

## Happiness, Skillful Actions, and Good Morality

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to answer the simple question: what is the concept of happiness according to Buddhism? How significant are the skilful actions linked to good morality to produce happiness, and how do the unskilful actions performed by a clouded mind cause unhappiness. Those who are at peace in the present moment might feel a glimpse of happiness just by reading the current sentences. On the other hand, those who are not at ease right now might wish to dispel their uneasiness right away. What are the elements that contribute to our happiness according to Buddhism? Human life aims to find happiness and avoid suffering. Many people in our society and spiritual leaders have laid down many ways to happiness, but nowadays, humans wonder what true happiness is. We want to attain happiness, but many times we behave in the opposite direction. If we can understand the essence of happiness, then the chance to realize it will require little effort.*

### Keywords

Happiness; well-being; skilful actions; good morality; affliction



## I. Introduction

Psychologists assert that happiness is an emotion experienced by a human being [Kalat, 2008]. Lomas [2018], in *Translating Happiness*, says that positive psychology has investigated two primary forms of well-being: hedonic (subjective) and eudaimonia (psychological). Husthouse & Pettigrove [2016] show that eudaimonia means happiness or flourishing and occasionally in contrast with Hedonic, which is the act of pursuing pleasure devotedly.

Eudaimonia is a state when others or individuals feel satisfied with their work. Satisfaction gives rise to inner calm and personal satisfaction that lead to feeling happy about life [Massingam, 2019]. On the contrary, in a study, according to Nahra [2014], the Greatest Happiness Principle emphasized the so-called epistemological argument, which claims that leaving people to do whatever their want even might cause harm to themselves.

Japanese has a term *amae* (甘え) to describe people's emotion, and this term is translated as "the pleasant feeling of depending on someone else" or "feeling of comfort in another person's acceptance." The Japanese believe to a certain extent that people from different cultures also have a similar emotional experience, such as *amae*, but fail to recognize it [Kalat, 2008].

Yu [2020] shows that spiritual exercise can nourish the art of living, according to Zhuangzi. The satisfaction, good flow of life, or lasting happiness can be achieved by manifesting Dao and cultivating virtue. Good character consists of both private and public actions. The knowledge about the good character for sure is not enough, but one should

desire the good and aid by virtue which is indeed the act of good character [Van de Ven, 2019].

In Buddhism, Sukha is the term that has been translated as well-being or happiness [Pali Text Society, 1993]. Kalupahana [2006] examines many Buddhist scriptures and finds out that the word 'sukha' means that "having a good axle hole," thus, a chariot can run smoothly without constraint.

## **II. Review of Literature**

The specific topic of this research paper is happiness, skilful actions, and good morality. A literature review is most suitable for identifying relevant theories, summaries, and explanations to analyze and narrow down the relevant topic in academic books and journal articles.

Personality and character development patterns must be carried out systematically and continuously by involving aspects of knowledge, feelings, and actions. Character education can also be instilled, both in the family, community, and school. The most ideal foundation in character education is the values of faith and piety (Siregar et al, 2020).

Many prior pieces of research have been done related to the topic and in order to deepen and sharpen the subject in the context of Buddhism. There are several steps involved in the research as adapted from Maci & McEvoy [2016]:

### **2.1. Develop the Tools of Argumentation**

The central topic of the research is happiness according to Buddhism. The researcher has built six arguments to form a logical conclusion. How skilful actions and morality are related to happiness, and how unskilful actions cause unhappiness. The concept of happiness recorded in Buddhist scriptures was very enlightening, but there were few researchers who used them as a reference point.

### **2.2 Search the Literature**

This is the step to compile all information related by searching for relevant sources. This step needs a list of keywords or synonyms associated with the main topic and provide the most substantial evidence to support the arguments. Nowadays, most sources are available in electronic versions, such as electronic books, journals, and articles that search engines such as Google.

### **2.3 Survey the Literature**

The data has been collected mainly in electronic versions. To build strong evidence, the data are logically organized and assembled according to their similarity. The most crucial task is to construct defensible findings by observing the pattern of the data.

### **2.4 Critique the Literature**

This is a step to interpret the finding from the previous step. A temporary conclusion will be made to form stronger arguments and factual and implicative reasoning. The critique is to reframe the main idea included fallacies.

### III. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1. Happiness and Good Morality

**(1) On the positive side, the concept of happiness in Buddhism is closely linked to good morality.** Buddha mentioned about two forms of happiness in his discourses, the first is material happiness (*āmisa-sukha*), and the second is spiritual happiness (*nirāmisa-sukha*). Material happiness is the happiness derived from the satisfaction or feeling of the five physical senses that is why it becomes identical to desires happiness (*kāma-sukha*). Generally speaking, feeling refers to pleasant (*sukha*), unpleasant (*dukkha*), and neutral (*Adukkhamasukha*).

