, called Dighajanu, the Buddha refers to four requirements leading to happiness in this life: (a) Accomplishment in Effort: one should be energetic, tireless, of an inquiring turn of mind, and capable of organizing and carrying out one’s work systematically and efficiently; (b) Accomplishment in Protection: one should see that the wealth one has earned is properly guarded and protected; (c) Good Companionship/Friendship: one should associate and cultivate friendship with people who are virtuous, faithful, charitable and wise; (d) The need to lead a balanced life: One should neither be unduly extravagant, nor unduly miserly. He should know that his income will stand in excess of his expenditure, but not his expenses in excess of his income. Just as the goldsmith knows on holding up a balance by so much it has dipped down, by so much it has tilted up, even so, a householder, knowing his

income and expenses, leads a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly” (Venerable Narada Mahathera, *Everyman’s Ethics: Four Discourses of the Buddha*, BPS. Kandy 1985).

17. The wealth earned by a householder can have four sources of loss: looseness with women, addiction to intoxicating drinks, gambling, and associating with evil-minded people. “There are six evil consequences in indulging in intoxicants: loss of wealth, increase of quarrels, susceptibility to illness, loss of one’s good name and reputation, shameless and indecent exposure of one’s body, and weakening of one’s intellect. There are six evil consequences when one indulges in gambling: the winner makes enemies, the loser bewails his loss, loss of wealth; his word is not relied upon in a court of law, he is despised by his friends and associates, and he is not in demand for marriage, for people would say he is a gambler, how can he look after a wife” (Venerable Narada Mahathera, *Everyman’s Ethics, Four Discourses of the Buddha*, BPS, p. 14).

18. There are six evil consequences in being addicted to idleness: He does not work, saying that it is extremely cold, that it is extremely hot, that it is too early in the morning, that it is too late in the evening, that he is extremely hungry, or that he is too full”. (Venerable Narada Mahathera, *Everyman’s Ethics, Four Discourses of the Buddha*, BPS. p.14)

Happiness through Family Life

19. Filial piety or devotion to parents: One’s parents, the Buddha says, are the “first teachers” (pubbacariya), the “first deities” (pubba-devata), “worthy of offerings” (ahuneyya). The mother and father are elevated to the level of High Divinity (Brahma’ti mata-pitaro). “Once mother is the friend in one’s home” (mata mittam sake ghare). In five ways should a child minister to his mother and father: “Having being supported by them, I will support them; I shall perform their duties for them; I shall keep up the family tradition; I shall be worthy of my heritage; after my parents’ death, I shall offer alms in honour for my departed parents”. There are five ways in which the parents so ministered to by children, will show their compassion to the children: they restrain them from evil; they encourage them to do good; they train them for a profession; they arrange a suitable marriage, and at the proper time, they hand over their inheritance to them” (Sigalovada Sutta, Dighanikaya).

20. “A man’s wife”, the Buddha says, “is his greatest friend” (bhariya’va parama sakha: Samyuttankaya PTS I, 81). Marriage between man and woman, thus, becomes the greatest friendship. “There are five ways in which a husband should minister to his wife: by being courteous to her, by not despising her, by being faithful to her, by handing over authority to her, and by providing her with adornments. The wife thus ministered to by her husband, shows her compassion to her husband in five ways: she performs her duties well; she is hospitable and courteous to relations and attendants; she is faithful to her husband; she protects what he

brings; and she is skilled and industrious in discharging her duties. In five ways should a householder minister to his servants and employees: by assigning to them work according to their ability; by supplying them with food and wages; by tending them when they are sick; by sharing special delicacies with them; and by granting them leave from time to time” (Sigalovada Sutta, Dighanikaya).

21. There are many levels of happiness, ranging from the lowest to the highest, from the grossest to the most refined. It is a gradual refinement and sublimation of happiness until it reaches the highest level. The process begins with sensual pleasure (kama-sukha), the pleasure that we experience by gratifying our five-fold sensuality through the five physical sense-organs. Then come in gradual sequence higher levels of non-sensuous happiness, as for example, the happiness one experiences when one unifies and concentrates one’s mind in higher levels of jhana-experience. An important motivating factor for pursuing abiding sustainable happiness is the reflection that it is better to give up lower levels of happiness if, by doing so, one can experience a higher level of happiness.

22. The path discovered by the Buddha for realizing Nibbana, the Highest Happiness, is the Noble Eightfold Path. It sets itself aloof not only from sensual indulgence, but also from self-mortification, which is “painful and ignoble”. Therefore, the Buddhist Path to the Highest Happiness is certainly not through suffering. For it “does not involve suffering, vexation, despair, and anguish”. Therefore, the Buddha describes the Noble Eightfold Path, as the Path, “To be trodden with Joy” (piti-gamaniyo): Majjhimanikaya, PTS I, 117).

23. It is certainly through happiness, not through suffering, that the Buddha penetrated the Truth of Suffering. In this connection, the Buddha says:

“I do not say that the breakthrough to the Four Noble Truths is accompanied by suffering or displeasure. Rather, the breakthrough to the Four Noble Truths is accompanied by happiness and joy (Connected Discourses of the Buddha, translation of Samyuttanikaya, Bhikkhu Bodhi, V, 1860 (2), 298).

24. “Cessation of Suffering” (dukkha-nirodha) is another expression for “Happiness” (sukha). If “Cessation of Suffering” is a negative expression, so is “Immortality”, which almost all religions including Buddhism, claim to be the highest goal of religious life.

25. In the quest for the highest happiness, the decisive turning point is not fear, but a real encounter with suffering. From then onward the sequence is not one of suffering, but degrees of happiness leading to the highest happiness. This idea is clearly highlighted in what is called “transcendental dependent arising”, a dependent arising leading to the transcendence of the world: (Bhikkhu Bodhi, Transcendental Dependent Arising, BPS, 1980 p.4)

“Thus, monks, ignorance is the supporting condition for kamma formations, kamma formations are the supporting condition for consciousness, consciousness is the supporting condition for mentality-materiality, mentality-materiality is the supporting condition for the six-fold sense-base, the six-fold sense base is the supporting condition for contact, contact is the supporting condition for feeling, feeling is the supporting condition for craving, craving is the supporting condition for clinging, clinging is the supporting condition for existence, existence is the supporting condition for birth, birth is the supporting condition for suffering, suffering is the supporting condition for faith, faith is the supporting condition for joy, joy is the supporting condition for rapture, rapture is the supporting condition for tranquility, tranquility is the supporting condition for happiness, happiness is the supporting condition for concentration, concentration is the supporting condition for the knowledge and vision of things as they really are, the knowledge of things as they really are is the supporting condition for disenchantment, disenchantment is the supporting condition for dispassion, dispassion is the supporting condition for emancipation, while emancipation is the supporting condition for the knowledge of the destruction of cankers” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Transcendental Dependent Arising*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy 1980, p. 4).