



Better to Be a Renunciant : Buddhism, Happiness, and the Good Life

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[Essay]

Better to Be a Renunciant Buddhism, Happiness, and the Good Life

Charles K. Fink*

Abstract

This essay seeks to understand the nature of happiness and the good life within the context of Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism is a pessimistic philosophy, but only in the sense that it insists that happiness, as we ordinarily conceive of it, is unattainable. It is optimistic insofar as it maintains that true happiness is humanly possible, but only if we see things as they really are and relinquish our desires. Yet, even if we would be happier as renunciants, would our lives be better? To answer this question, we must understand the relationship between happiness and the good life. I argue that happiness is a complex psychological state involving affective, cognitive, and motivational components. Buddhist practice seeks to cultivate these different dimensions of happiness and in this way lay the foundation for living a good life.

1. Introduction

Buddhism is often interpreted as a philosophy of life rather than as a true religion. This is understandable. Buddhism addresses the problem of suffering and offers a way of life by which suffering can be overcome and happiness achieved. Of course, Buddhism is not *just* a philosophy of life; it is also a religion. But central to Buddhist teaching is a critique of the conventional conception of happiness—a critique that can be appreciated independently of any distinctively religious doctrines, such as karma and rebirth. Buddhism is a pessimistic philosophy, but only in the sense that it insists that happiness, as we ordinarily conceive of it, is unattainable. It is optimistic insofar as it maintains that true happiness is within our reach, but only if we come to see things as they really are and discipline our minds accordingly.

This essay examines the Buddhist conception of happiness and how it relates to the good life. The first section focuses on a core Buddhist teaching: that life is suffering. I argue that this should be understood to mean that the common

* Professor of Philosophy, Department of Arts and Philosophy, Miami Dade College, Kendall Campus, 11011 SW 104 St., Miami FL 33176-3393, USA.

conception of happiness is fatally flawed. The second section makes a case for the renunciation of desire and explains why it is, at least from a Buddhist standpoint, that we would be better off as renunciants. In the third section, I explore the relationship between happiness and the good life. Although the two notions are not always distinguished, the concept of happiness can be treated as a psychological concept rather than as a normative one. This allows us to ask whether happiness is all that matters in life, and even whether happiness is essential to living a good life. In the fourth and final section, I suggest that Buddhism conceives of happiness as psychological health and that, so understood, happiness is foundational to living a good life.

1. Why Life is Suffering

The Buddha famously taught that life is suffering, and he located the source of this in desire, thirst, or craving. The happiness we seek is unattainable because our thirsts are unquenchable. This implies that we *would* be happy if only our desires were fulfilled. Happiness, then, is a state of fulfillment or “desirelessness,” a state completely free from dissatisfaction or want. But, having said this, it is clear that the Buddha’s message is not that happiness is to be achieved by fulfilling our desires, but that we suffer because we mistakenly conceive of happiness in this way. It is *because* we seek happiness in the fulfillment of desire that happiness is unattainable. Why is this?

First, the stream of desires is endless. No sooner is one desire satisfied than another one takes its place—a sad phenomenon sometimes called the “satisfaction treadmill.”¹ Never content with the present moment, we seek happiness in the future, in the satisfaction of some new desire. As any beginning meditator knows, dissatisfaction and restlessness gnaw on us constantly. The untamed mind is never free from the grip of desire, not even for a moment. If to be happy is to satisfy all of our desires, and if the stream of desires is endless, then lasting happiness is unattainable. Some new desire, some unsatisfied want, always appears to disrupt whatever satisfaction we might experience.

Second, desire often assumes the form of *grasping* or *attachment*. To a large extent, we seek happiness in our possessions. We covet material things, of course, but also pleasure, health, knowledge, status, praise, and recognition. We are

¹ See Irvine (2006), p. 106.

attached to our family and friends, our pets, our material possessions, our bodies, our minds, our careers, our reputations, our health, our physical appearance, our youth, and, of course, life itself. Can we achieve lasting happiness by acquiring and holding on to the things we covet? No, according to Buddhism, for the following simple reason: all things are impermanent. In one way or another, all that we care about, everyone and everything, slips from our grasp. Material possessions crumble into nothingness. Children grow into adults. Relationships end. Health fades. Youth fades. Beauty fades. If this is not obvious, consider this. Death represents the loss of *everything* we value, and no one escapes death. In Buddhism, impermanence (*aniccata*) is one of the three marks of all conditioned phenomena. Because all things are impermanent, we cannot achieve lasting happiness by acquiring the things we desire. These things eventually fade away, and with it our happiness.

