

THE WAY TO HAPPINESS

By Tikiri Disanayake

From time immemorial people thought that the highest good or the summum bonum of life was happiness and that the only worthwhile aim was the pursuit of that ideal. This search has continued up to the present day and will in all probability continue down the long passage of time. Man has found that riches and prosperity, gain and success, all vanish and that they are a mere illusion (*maya*). Happiness, therefore, has been considered the Supreme Search and the greatest achievement of life. And consequently all human beings seek happiness and make it a life-long quest. Man rightly believes that he can achieve happiness, but as he pursues it madly, it evades him leaving him discontented. Thus, to many it is only a mirage and an earnest hope. In spite of all their search for it, they are not happy for the most part. We know the cry of misery on all sides.

The ancient Greeks, who believed that happiness is the greatest object of human activity, regarded it to be two-fold higher and lower, positive and negative while Plato considered happiness as consisting of the harmony between the three parts of the soul – reason, spirit and appetite. Aristotle thought that everybody agreed in calling the good, happiness but differed as to what constituted it. According to him, that moral Virtue which involves a control of those desires of a lower nature is conducive to the happiness of all human beings. He taught that happiness consisted in living in accordance with the promptings of the intellect, fulfilling one's intellectual functions as a rational being.

As opposed to Aristotle's assumption that all men considered the good to be happiness, Kant and his followers denied the possibility of its being Supreme good, but agreed that it is only a component part in what constituted the complete good. The adherents of Mills' Utilitarian School of Ethics, however, considered things in the light of their capacity to yield happiness for all. "Happiness", they declared "is the highest good of life," and the welfare of all men was considered to be the standard of right conduct. And that, according to them, is right which afforded more happiness than pain.

In Buddhism, happiness or “*Sukha*” is twofold – that of this world and that of the next and according to Mrs. Rhys Davids applies alike to physical health, material well-being and spiritual beauty”. The natural desire of all living beings, to attain happiness, avoiding pain and sorrow, is fully recognized and justified in Buddhism. According to Buddhism, every human desire is calculated to attain one ultimate end – happiness. Thus, virtuous deeds are considered to be conducive to the happiness both of self and others. Even the appearance of a Buddha is declared to have as its object the teaching of how “*dukkha*” can be avoided, of how the happiness and well-being of all living things can be achieved. Buddhism emphasises the attainment of happiness, here and now, the attainment of Nibbana being merely the result of good action, which in itself is conducive to the attainment of happiness, both here and thereafter. Speaking of good and bad action, the Buddha says: That deed is well done, which being done, one afterwards repents not, and the fruit whereof one reaps with joy and pleasure. But all this is mere mundane happiness. The Buddha declared Nibbana to be the Supreme happiness. All other happy feelings are subordinated to this, but even this Supreme Bliss is achieved by happy ways, that is, by actions which yield happiness.

To be happy, one need not necessarily believe in any religion or philosophy. An ordinary man is concerned more with the practical question of how to be happy than with abstruse philosophical discussions. The utilitarian who believed that happiness is the highest good of life is correct to a very great extent; for, what is life without happiness. Why do we struggle in a mad rush for wealth, fame, success and pleasure, if we do not crave for happiness?

Some religions preach that this world is an ocean of sorrow, and that happiness can be attained in some utopia, in some indefinite future birth! But what the ordinary man is concerned with is not how happiness can be achieved in the next birth, but how he can achieve happiness here and now. Today, man has reached the heights of material advancement and has conquered most of the obstacles set on his path by nature. Thus, today, he has every means of making himself happy if our conception of happiness is true. But the fact that he is unhappy everywhere shows that material well being alone will not give him happiness. What he lacks is a new outlook on life, or a new and true sense of values, a new approach to the vicissitudes of life that befall him in his day to day existence.

