

Ask the Teachers: Is happiness really the central goal of Buddhist practice?

*By Anushka Fernandopulle, Thubten Chodron and Kaira Jewel Lingo,
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Anushka Fernandopulle, Ven. Thubten Chodron, and Kaira Jewel Lingo discuss the real meaning of “happiness” in Buddhism.



(Left to right) Anushka Fernandopulle, Ven. Thubten Chodron, and Kaira Jewel Lingo. Photo by Mateo Hinojosa, Sravasti Abbey, and Thomas Kierok.

Question: Buddhist teachers, including the Dalai Lama, often speak of happiness as a goal (if not the goal) of Buddhist practice. I don't begrudge anyone happiness, but making it so central to spiritual life feels self-serving. Am I misunderstanding what's meant by "happiness"?

Anushka Fernandopulle: The Buddha talked about three different levels of happiness. The first is happiness that can come from pleasant sense experiences: delicious food, nice weather, pleasant music, or any kind of positive sensual experience. These are enjoyable but fleeting. Since all sense experiences change quickly and none can be relied upon to stay forever, this kind of happiness is fragile.

There is nothing wrong with pleasant experiences, but orienting one's life entirely around them comes with a deep restlessness, one that we may not even notice while we are caught up in that game. If we were solely chasing pleasant experiences for happiness, it could indeed seem like a selfish and limited life.

With just a little examination, most of us can see that happiness is in the mind and heart, not in the nose, eyes, ears, tongue, or body. So the next level is discovered by going directly to the mind, where in meditation we can uncover refined states that bring a deep sense of unity, well-being, and joy. The happiness from these states beats all sense experiences, even the most exquisite ones. It is more sublime, with an immense sense of ease and peace. When we attain these refined mental states, the things that block our sense of well-being (greed, hatred, fear, and other hindrances) temporarily lose their power, which is great. However, these obstacles are not yet totally eradicated; eventually, when conditions change, they will come back. So this kind of happiness, too, is ultimately fragile, requiring particular conditions to arise.

The highest level of happiness is a deep contentedness and peace beyond all changing circumstance. Through insight and wisdom, the obstacles to happiness can be uprooted from the mind rather than just temporarily suspended. This is the most reliable kind of happiness, well-being, and ease: unshakeable and deeply rooted beyond all conditions, an awakening that brings peace even among the vicissitudes of life.

We can investigate each kind of happiness for ourselves; we can see what leads to a more reliable happiness. As we expand our access to deeper levels, we develop more bandwidth for caring about others and being of service in the world. We discover that happiness includes cultivating wholesome states like generosity, kindness, compassion, as well as letting go of fear, selfishness, hatred, and greed. As we grow out of orienting around “self-serving” drives, we can rest in a much greater perspective of spaciousness and caring. We can gradually expand our idea of “self” to encompass all, so seeking happiness eventually means being of service to all.

Ven. Thubten Chodron: There are many different kinds of happiness. Some are selfish, others are not. Some forms of happiness rely on people, objects, places, sounds, and so forth. Since we cannot control our environment to the extent we'd like, happiness that depends on people and things is neither stable nor predictable. In addition, our motivation to experience this kind of happiness is often self-serving—we are seeking only our own happiness, and our mind is trapped in what the Buddha called the “eight worldly concerns”:

attachment to wealth, praise, good reputation, and sense pleasures, and aversion to loss, blame, notoriety, and unpleasant sensations.

The Buddha directs us to the happiness that comes through spiritual development, such as the joy that arises from single-pointed concentration. We may think that this is self-serving, and in cases in which someone becomes attached to the bliss of deep states of concentration, it may be. However, if a practitioner cultivates concentration with the intention to then use their focused mind to realize the nature of reality, or to cultivate other virtuous qualities such as great love and great compassion, selfishness is not involved.

Those of us who grew up in Christian contexts have a tendency to think that to be a truly compassionate, spiritual person, we must sacrifice our own well-being; the greater our suffering, the purer our compassion for others. The Buddha did not share this view. In fact, any who have attained buddhahood have fulfilled their own purpose and others' purpose as well. Attaining the dharmakaya, the omniscient, compassionate mind of a buddha, is the fulfillment of one's own aim, and gaining a buddha's form bodies, with the capacity to manifest in various ways to work for the benefit of others, is the fulfillment of others' aims. In that work a buddha also experiences great bliss, but this is certainly not self-serving.

For us ordinary beings, joy comes from being free from craving. By diminishing our craving and attachment, we may not have the giddy excitement we often call "happiness," but our minds are clearer and our hearts calmer. There is more self-acceptance and thus greater satisfaction in our lives.

In addition, a sense of fulfillment arises when we cultivate kindness and compassion toward others. We delight in being of service to others and in using our unique talents in whatever way possible to contribute to others' well-being. We are involved with others but are free of arrogance, jealousy, and competition. Our mind remains peaceful and we spread peace simply by our presence.

When we look at sincere dharma practitioners from all Buddhist traditions, we see that they are happy, contented people, and their lives are meaningful for others. That certainly is not self-serving!

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Making happiness central to spiritual life is only self-serving if we see ourselves as separate from others. But in fact, we are

inextricably interconnected with those in our lives. When we practice to bring genuine happiness to ourselves, we naturally become someone others want to be around—we are fresh, relaxed, and available because of our inner contentment. In this way we become capable of bringing happiness to others.

The Buddha taught in the *Mallikaa Sutta* that it is correct to regard yourself as the most precious person in your life. I love how Toni Morrison says it in *Beloved*: “You your own best thing.” This doesn’t mean we are more important than others. Rather, seeking happiness for ourselves *is* creating happiness for others. And the reverse is also true—when we strengthen others’ happiness, this also benefits us. Is this self-serving? Only in the best sense of that word. Taking good care of ourselves, loving and bringing happiness to ourselves, is the foundation for being able to love, care for, and bring happiness to others.

In the *Mallikaa Sutta*, the Buddha makes the connection that just as we hold ourselves dear, so do all others, so one who truly loves oneself will not harm others: “Though in thought we range throughout the world, we’ll nowhere find a thing more dear than self. So, since others hold the self so dear, he who loves himself should injure none.” Put simply, loving ourselves automatically translates into care and love for others.

What is happiness? There are probably many “happineses” we could speak of, just as Sharon Salzberg says that there are many “forgivenesses.” In the *Mahamangala Sutra*, or *The Discourse on Happiness*, the Buddha lists the greatest blessings that bring about a happy and peaceful life. In the last verse, he teaches,

*To live in the world
with your heart undisturbed by the world,
with all sorrows ended, dwelling in peace —
this is the greatest happiness.*

This is not the version of happiness sold to us by our consumer culture, which does everything to convince us that happiness is in the next new product, the next upgrade of our smartphone, the next promotion, house, car, vacation, or other status indicator that is supposed to determine our real worth. In this paradigm of accumulation, happiness is always somewhere else and depends on getting something more.

But we can touch happiness right now, simply by touching the good that is already here: our beating heart, the earth that is providing us with air, our

lungs able to convert this into oxygen for our blood. Part of being “undisturbed by the world” and “dwelling in peace” is knowing how to see and appreciate the things we usually take for granted. This kind of happiness is indeed the aim of our spiritual life, as it is the kind of happiness that both results from, and leads us toward, liberation.