Third, the things we think will bring us lasting happiness simply don't. We tend to think: If I only I had the right job, a good marriage, enough money, a new house, *then* I would be happy. Yet nothing desired, once acquired, is a source of lasting satisfaction. Of course, we derive *some* satisfaction from achieving our goals, but it soon fades. Psychologists call this "hedonic adaptation."² This is another of the three marks of existence: *dukkha*. All conditioned phenomena, according to the Buddha, are marked by "unsatisfactoriness." This is rooted in the first mark of existence. Our experience of satisfaction is itself a conditioned, dependent phenomenon. It fades like everything else.

Fourth, if happiness is to be found in the fulfillment of desire, then we must be able to control things—people, situations, and events. To be happy, things must go our way. And this means that we must have the *power* to make things go our way. Yet, realistically speaking, not much is under our control. Sensing this, we immerse ourselves in worry. When our will is thwarted, as it so often is, we experience frustration. When people don't behave as they're "supposed" to behave, we experience anger and resentment. Worry, frustration, anger, fear, resentment, jealousy, despair, disappointment, heartbreak, and many other conflictive emotions are bound up with our efforts to control things. Although it is happiness that we seek, it is suffering that we create for ourselves and for others.

According to Buddhism, the problem is not just that we have *limited* power

² See Irvine (2006), pp. 105-106. There are ups and downs in life, but the evidence suggests that there is an individually variable happiness "set point" to which people eventually return. See Haybron (2011).

over the world; rather, we have *no* power at all. The self, understood as a center of power and control, as a doer of deeds, an initiator of actions, does not exist. When I think, there is no “I” that makes thoughts appear. When I raise my arm or speak, there is no “I” that makes my arm rise or my lips and tongue move. There is no actor or agent behind my actions. The “I,” understood as an actor or agent, as a center of power and control, is an illusion. This is the third mark of existence: no-self (*anattā*). Understood as a general metaphysical thesis, the no-self doctrine amounts to the claim that all things lack a substantial core. All things at every moment are in the process of coming to be or in the reverse process of ceasing to be; there is no time when something simply *is*. There are no “beings” but only “becomings.” This includes myself. My life is a transformational process, but there is no enduring entity that undergoes this process. My thoughts and actions are events, and they are bound up with everything else that happens. They cannot be disentangled from the causal matrix and assigned to a separately existing, substantial self.

We regard many things as possessions, and these things are intimately bound up with our sense of selfhood. Every “my” points to an “I.” I look upon my body, for instance, as *my* body, not just as *a* body. But my body is not a possession. It is something I make use of, but only temporarily. It is subject to disease, old age, death, and decay. Sooner or later, it will slip from my grasp, like everything else. Because all things are impermanent, there is nothing that persists from one moment to the next—including myself and everything I conceptualize as mine. This can’t be reconciled with the attitude of possessiveness. Possessiveness insists that things remain the same. But nothing remains the same. The object of my possessiveness now is not the same as the object of my possessiveness a moment from now. Possessiveness rests upon the delusion of permanence. The delusion is thinking that we can arrest the process of change and somehow make something remain the same from one moment to the next, from one day to the next, from one year to the next.

There are a number of reflections that bring home in a powerful way just how deep our attachments are. Imagine that all your physical possessions are destroyed. How devastating would this be? Imagine losing your ability to remember things or to learn new things, to see, touch, or hear. Imagine that you lose your career. Imagine that everyone you care about dies. Imagine that you’re diagnosed with a fatal condition. The truth is that this *is* (or soon will be) happening to us, but we don’t face this fact. It’s too frightening. We live with the comforting delusion of

permanence. (But, importantly, the inevitability of loss is frightening only *because* we cling to “I” and “mine.”)

Ultimately, we suffer because of an existential contradiction: the contradiction between the deep attachments that we have—to our lives, to our bodies, to our minds, to youth, to health, to people, to our material possessions, to our mental possessions (e.g., knowledge, memories)—and the fact that all things, without exception, are impermanent. The suffering of life resides in this contradiction. We cope with this contradiction by denying it or ignoring it. This is delusion. We delude ourselves into thinking that what is impermanent is really permanent, or we just don’t think about it. It’s not that we are ignorant of this contradiction. We just refuse to think about it, or we disguise the facts.