Thus, before we try to find out how we can cultivate these qualities in us, we should consider as to what factors make it almost impossible for us to enjoy happiness. “The causes of these various kinds of unhappiness”, says Bertrand Russell “lie partly in the Social System, partly in individual psychology – which of course is itself to a considerable extent a product of the Social System”. Poverty one feels is directly responsible for unhappiness for the most part. This is true only up to a certain point but beyond that it is mere convention and imagination of unthinking people. If mere poverty is instrumental in making us unhappy, then the rich man must necessarily be happy. But this is not so. Alexander Pope, the poet asks, “can wealth give us happiness? Look round and see, what great success what great misery!” Thus, if happiness does not lie in the amassing of wealth or material fortune in what, one may wonder, does it lie? Various events, we think, are conducive to our happiness. But on a close and penetrating scrutiny, one with an unprejudiced mind would realise that happiness or unhappiness lies not in the events themselves, but in the way one feels about them, and reacts towards them. That is why two persons of different temperaments, but under the same circumstances react towards the same event in two different ways. One may become sick of life, while the other may pass it off with a smile. And, if we look at life in the proper way, lack of material wealth to a certain extent may indeed be really instrumental in making us happy, for we have less cause to worry and less cares to attend to. The Buddha says: “No sorrows befall him who has nothing.” This may not necessarily refer to the defilements in one’s mind as explained by the commentators. One feels that that is the very reason why the Buddha spoke so highly of that simple and practicable way of life. “The miseries of the World” says Swami Vivekananda “cannot be cured by physical help only. Until man’s nature changes, these physical needs will always arise, and miseries will always be felt. And no amount of physical help will cure them completely. The only solution for this problem is to make mankind pure, let men be pure, and spiritually strong and educated. Then alone will misery cease in the world; not before.” In other words, man should have a constructive outlook on life, without giving way to despair and to various other rash acts at the mere approach of misfortune. And the Buddha too has said: “The wise men never change in face of happiness or sorrow, even as a mountain shakes not, being blown against by fierce gusts of wind.”

Failure may be regarded as one of the most potent causes of unhappiness. As in all calamities, it is not in the failure itself, but in the way one faces it, that one’s happiness or unhappiness lies. The feeling of success will

undoubtedly be greatly instrumental in making one happy, for we desire to see our talents win recognition. But we should not consider that success alone is the main source of happiness. It is only one ingredient of happiness, only up to a certain point, when one passes that, it is not mere success that one aims at, but competitive success as well. And the moment one begins to compete, one is not happy, for, one becomes completely uneasy, and a prey to envy and anxiety, thus making oneself incapable of enjoying true happiness. Here we cannot but be reminded of the words of the Buddha: “Victory, success, causes hatred; the defeated experience sorrow. But happily do the peaceful live, giving up both victory and defeat” (*Dhammapada*). Here the Buddha does not preach a doctrine of non-action. On the contrary he exhorts us to action – action which is free from the competitive element that has victory or defeat as its main issue. One should act one’s part to the best of one’s ability with whole-hearted devotion but free from attachment, for it is our attachment to anything that determines the degree of our happiness or unhappiness in case we succeed or fail.

Envy again is greatly instrumental in making us unhappy. It is in all of us to a certain degree, and man, so long as he remains a prey to it, cannot be happy. Even the Buddha has realized the truth of this assertion when he said: “Happily do we live, benevolent amongst the hateful amidst hateful men, we live benevolent.” Thus, whosoever that wishes to gain happiness should get rid of this undoubtedly deep seated human passion. Fortunately man is endowed with another quality, or to be more correct, another passion which may be regarded as quite the opposite of envy-admiration. This can be cultivated by developing a sense of appreciating the virtues and achievements of other people which is more admirable in itself, and yielding happiness, than jealously gloating over the fortunes of other people better off than oneself.

We should try to avoid comparison at all times for comparison-mindedness is harmful to human happiness as it often leads to envy. In the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha says that there is no subduing (of bad and disturbing thoughts, and hence unhappiness) in the case of one who is given to measuring oneself against others and that *Mana* or comparison should be given up to achieve full control over oneself. Thus, all such comparisons as wondering on the good luck of other people are foolish and futile. And one should never slight one’s abilities and achievements. This inevitably leads to comparison which before long makes one feel inferior, and feeling inferior, one will tend to develop an ill-feeling towards those who seem to be

superior. Thus, one will find it quite impossible to cultivate admiration and almost too ready to feel envious. To get rid of the feeling of envy, therefore, one should dwell less on other people's good fortune, enjoy what pleasure that came one's way, do the work which has to be done and learn to value one's own abilities, cultivating more and more self-reliance.

Even today, in a world of advanced and enlightened ideas convention plays a very important role in determining the happiness and unhappiness of most of us. Very few people can be genuinely happy if their way of life and outlook on the world are not favourably looked upon by the rest of the world, especially by their close friends and relations. "One should," says Bertrand Russell "respect public opinion in so far as is necessary to avoid starvation and to keep out of prison, but anything that goes beyond this, is voluntary submission to an unnecessary tyranny, and is likely to interfere with happiness in all kinds of ways." Most of us do things and ultimately fall in trouble, merely because we do things which are quite alien to our in born states, but which we consider would win us the respect and recognition of our associates. People should not be deliberate eccentrics and turn a deaf ear to public opinion. But they should follow their natural desires and tastes, so long as they are not a set-back to society. Happiness lies in reason and not in convention. Thus we should not cherish that fear of fear of public opinion which keeps us bound to convention and thereby to unhappiness.