There was a conversation between Buddha and Anathapindika about four types of happiness that a householder can acquire; the happiness of ownership means he owns a legitimate wealth by using his effort and initiative. The happiness of using his wealth for making merits. The happiness of having no debts, either large or small. The happiness of blameless conduct by way of body, speech, and mind. When he reflects on these conditions, he is filled with pleasure and happiness [*Ānaṇyasutta*, 2018].

Material happiness can be achieved; for example, if one receives a Christmas gift, the smile arises from the face, the gesture can show material happiness. The so-called worldly happiness is also attainable by general practitioners, such as living a life without hatred, sickness, longing, being content, abandoning a view about victory and defeat, and having a peaceful mind.

Concerning spiritual happiness, Thich Nhat Hanh mentioned that the practice of stopping (*Samatha*) is crucial, especially to stop our mind by using in-breath and out-breath. When our minds are present, peace and happiness are always with us [Thich, 2009]. The happiness that can be realized here and now is also mentioned in *Sallekha Sutta*, *Diṭṭhadhammasukhavihārā* (現法樂住; Pinyin: xiàn fǎ le zhù), which is translated as “abiding in ease here-now.” The term *sukha* is being translated as “ease” [*Sallekhasutta*, 2017].

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings from the Community of Interbeing using a similar term which is “Dwelling happily in the present moment,” realizing that that real happiness depends primarily on the mental attitude rather than an external condition, the happiness in here and now can be achieved by simply remembering that all of us already have more than enough conditions to be happy [Thich, 2018].

The scientist named Matthieu Ricard [2006] the 'world's happiest man' because he participated in a 12-year brain study on meditation and compassion; a neuroscientist led the research from the University of Wisconsin. Meditation and compassion are, indeed, spiritual happiness. Durable happiness is a skill, a way of being that requires sustained effort in developing human qualities such as mindfulness, altruistic love, and inner peace through mind training.

**(2) The good morality that is free from the three poisons, namely hatred, greed, and ignorance.** It is undeniable that in the context of medical science, poison is any substance that causes illness or even death. The mental state that is free from those three poisons is considered as the supporting factor for well-being.

The term in Pali, *kusala*, is being used to describe good morality or sometimes wholesome activities. *Kusala* has its roots connected to the good qualities of the mind, such as loving-kindness, compassion, forgiveness, etcetera. Buddhagosa [2017] in *Atthasālinī* stated that “*kusala* (moral) means of good health, faultless, skilful, and productive of happy sentient results.” Harvey [2011] mentioned there are four connotations to *Kusala*, which are:

1. Arogya (mental states which contain those conditions which support mental health and produce a stable mind),
2. Anavajja (factors which render the mind clean and clear),
3. Kosalasambhuta (mental states which are based on the understanding of truth),
4. Sukhavipaka (rewarded by well-being. The sense of well-being or happiness arises when kusala manifests in our minds).

### 3.2. The Three Poisons and the root of all afflictions

**(3) On the negative side, the three poisons indeed are the root of all afflictions.** All actions will bear unwholesome results as long as they are rooted in the mental state of greed, hatred, and ignorance. Any deed that comes up from greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and ignorance (moha) are unskillful, blameworthy, results in suffering [Paṭhamanidānasutta, 2018].

Buddha gives an example to Rahula in Ambalattika-rahulovada Sutta [2018] (Majjhima Nikaya I:414), saying that anyone without shame at telling a deliberate lie would lose their integrity. The ability to reflect on our speech is crucial; if repeated reflection on any bodily, verbally, and mentally actions that will cause afflictions, painful results, then it is not a worthy action.

People earn their living by doing business, and they often do not realize that the driven force, such as greed, is endlessly making a more significant amount of profit. They end up lying and, without hesitation, doing other unwholesome actions; of course, they earn a considerable profit. Still, one day, when the customer finds out the truth, it will cause a bad reputation for the seller, and they might fail to maintain their business.

Once, Buddha was being asked how to ascertain whether spiritual teaching is true. The Buddha advice that one should check whether the particular teachings are skillful or wholesome (kusala), blameless (anavajja), praised by the wise (vinnuppasattha), and when put into practice, are conducive to happiness — using the last criterion to transform greed to non-greed, hate to non-hate, and ignorance into non-ignorance [Sāḷhasutta, 2017].

**(4) The root of afflictions is the mental states that cloud the mind.** Gyaltsen [2009] says that unwholesome actions started with this kind of disposition, such as anger, frustration, depression, anxiety, etc.; these states obscured the clarity of mind.