Once again, Buddhism teaches that all phenomena have three characteristic marks: impermanence, selflessness, and unsatisfactoriness. We have seen how the attitude of possessiveness is related to the first mark. It is also related to the other two. That all things lack a self implies that there is nothing to possess. If I am possessive of my car, what is *it* exactly that is the object of my possessiveness? What is there to grasp, to hold on to? The Buddhist answer is “nothing.” Also, why is it that I should try to possess anything? Only because I imagine that my possessions will bring me happiness. If I think of happiness in terms of the enjoyment of my possessions, then of course I cling to these possessions. But if all things are unsatisfactory in the sense that possessing things is not a source of the happiness we seek, then the attitude of possessiveness is based on delusion.

Buddhism challenges the conventional conception of happiness. The Buddha tells us that happiness, as we ordinarily conceive of it, is an illusion. True happiness cannot be found in possessing things or satisfying our cravings. Rather, it involves an abiding sense of fullness and inner peace, an inner serenity that does not depend upon our life circumstances. If I see things as they really are, I will cling to nothing. Material things flow in and out of my life. So do people. My body will eventually die and decompose. Life ends. This is just how things are. Happiness is the natural expression of understanding, *really* understanding, that all things are impermanent. The Buddha was once asked whether he could sum up his teaching in a single sentence. He replied that he could, and that this was “Cling to nothing.”³

³ *Majjhima Nikāya* 37. For discussion, see Bhikkhu (1994), p. 15.

2. Better to be a Renunciant

If happiness is a state of “desirelessness,” then there are two ways in which we might reach this state. One would be to fulfill all our desires. Another would be to abandon our desires, to become renunciants. We have seen that, for reasons deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy, the first way is a dead end. What about the second?

If you desire something, there are two possible outcomes. Either your desire will be satisfied or it will not be. If your desire is unsatisfied, clearly you would have been better off if you had never had the desire to begin with. But suppose that it is satisfied. Are you better off in this case? That is, are you better off as a result of having a satisfied desire than you would have been if you had never had the desire to begin with? If not, then you would be better off if you could rid yourself altogether of desires. That is, you would be better off as a renunciant.

In one sense of the term, we can’t “desire” something if we already have it. I might desire a new home or a new car; I might want to be handsome or brilliant; I might want to play the piano, or to speak French, or to be a marathon runner. These are things I might desire, but only if I experience them as things that are missing in my life, as things that I lack. Understood in this way, accompanying any desire is a sense of *dissatisfaction*. To satisfy a desire is simply to alleviate this sense of dissatisfaction. Satisfying a desire is like quenching a thirst, and this is precisely how desire is understood in Buddhism. The Pāli term is *taṇhā*, which also translates as “thirst” or “craving.”

Understood in this way, having a desire is like having an addiction. Smoking a cigarette alleviates the craving for a cigarette, but it does not enhance the quality of a smoker’s life. Ignoring the health risks of a tobacco habit, smokers are not better off than non-smokers because they satisfy more cravings. They would be better off without these cravings. And, in general, the satisfaction of a desire doesn’t add anything to our lives; it simply fills a void. If the ideal state of being is a state of “fullness,” and if satisfying a desire simply amounts to filling a void, then clearly we are no better off as a result of having a desire satisfied than we would have been if we never had the desire.

According to this account, the satisfaction of a desire is not a genuine benefit; it does not enhance the quality of our lives. It might be compared to recovering from an illness. It is good to recover from an illness, but it is better never to be sick. The ideal state of being is to be healthy, and recovering from an illness is a good

thing only because it restores us to that state. The satisfaction of a desire is a good thing in exactly the same way: it restores us to health, to tranquility, to fullness.

This is not obviously true, however, for it certainly seems that there is more to the satisfaction of a desire than the alleviation of dissatisfaction. It is an enjoyable experience to drink when you're thirsty and to eat when you're hungry. If you never experienced thirst or hunger, you would never have these enjoyments. Don't these enjoyments enhance the quality of your life? It is said that Diogenes of Sinope, the stoic philosopher, would deliberately prolong his experience of hunger and thirst so that he could more fully appreciate the joys of eating and drinking. Other stoic philosophers have advised us to voluntarily endure certain discomforts (such as being cold and wet) so that we might better appreciate simple comforts (such as being warm and dry).⁴