Like every other kind of fear, the fear of public opinion too, is a source of unhappiness and keeps us away from that mental calm which is indispensable in gaining happiness, one's happiness depends on one's reason, tastes and desire, and not on those of others who happen to be one's acquaintances, or even one's relations. Subordination of one's tastes to those of another is obviously painful. It brings worry in its train, and ultimately unhappiness. But one should not be crestfallen at the idea that one is given to worry. It can be most easily overcome by a new approach to the problems that worry us, based on a better understanding of life. A little more mental restraint would also be greatly instrumental in overcoming it. The Buddha holds that the Bhikkhu who is restrained in every way is freed from all sorrow. This exhortation holds good equally well to all others. Besides, most of the so-called "worries" are really not worthwhile troubling about, and are mostly due to a false sense of importance attached to them. Even those worries which one thinks are insurmountable will often vanish away with the passage of time, making us wonder as to what made them seem so very necessary for the attainment of happiness at that time.

What most of us term “happiness” today is not happiness but pleasure. But, even though we confuse the two, there is an essential difference between pleasure and happiness. Pleasure is temporary, fleeting and evanescent. We have it now, and is gone the very next moment. But happiness is more fixed and lasting. Happiness is the end, the goal of life, for which, pleasure at its very best can only be a means, a potential pathway. We should not, therefore, pursue pleasure to the exclusion of everything else. The pleasure-hunter is never happy, for happiness is a state of mind in which satisfaction and contentment play a very important role.

Happiness cannot be attained by any direct means. “It is the by-product of a contented serviceable life”, the supreme reward or doing perfectly what one is suited to do. Thus, we should not go in search of happiness, for, unlike pleasure, it is not a relative feeling. It is only a state of mind, which can be attained even within one’s own home, environment and every day activities and in the adoption of a right attitude of mind, that is, to use the Buddhist terminology, in the development of right views and right thoughts. Thus, happiness lies within us. What is necessary is to awaken the dormant feeling of happiness which depends more upon oneself than upon external circumstances. The latter may tend to affect us, and interfere with us in our activities. But we can be the masters of ourselves. “One is the master of one’s own self,” proclaimed the Buddha. Who can be the master of another? Thus, granted the absolute essential for our existence, such as food, clothing and shelter, we ought to be able to enjoy happiness, in face of all other obstacles, and calamities which obstruct our path to happiness. We must be able to get the better of everything that befalls us. Nothing can disturb our inner calm and serenity, except in the way we allow it. Thus in almost all cases it is not the events themselves but our mental reactions to them that decide our happiness and unhappiness. The Buddha has said that the mind is the forerunner of all conditioned things, and that the mind is supreme and everything is mind-made. The maintenance of this balanced state of mind which is very necessary for the realisation of happiness has been the chief aim and the main tenet of the ancient stoic school of philosophy.

“The stoic” says Dr. Miller, “sat unmoved, while the heavens crashed, tranquil and content in the citadel of his own complacency.” But he became an extremist. And extremism in any form is not to be recommended. What is needed is only a calm and tranquil outlook on life. Thus while the Buddha maintains that the calm life in happiness the Bhagavad Gita (whose doctrines

often tally quite well with those of Buddhism) tells us, “Supreme joy comes to this yogin whose mind is peaceful, whose passionate nature is calmed.”

We should, therefore, try to get rid of self-centred passions such as fear, envy etc. which tend to destroy our inner calm. Moreover the man whose thoughts are perpetually directed on himself loses all other interests in life, which alone can lessen the boredom of our days. And consequently, such a man undergoes untold misery, from the sameness of the object of this attention. The best antidote against this state of mind is to cultivate a hobby and to be interested in as many things as are necessary to make our life one of variety and entertainment. Variety is the very fountain-head of life and the man who is interested in many things has more opportunities to be happy than the man whose only interest is the care of his own self.

Happiness lies in giving and not in getting. “He who has destroyed craving” said the Buddha “has overcome all sorrow”.

But this does not mean that we should not have any desire to better ourselves. The Buddha never meant that. What we should do is to act without attachment. The surest key to open the door of happiness is this unselfish service. The Buddha himself was a great advocate of loving ministry unto others. This is amply manifested in the various occasions at which he waited upon sick people ministering unto their needs. Our greatest happiness, therefore, lies in an attempt to make others happy, a mission the Buddha undertook two thousand five hundred years ago. We have certain obligation to our fellow human beings, certain duties to be performed towards them. Let us not forget that. Let us always perform the duty, both to others as well as to ourselves. Expecting no rewards, let us perform it without attachment thereto, for the mere sake of doing something contributes to the happiness of others. If we do this, happiness, the goal of life would be ours. No event in life however much disastrous it may seem to be, can disturb our happiness, which is inner strength and wisdom, attained by unselfish service and right thought in upheavals of one’s day to day existence.

May you find the strength, courage and determination to live in accordance with the dynamic message of the Buddha.

May you all be well and happy.

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