### 3.3. Actions of body, speech, and mind

To free ourselves from all lamentation, one must be mindful of their speech, well-controlled minds and avoid evil bodily actions [Kodhavagga, 2017]. The medium of human action of body, speech, and mind are called the three doors [Rinchen, 2006]. The term door is self-explanatory; it is an entrance through which one enters or leaves a room or building; it applies to either skillful or unskillful actions.

Buddha draws a comparison to a mirror to show the similarity of the power of reflection to body, verbal, or mental action. One should give up unskillful actions and choose to continue skillful actions instead [Ambalattika-rahulovada Sutta, 2006].

**(5) The concept of skillful actions is those associated with our happiness free from three poisons and do not cloud the mind.** The mind plays a significant role in human life. As stated in the Dhammapada [2013]:

“The mind precedes all phenomena,  
Created by the mind,  
And have the mind as their master.  
If one speaks or acts with a pure mind,  
Happiness follows as an ever-present shadow.” [P. 1].

An ever-present shadow seemed to illustrate the acts or speech with a pure mind accurately; then, happiness will always be by our side. The mind is paramount; that is why training the mind is considered very important.

The best-known moral guidance in Buddhism is the five precepts, sometimes it also being translated into virtuous conduct. The fourth precept concerning the door of speech is avoiding false speech (musavada) or rephrased positively truthful speech [Lomas, 2018].

The community of Plum Village leads by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, has revised the Five Precepts into a modern, updated, and secular guideline for an ethical life. The precepts are aligned with the practice of mindfulness. That is why it's called mindfulness training, the form may be different, but the essence is the same. The fourth precept has been rephrased into "Deep Listening and Loving Speech [Thich, 2013].

**(6) The concept of unskilful actions as those performed by a clouded mind and which cause unhappiness.** The dialogue between the king of Madhura, Avantiputta, and Mahakaccayana, as recorded in "Madhurasutta" [2018], giving an example; if a man from any caste has committed unskilful actions such as stealing, then for sure the king will either kill, ruin, or banish that person. The motive behind the robbery can be varied due to greediness or hatred, or ignorance.

### 3.4. Virtuous Friends

Dīghajāṇusutta [2018] (AN 8.54) mentioned four things that lead to the welfare and happiness of a householder: Accomplishment in the initiative, protection, good friendship, and balanced finances. How good company leads to happiness?

A virtuous friend (Kalyanamitra) shares ethical values and pursues the highest goal of awakening. When one associate with such a friend who is mature in conduct, have rational faith, noble thoughts, clear thinking, having good moral conduct, self-control, generosity, conquest hindrances, and gaining insight for liberation, these qualities will water the good seed in a person [Soni & Khantipalo, 2006].

There are four drains on wealth mentioned in the same scripture above: womanizing, drinking, gambling, and having bad friends, companions, and associates. By avoiding these four drains, our actions will lead to the welfare and happiness of a respectable person in this life.

## IV. Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I would like to give a summary of my points as below:

- 1) On the positive side, the concept of happiness in Buddhism is closely linked to good morality.
- 2) Good morality is free from the three poisons.
- 3) On the negative side, the three poisons indeed are the root of all afflictions.
- 4) The root of afflictions is the mental states that cloud the mind.
- 5) The concept of skilful actions is those associated with our happiness free from three poisons and do not cloud the mind.
- 6) The concept of unskilful actions as those performed by a clouded mind and which cause unhappiness.

Therefore, the concept of happiness in Buddhism is based on skilful actions of body, speech, and mind linked to good morality; on the contrary, unskilful actions performed by clouded mind cause unhappiness.

## Postscript

The concept of happiness has been an enormous discussion for thousands of years. Eudemonia is a unique term from Greek, which means happiness, flourishing, or well-being. The facial expression shows people's emotions to a certain extent. This is how positive psychology tries to explain different kinds of human feelings. Buddhism has a specific way of defining the concept of happiness. The term "sukha" has been translated as happiness or ease—the state of being ease related closely to skilful actions (kusala).

A mind that is free from three poisons (greed, hatred, and ignorance) is pure, that is the state of mind that is conducive for growing loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karuṇā), joy (muditā), equanimity (upekkhā) and other wholesome mental disposition. A mind clouded by the three poisons will naturally lead to an unwholesome mental disposition, which causes unhappiness.

The way we consume through our sense impressions such as eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body can either strengthen or weaken the three poisons in us. The mind is paramount, and I believe that the fundamental practice of mindfulness (sati) and clear comprehension (sampajāna) give us the power to choose consciously.

The other important element is having a virtuous friend on the path to support each other along the path to the highest happiness, extinguishing the fire of greed, hatred, and ignorance, attain the final goal of Buddhism, that is, Nirvana.

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