On reflection, though, this is rather queer advice. Should I deliberately catch a cold so that, once I recover, I can better appreciate having good health? Should I bash my hand with a hammer so that I can experience a pleasant state of relief when the pain subsides? This would be irrational because, on balance, I would gain nothing. After recovering from an illness, I might well appreciate having good health, and the experience of appreciation is a pleasant one. But this experience is no more pleasant (and probably much less so) than the experience of illness is unpleasant or painful. Similarly, after the pain of bashing my hand with a hammer subsides, I would experience relief, and the experience of relief is a pleasant one. But this experience is certainly no more pleasant (and, I think, much less pleasant) than the experience of bashing my hand with a hammer is painful. On balance, then, I would be at least as well off (and probably much better off) never to have these unpleasant experiences.

The same is true with the experiences of thirst and hunger. These are unpleasant experiences, and it seems correct to say that the experience of assuaging thirst or hunger is no more pleasant than the experience of thirst or hunger is unpleasant. On balance, then, we are not better off as a result of having these desires. This is not to say, of course, that we would be better off if we never enjoyed the simple pleasures of eating and drinking. Eating and drinking are pleasant experiences in their own right, but the pleasure of enjoying food and drink is something *in addition to* the mere satisfaction of hunger and thirst. It is possible to enjoy things—eating a good meal, listening to music, reading a book,

⁴ For discussion, see Irvine (2009), pp. 112-113.

socializing with friends—even if we never crave them, and it is simply not true that we are better off if we crave them because of how this enhances our appreciation.

This is not to deny that the ability to appreciate things enhances the quality of our lives. But we can appreciate things without previously craving them. Of course, we do sometimes experience *relief* once something we have hoped for comes to pass, and this experience contributes to the appreciation we feel. Suppose, for example, that I have some medical tests run. Naturally, I hope for positive results. If they are, my appreciation would be greatly enhanced by the relief I would experience—something I would not experience if I were indifferent to my test results. This suggests that we are better off having certain desires—specifically, those that enhance our experience of appreciation. We need not, however, pursue this line of reasoning, because we have already seen where it leads. Suppose I learn that my test results are positive. Clearly, I would not be relieved by this news unless I previously worried about the test results. Assuming that the degree of relief I experience is proportional to the depth of my worry, I am not, on balance, better off as a result of having hoped for positive results. Indeed, in all likelihood the momentary relief I experience is nothing by comparison with the anxiety I endured for hours, days, or weeks. If this is right, then I would have been much better off if I had been indifferent to my test results.

To pull together the treads of the argument: If you desire something, there are two possible outcomes. Either the desire will be satisfied or it will not be. In the second case, you would have been better off (if only because of the frustration you experience) if you had never had the desire. On the other hand, if the desire is satisfied, you would be no better off (and quite possibly worse off) than if you never had the desire. The satisfaction of desire does not in itself enhance the quality of your life; it merely restores you to the state of being free from desire. All things considered, then, you are better off if you desire nothing.

As pointed out earlier, this argument presupposes a certain conception of desire. In the sense in which I have been using the term, we cannot “desire” things we already have. Desire is a state of dissatisfaction arising from the sense that there is something missing in our lives. To satisfy a desire is to fill a void and restore a sense of fullness, if only temporarily. This is the meaning of *taṇhā*, which, as pointed out earlier, also translates as “thirst” or “craving.” Yet, in some sense, we can also desire things we already have. I can want my home, my books, my career, my marriage, and countless other things. I can want to be doing exactly

what I am doing—sitting down, listening to music, writing. I can want things to be exactly as they are. In this sense, desire is best understood, not as craving, but as attachment or clinging (*upādāna*). We *crave* the things we don't have but *cling* to the things we do.

Just as it is possible to appreciate something that comes into our lives without previously craving it, it is also possible to appreciate something that we already have without clinging to it. And we're better off if we don't, because attachment is inextricably tied to fear, worry, heartbreak, and other conflictive emotions. I fear the loss of anything I cling to as "I" or "mine." Because I cling to a self, I fear its extinction. Because I cling to life, I fear death. I cling to my family, my material possessions, and my pets. Because of this, I fear losing them. When a loved one dies or a relationship ends, I can be heartbroken. Because I cling to my physical possessions, I worry that they might be stolen, damaged, or destroyed. The loss or destruction of a cherished possession can be a devastating one. It is not just that such losses *occasionally* occur; such losses are *inevitable* because all things are impermanent. Buddhism teaches that it is only by recognizing the three marks of existence—that all things are impermanent, that there is literally nothing to cling to, and that possessing things is not a source of the satisfaction we seek—that we can rid ourselves of the suffering that arises from attachment.

