

The Meaning of Happiness

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The Pali word that we translate as happiness—*sukha*—actually has a very wide range of meanings: everything from physical pleasure to ease, well-being, bliss, the whole gamut of all kinds of physical well-being and mental well-being. Sometimes “happy” seems to be the right translation, and sometimes it seems a little bit air-headed.

Years back, when we were first translating the chants here, I went to a meeting where there were some nuns and monks from England. Over there, they translate the passage—*Aham sukhitō homi*—as, “May I abide in well-being,” which a friend of mine called Benedictine Pali. One of the nuns was curious to hear how we translated the passage, and so I told her: “May I be happy.” She started laughing so hard she almost fell out of her chair. I guess she felt that the simple wish for happiness was a little air-headed. So if you have that feeling around the word “happiness,” remember that *sukha* covers a lot of other things as well.

The Buddha himself said that another word for happiness is *acts of merit*. Merit is another one of those words we have trouble with—it sounds like merit badges and Brownie points—but what he’s saying is that happiness lies in the action of doing something good. He lists three kinds of meritorious actions: generosity, virtue, and meditation, and those three activities cover pretty much all the goodness in the world. The acts that give meaning to our lives come under these three headings.

Generosity means not only giving material things, but also giving your time, giving your energy, giving forgiveness, giving help in all kinds of ways. It’s in the act of giving that a lot of us find meaning in our lives: the time we give, the love we give to others, the care and concern. The act itself is a form of happiness, a form of *sukha*.

The same with virtue: This has more to do with refraining from things where you could harm other people, or you could do something that was for your advantage that would take something away from someone else. You may find yourself in a situation where you could do something of that sort, yet you don’t do it. You have a sense that your worth as a person is much more important than whatever little gain you might get from behaving in lowly ways. That’s another area where we can find a lot of meaning in our lives.

And then there's meditation. The Pali word here is *bhāvanā*, which means "developing": developing good qualities in the mind. We primarily think of meditation in terms of developing mindfulness and alertness and other good qualities as we sit here and do formal meditation, but developing applies to all areas where you see that your mind needs to train itself in noble qualities—in your thoughts and your words and your deeds.

So when we say, "May I be happy; may all living beings be happy," it's not that we're hoping for everyone to sit around surrounded by nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Basically it means that we hope they do good, because that's where the happiness lies.

Sometimes you run into descriptions of the Buddha's teachings on happiness that sound pretty hedonistic. A few years back, I was going to give a talk on a Buddhist perspective on the pursuit of happiness. In the afternoon before the talk, I happened to meet with my old Christian Ethics professor from college. He asked me what I was going to talk about that night, and I decided to boil it down to one sentence, which was, "The pursuit of happiness doesn't need to be hedonistic." In other words, the wish for happiness is not simply about gathering up pleasures. He said, "I wish I had the time and opportunity to come and hear that."

Sometimes you hear mindfulness sold as a way of enjoying your pleasures more. The more mindful you are, they say, the more pleasure you find in simple physical sensations. This idea is especially common when they practice eating raisins as a mindfulness practice: You find there's a lot more flavor to the raisin when you savor it slowly. There's a lot more pleasure in the experience of drinking tea when you sip it slowly: enjoying the warmth of the cup in your hand, that kind of thing.

Yet there was once a psychology professor writing about positive psychology, who pointed out the fact that, of various approaches to pleasure and happiness in life—such as mastering a skill or devoting yourself to a higher purpose—the lowest is trying to enjoy sensual pleasures. All he knew about Buddhism was the Raisin Mindfulness School. When he described Buddhism, he was trying to write about it in a respectful way, but he couldn't help but place Buddhism at the very lowest end of the various approaches to happiness in the world.

This is what happens when you try to sell Buddhism in a way that you think is going to appeal to people—teaching them that if you practice mindfulness, you can squeeze a lot more happiness out of consuming the pleasures in life. So there is that understanding about Buddhism going around out there, but it's not what the Buddha taught.