The conclusion we reach is that whether we think of desire as "thirst" (a sense of dissatisfaction arising from the feeling that something is missing in our lives) or as "attachment" (a mental attitude of possessiveness), we are better off without it. Of course, understood in another way, we are never free from desire. Without desires we would never *do* anything because actions are motivated by desires. But we can act without attachment to the goals of our actions and in this way "cling to nothing." I can take a walk with a destination in mind, but I need not be attached to this goal. I can take a walk just to take a walk. And I can relate to every action I undertake in this way: as an end in itself.⁵ Buddhism teaches that happiness does not require that things be the way we *want* them to be. Rather, it is because we *seek* happiness in trying to control things, insisting that things be one way rather than another, that we never find happiness. To cling to nothing can be understood as simply "letting go"—letting things be the way they are without grasping or aversion. There is a very practical reason why we should do this. A fundamental fact about our existence is that we *live* in the present

⁵ The practice of moment-by-moment mindfulness is sometimes presented in this way. See Hanh (1975).

moment, and we can no more alter the present than we can alter the past. The way things are is the way things are. If we are to be happy, then, we must be able to experience it in the present moment; and if to be happy is to be free from dissatisfaction, then we must be able to fully accept the way things are.

3. Happiness and the Good Life

This account, however, is open to a rather obvious objection. David Benatar rightly points out that on the “desire-fulfillment” conception of happiness, there are two ways in which one might reach a state in which all of one’s desires are fulfilled (or in which none of one’s desires is frustrated): (a) having fulfilled whatever desires one has, or (b) having only those desires that will be fulfilled. The problem, he argues, is that on this conception of happiness,

a terrible life could be transformed into a splendid one by expunging desires or by altering what one desires. If, for instance, one came to desire the various features of one’s doleful existence, one’s life would thereby transmute from the miserable to the magnificent. This is hard to swallow. It might *seem* (or feel) as though one’s life had so improved, but it surely would not have been actually so transformed.⁶

In responding to this, we might distinguish between *being happy* and *having a good life*. Certainly one could be *happier* by expunging or altering one’s desires, although this would not necessarily transform one’s “doleful existence” into a *good* life. Suppose I went blind, for example. Presumably, I am better off with sight than I would be without it (if only because the ability to see allows me to have certain kinds of intrinsically valuable experiences that I otherwise could not have). But it is certainly possible that I might be just as *happy* even though my life would not be as *good* if I went blind. If I accepted my situation, if I did not experience blindness as a deprivation, if I was not frustrated because of it, then I would be just as happy even though my life would not be as good as it was previously. Certainly, blind people may be just as happy as anyone else even if their lives are in some ways not as good.

Some writers distinguish between two senses of “happiness.”⁷ In one sense,

⁶ Benatar (2006), p. 80.

⁷ See Haybron (2011).

to describe someone as happy is to make a value judgment; it is to say that that person has a *good* life, a *valuable* life, a life *worth* living. This is the sense in which “happiness” is often understood by philosophers. But in another sense, “happiness” refers to a psychological state (one that is roughly the opposite of depression). This is the sense in which “happiness” is understood by psychologists; and it is, I believe, the sense in which the term (or the Pāli equivalent, *sukha*) was understood by the Buddha. In this sense, to describe someone as happy is not to make a value judgment about that person or about that person’s life (no more than to describe someone as depressed is to make a value judgment). Using the term “happiness” in this second, value-neutral sense, what exactly is happiness? How is related to the good life?

On the most simplistic understanding of the concept, happiness (as a psychological state) simply amounts to “feeling good.”⁸ It is how we feel when we receive good news, when we enjoy listening to music or taking long walks, when we fall in love, or when we derive satisfaction from some accomplishment. And certainly this is at least part of what it means to be happy. Happiness is something we experience. There is something that it *feels* like to be happy, and it feels good.

Is happiness, so understood, the ultimate good? At least initially, there is something repellant about the idea that what has supreme value in life is just an emotional state, a mood, or a feeling. How can it be that life, especially human life, has no higher goal than just feeling good? But consider the importance that we *do* attach to feelings. Depression is a feeling, but it can drive people to suicide. Anxiety, terror, embarrassment, humiliation, boredom, shame, and guilt are feelings, but people go to extraordinary lengths to avoid experiencing them. What have you done, for example, to avoid feeling frightened, guilty, ashamed, or humiliated? People become alcoholics or heroin addicts because of how these drugs make them feel. We are naturally drawn to those activities—eating, drinking, sex, reading, creative activities, listening to music—from which we derive pleasure, and we naturally avoid those activities that cause us pain. But pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, bliss and agony, are just feelings. We regard some feelings or emotions as morally good—love and compassion—and others as morally bad—hatred and envy. Why, then, should we think that what has supreme importance in life cannot simply be a feeling?

⁸ For a defense of this account, see Gilbert (2007), Ch. 2.

Buddhism acknowledges that we all seek happiness. But is this the only thing that matters to us? Clearly, there are things other than “feeling good” that are important to us, and are important to us independently of their connection to this affective state. People do sometimes sacrifice their happiness for the sake of other values. For example, I might feel better if I abandoned my family and lived the life of a single man, and yet I might choose to remain with my wife and children. I might devote time to a certain humanitarian cause even though I would be happier if I lived an uninvolved, academic life. It seems clear that there are things other than happiness that matter to us, and matter to us greatly, and may well matter to us *more* than happiness. Happiness is important, but it’s not the only thing that it is important to us, and given that we would sometimes sacrifice our own happiness for the sake of other values, it’s clear that other things don’t matter to us only because they lead to happiness.

And yet we might wonder whether happiness is all that really *does* matter in life. I might sacrifice my happiness for the sake of other values. But if I do this, is my life as good as it otherwise would have been? I might choose to remain with my wife and children even though I would be happier as a single man. If I do this, then remaining with my family is more important *to me* than being happy. Still this doesn’t mean that by staying with my family I have a *good* life, or even a *better* life than I otherwise would have had. It makes perfect sense to say that even though I have the things that matter to me most in life, my life is not as good as it would have been if I had made different choices, because I am not as happy as I otherwise would have been.

Some activities or projects are more worthwhile than others. If we think of life itself as a project, as something we undertake, then it makes sense to say that our lives are worthwhile to the extent that we spend our time engaged in worthwhile activities. Studying history is a more worthwhile activity than watching game shows on television. Creative work is more worthwhile than repetitive, assembly-line work. Discussing philosophy is more worthwhile than gossiping. Moreover, these activities are worthwhile independently of their connection to happiness. Suppose one person spends her time studying history while another person spends her time watching television game shows. Then, other things being equal, the first person has a more worthwhile life, a *better* life, than the second. This is true even if the second person is happier. If only happiness matters, then we would have to say that what makes an activity worthwhile is simply that it is a

means to happiness, and that if two activities are equally a means to happiness, then they are equally worthwhile.

But this clashes with common sense. Happiness is important, and so *some* activities are worthwhile because they lead to happiness. But there are other reasons why an activity may be important. Understanding the nature of things is important, and so time devoted to intellectual pursuits is time well spent. Having good character is important, and so time dedicated to moral development is time well spent. Great art is important, and so time devoted to the production of great art is time well spent.

If this is correct, then it is not at all clear that happiness is even essential to having a good life. If a worthwhile life is a life devoted to worthwhile activities, and if a worthwhile activity need not be one that leads to happiness, then a worthwhile life need not be a happy one. Even if Einstein, Mother Teresa, and Picasso were miserable people, they nonetheless had good lives because they devoted their time to worthwhile projects.

At the same time, that one is unhappy seems to be a *conclusive reason* for saying that one does not have a good life. When people are depressed, we sometimes try to convince them that they have reasons to be happy. And they may have such reasons, but if they are nevertheless unhappy, then clearly something important, something essential to having a good life, is missing. Einstein had good reasons to be happy. But if, despite this, he was miserable, he did not have a good life.

Thus, a complex and somewhat confusing picture takes shape concerning the relationship between happiness and the good life. Clearly, happiness (as a psychological state) is a good thing (just as depression is a bad thing), but one might well question whether it is the only important thing, or the most important thing, in life.

First, it can be argued that happiness is one component of a good life, but not the only one. It seems reasonable to suppose that knowledge, virtue, and caring relationships, for example, are also components of a good life. Happiness might occur as the *result* of “flourishing” as a person, or it might be unrelated to personal growth. Yet, we would not want to say that a slothful, bleak, or impoverished life is a good life so long as one is content with one’s lot. Consider someone—call him Fred—who never leaves his home and has no contact with other people or with the outside world. Fred has a deck of cards and plays solitaire all day long. Clearly, Fred has a bleak existence, and yet he might nevertheless be

happy. Would we want to say, for that reason alone, that Fred has a good life? Certainly we would pity Fred. But why would we pity him if he has a good life?