As he actually said, the happiness lies in the actions—when you do something skillful, something noble. That’s where the real happiness lies: both because there’s a sense of well-being as you do the action—you realize that what you’re doing is not harming anyone—and in the sense that it’s going to produce happiness down the line, both for yourself and other people.

In this sense, the Buddha wants you to take the pursuit of happiness seriously. You’d think that people would stop and think about how they’re trying to be happy, but they don’t. They just follow their urges. This may be one of the reasons that happiness has bad press in some areas, because a lot of what people do when they’re trying to be happy is to block out a lot of reality so that they can just focus on what they like, and pretend that what they’re doing has no impact aside from the immediate sensation of pleasure.

The Buddha wants us to be very clear-sighted about our happiness—all the implications of where we look for happiness and how. If you want happiness that’s true, he said, you have to develop qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity. These are all noble qualities in the mind. Without them, there’s no true happiness.

Wisdom starts by seeing that pleasure and pain, happiness and sadness, come from your actions. They’re not just a matter of things floating by. So you’ve got to be very careful about what you do and say and think, because some things lead to short-term happiness and then long-term pain. Other things might be difficult in the doing, but they lead to long-term happiness. Seeing that, and being able to talk yourself into wanting to do those things that will lead to long-term happiness regardless of whether they’re easy or not: That’s a real function of wisdom.

As for compassion, you have to realize that if your happiness depends on other people’s suffering, it’s not going to last, it’s not going to be true happiness. So you have to take their needs into account.

As for purity, you look at your actions and see: Do they really fall in line with your values, your desire to be compassionate, your desire to be wise? You don’t go just on good intentions. The Buddha makes the distinction: There are *good* intentions and there are *skillful* intentions. With good intentions, you may mean well, but you can end up causing a lot of harm because you’re not really looking carefully at what you’re doing or the results of what you’re doing. Skillful intentions are ones that actually do lead to happiness. To be skillful like this, you’ve got to keep checking your actions, again and again and again, to see what results you’re actually getting, to make sure that you’re acting on your best intentions and your best understanding of what’s going to happen as a result.

You also keep in mind that there are situations where you may not know, and the only way to gain knowledge is to learn from your actions, too. You've got to do your best, or at least what *seems* to be most skillful, and watch for the results. All of that, the Buddha identifies as the quality of purity.

So there are good, noble qualities that you can develop in the mind through the wise pursuit of happiness. And it's in developing those noble qualities that true happiness lies—true well-being, true bliss, or however else you want to translate the word *sukha*.

So as we meditate, we're here partly for the sake of the sense of ease and well-being that comes as you get the mind to settle down, but also for the sake of using that settled well-being as a tool to gain greater insight into the mind, and to strengthen our generosity, strengthen our virtue, strengthen all the good qualities in the mind that need to be developed. The pleasure of the meditation is happy in the doing, but it's also a tool for an even greater happiness in its results. And this is what gives meaning to our lives—the fact that the mind is developed

There are a lot of things that we try to accomplish in life that depend on outside situations—projects we'd like to do, goals we'd like to realize in the outside world. Sometimes we actually do accomplish them, but then someone comes along and erases our accomplishment. Look at the tide of history: Things go back and forth and back and forth, like the tides of the sea, and if your sense of accomplishment or meaning lies in the sense that you've made a permanent change in the world, it's going to be disappointed. It'll be washed away when the tide turns.

I remember listening to a lawyer who had argued many cases before the Supreme Court. He was talking about how, when he started out his career, things seemed to be heading toward greater and greater freedom, greater equality, and greater goodness in general, but then the tide turned, and he saw all his accomplishments being frittered away by one court case after another.

So if you're looking for meaning in those terms, the world is a pretty cruel and heartless place to look for it. But if you look in terms of the good qualities you can develop in the mind, they don't have to depend on the world outside. Whereas the actions that you do that are skillful, that are meritorious, that are meaningful: These are things that give real meaning to life. The qualities of virtue, generosity, and all the other things that the Buddha describes as inner treasures or inner perfections: Those are what real happiness means.