Second, it can be argued that happiness is not the most important thing in life. For example, it can be argued that it is better to be moral than to be happy when the two conflict, which implies that the moral life is a *better* life than a happy one. If so, then happiness is not the most important thing in life. Or, to explore another line of thought, it might be argued that if you see life for what it is, if you connect with all the pain and suffering in the world, if you acknowledge the inevitability of death, that whatever you might accomplish, however grand or noble, ultimately fades—in short, if you live an “authentic” life without self-deception or delusion, you cannot possibly be happy. And yet, it might reasonably be said, an authentic life is a more worthwhile life, a more meaningful life, a *better* life than a happy one. If this is true, then not only is happiness not a component of a good life, it *conflicts* with other things that matter, and matter more deeply, in life.

Third, even though happiness may not be the most important thing in life, it doesn't follow that that happiness is not essential to having a good life. A deeply moral life might be a *better* life than a shallowly happy life, but this doesn't mean that a moral life is a *good* life. An authentic life might be a *better* life than an inauthentic one, but this doesn't mean that an authentic life is a *good* life. If, as seems reasonable to suppose, one cannot have a truly good life without being happy, and if being happy conflicts with other essential components of a good life, then, as pessimists argue, no life is good.

4. Happiness as Mental Health

Understood as a philosophy of life, is Buddhism a theory of happiness, a theory of the good life, or both?

According to Buddhism, although it is happiness that we seek, because we have a *false* conception of happiness and how it is to be achieved, we suffer. What, then, is happiness *correctly* conceived? Many passages from the canonical literature, such as the one below, suggest that happiness is to be understood as freedom from dissatisfaction, as serenity, tranquility, or inner peace.

Lose your greed for pleasure. See how letting go of the world brings deep tranquility. There is nothing you need hold on to and nothing you need

push away. Live in the present but do not cling to it and then you can go from place to place in peace. There is a state of greed that enters and dominates the individual. But when that greed has gone, it is like a poison leaving a body and death will have no more terror for you.⁹

The fundamental types of control we seek to exercise over our lives are forms of grasping (*lobha*) and aversion (*dosa*). Instinctively, we grasp after some things, trying to pull them into our lives, and avoid other things, trying to push them away. But if we live life without grasping or aversion, without pulling or pushing, then we do not experience life as something we are controlling. We “let go” of life; it just “happens.” We become spectators, observing life’s ups and downs with detachment.

As a philosophy of life, perhaps the most important insight of Buddhism is that genuine happiness is not contingent upon our life circumstances. We can be truly and deeply happy simply by connecting with the present moment without grasping or aversion. Nothing more is required—the right relationship, the right job, the right home, riches, even physical health—than the inner expansiveness of mindfulness. The Buddha himself was described as the happiest of men and capable of “abiding in pleasantness” (*sukhavihāritaro*) for seven days and nights without moving or uttering a word.¹⁰

But this doesn’t mean that all that there is to having a good life is being free from dissatisfaction. If there is more to having a good life than being happy, then Benatar is right to point out that one could not transform a bad life into a good one simply by bringing one’s desires into alignment with the circumstances of one’s life. This is so even though one can transform an unhappy life into a happy one by adjusting one’s desires. To the extent that we do not wish that things were any different from how they are, we are happy. And this is so even if we do not have good lives.

Although happiness might be characterized as freedom from dissatisfaction, there are reasons for thinking that Buddhism involves a richer conception of happiness. Even if happiness is a feeling, it is not *just* a feeling, not even a sense of tranquility. Compare happiness with depression. Depression is a feeling, but it is not *just* a feeling. It is a complex psychological state involving affective,

⁹ *Sutta Nipāta* 5.11. Quoted in Bancroft (2000), p. 70.

¹⁰ *Majjhima Nikāya* 14.

cognitive, and motivational components.¹¹ First of all, there is something that it feels like to be depressed, and it feels bad. This is the affective component of depression (and the one that it is treated by psychotropic drugs, such as Prozac). Second, depressed people see things in ways that confirm or reinforce their dark outlook on life. They have cynical or pessimistic beliefs about themselves, about other people, about the world, and about their life prospects. This is the cognitive component of depression (and the one that is treated by behavioral cognitive therapy). Finally, there is a motivational component to depression, or rather a lack of one. Seriously depressed people are not motivated to do *anything*, not even to get out of bed in the morning, eat or bathe.

The Buddhist conception of happiness can be understood analogously—as a complex psychological state involving affective, cognitive, and motivational components. First, there is something that it feels like to be happy, and it feels good. In Buddhism, this is described as a sense of tranquility (or, negatively, as freedom from frustration, worry, anger, fear and other conflictive emotions). It is, in the Buddha’s words, “like a poison leaving a body.” Second, being happy involves seeing or cognizing things in a certain way, and this means ridding ourselves of delusion and fully appreciating the three characteristic marks of existence. Finally, being happy involves the motivational factors of loving-kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). A genuinely happy person is a caring person and is motivated to promote the happiness of others and to alleviate their suffering. Buddhist practice addresses all three components. The practice of mindfulness (*sati*) addresses the affective component of happiness, fostering a tranquil state of mind.¹² Dharma study addresses the cognitive component of happiness, promoting an understanding of life that sustains this state of being and encourages compassionate engagement. Other meditative practices, such as the “heavenly abodes” (*brahmaviharas*), address the motivational component of happiness, instilling in the practitioner a deep and abiding sense of love and compassion for all sentient beings.¹³

One reason for treating happiness as a psychological state is that this approach does not trivialize certain questions about the importance of happiness. If happiness is, by definition, our highest good, then it is hardly an interesting question as to whether it is worth pursuing. But if happiness is understood as a

¹¹ See Haidt (2006), Ch. 2.

¹² See Gunaratana (1992) and Hanh (1975).

¹³ See Salzberg (1995).

psychological state, we can meaningfully ask: Is happiness a good thing? If so, how does it compare with other goods? Is a happy life necessarily a good life?

Let me close this discussion by briefly addressing these questions from a Buddhist perspective. If my account is correct, then Buddhism conceives of happiness as a psychological state: the state of perfect mental health. Certainly, mental health is a good thing, and so it follows that happiness is a good thing. But it does not necessarily follow that a happy life is a good life, because happiness might come into conflict with other things that matter in life. As mentioned earlier, circumstances may arise in which we should be willing to sacrifice our happiness for the sake of other goods—in particular, for moral goods. I might be happier if I abandoned my family, but this would be the wrong thing to do,¹⁴ and it is more important to do the right thing (or to be a good person) than to be happy. If happiness is nothing more than “feeling good,” this is a real conflict. But if feeling good is only one component of happiness, then the conflict is more apparent than real. Shouldn’t a measure of mental health be the extent to which one *enjoys* doing the right thing? If so, then one never has to choose between happiness (understood as mental health) and virtue, because virtue is a dimension or an expression of happiness. In situations of apparent conflict, one is forced to choose between *pseudo*-happiness and virtue.

Finally, we might wonder whether a happy life is necessarily a good life. Philosophers have variously equated happiness with pleasure, virtue, flourishing, and authenticity, and there is some truth to each of these accounts. Assuming that happiness is essential to the good life, then presumably one is happy *because* one enjoys life, or is virtuous, or flourishes, or lives authentically. It makes sense, though, to reverse this relation and to think of happiness as a state of being that makes it possible to enjoy life, to be virtuous, to flourish, and to live authentically. Depressed people find it impossible to enjoy anything. It’s not that people are depressed because they do not enjoy life; rather, people do not enjoy life because they are depressed. People are not depressed because they are unmotivated to accomplish anything; rather, people lack motivation because they are depressed. Happy people, on the other hand, enjoy life. They are motivated to achieve goals, to flourish, because they embrace life enthusiastically. Yet, they see life for what

¹⁴ It would be wrong for me to abandon my family simply because I thought I would be happier as a single man. According to the legendary account, the aspiring Buddha abandoned his family and took up the life of a wandering ascetic for the purpose of pursuing enlightenment—not for himself, but for the sake of all sentient beings.

it is and acknowledge the inevitability and universality of pain, loss, sickness, old age, and death. They live authentic lives, without delusion. And given this, we might speculate, happier people are also better people because they have a realistic, compassionate outlook. If this is right, then happiness is not the *result* of living a good life; rather it is the *basis* for a good life. That is, happiness is what makes it possible to live life well.

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