

Happiness is Transient:

There are moments of contentment in our lives; moments of pleasure and joy. So also there are periods when disasters, disappointment, grief, pain, depression, loneliness, resentment, the feeling that there could be something better (why me? syndrome) happen. Our transient happiness depends on things happening in and around us, a certain way, but is unsustainable and not dependent on conditions.

Buddhist teachings provide ways to find this perfect and lasting happiness. To find your way out of suffering, one needs to confront your own roots of unhappiness (resistance and craving); elimination of these would lead to happiness. If you make changes to be happier, through devoting your focus and the energy to it you can achieve this. This needs determination to overcome harmful thoughts and habits.

What happiness is:

The desire to be happy has been there forever. Nevertheless, happiness always escapes us. We often seek sensual pleasures, such as eating tasty food or watching a fun movie, contemplating that, those mundane activities would bring happiness to us. It may bring happiness transiently, but there is happiness beyond the fleeting enjoyment of a pleasurable experience.

These enjoyable sources (five-e senses and material) of happiness have limitations. Throughout the world, many people live with hunger; their basic needs for food and water, and clothing and shelter are unmet, and endure constant threat of violence and misery. Based on the materialistic benefits, many people believe that increased physical comfort and wealth will bring them lasting happiness. In most countries, the unequal distribution of wealth pushes many into poverty. In fact, the gap between the poor and the rich is expanding, while the middle-class is being squeezed. People assume that since the standard of living of the wealthy and the city-dwellers are high, these well-to do folks must be very happy; but it is not the case.

Although wealthy or powerful people may have everything, yet, most of them are still unhappy. Moreover, they are puzzled by this, not knowing what to do. So, they continue to seek more materialistic pleasures, assuming that these would bring them the happiness that they are seeking for. In spite of having loving families, good jobs, high-class homes, plenty of money, comfortable vehicles, they are not feeling happy. Unfortunately, possessions, social status, power, recognition, friends and family, and pleasurable experiences would not necessarily make people happy. In fact, the more one has, the more you try to protect them from others, and worries would only escalate.

The sources of happiness:

It seems that the very things that we think should make people happy, sometimes are the sources that lead to misery; because none of these is sustainable. Relationships end, health and the investments fail, people lose their jobs, kids grow up and move away, and the sense of power and glamour fades away, and pleasant experiences do not last. Nothing is permanent; change is all around us.

It is a paradox one needs to understand that the more possessions we have, the greater our possibility for unhappiness. People today are ever more sophisticated in their needs and demands, but no matter how many expensive, sophisticated, and beautiful things they collect, they want more (i.e., increasing the greed). The modern culture and the media unfortunately, reinforce our greed.

More the clinging, lesser the happiness:

Wealth, power, status, or fame does not make a person happy. Materialistic happiness is short lived. Whereas, the happiness cultivated in a person's mind, through noble thoughts, and righteous, generous, and compassionate behavior will last longer.

The Buddha categorized almost everything that most of us consider 'happiness' into the lowest category. He called it the 'happiness of sensual pleasures.' We could call it the 'happiness of favorable conditions' or the 'happiness of clinging'; invariably these are transient (just like seeing a movie). It includes all the momentary worldly happiness derived from sense indulgence, physical pleasure, and material satisfaction. These include, the happiness of possessing wealth, nice clothes, a new car, or a pleasing home; the enjoyment that comes from seeing beautiful things, listening to good music, eating good food, and enjoying pleasant conversations; the satisfaction of being skilled in painting, playing the piano, and the like; and the happiness that comes from sharing a warm family life.

Happiness of sensual pleasures:

The lowest form of indulgence in pleasure is from any of the five physical senses. Overindulgence of these can lead to immorality, addiction, corruption, and destruction of self and others. Indulging through five-senses would not lead to real happiness. Arising transient pleasure disappears soon, and may leave people with a feeling of regret.

As one matures spiritually, we begin to understand that there is more to life than pleasure through the five senses. Day to day, **worldly happiness** includes the joys of reading, watching a good movie, and other forms of mental stimulation or entertainment. It also

includes the wholesome joys of this world such as helping people, maintaining a stable family and raising children, earning an honest living, and helping those who are (all living beings) in need.

The Buddha mentioned a few of these more satisfying forms of happiness, (A) the happy and secure feeling you get from possessing wealth earned through honest, hard work. You enjoy the rightfully acquired wealth with a clear conscience and no fear of abuse or revenge; (B) happiness derived when one is completely free of any kind of obligations and debts to anyone (*Vol. 2 of the Anguttara Nikaya, part 7, chapter 2*); (C) satisfaction when one enjoys his or her wealth that is earned honestly, when sharing with others.

Most of us view these things as the essence of a good life, but **these depend on conditions being right**. Though less fleeting than the transient pleasures of sensual indulgence and less potentially destructive to long-term happiness; these too are unstable. The more we trust them, seek them, and try to hang (cling) on to them, the more we become unsecure and suffer. These efforts will generate more pain and mental agitations leading to futility; conditions inevitably will change—nothing is permanent. No matter what we do, our hearts will break.

Higher sources of happiness

The spiritual happiness that comes from seeking something beyond worldly pleasures is the “happiness of renunciation.” The pleasure comes from getting rid of worldly concerns and seeking solitude in peaceful surroundings, to pursue spiritual development. The happiness that comes from prayer, religious rituals, and religious inspiration (albeit not a part of authentic Buddhist teachings or practices) is also part of this category. In part because these will facilitate in keeping the mind in the present moment and aid in decrease defilements.

Another powerful form of renunciation is generosity. Sharing what we have with no expectation of returns, make us feel happy. In addition, there is a sense of pleasure and relief every time we let go, which decreases our mental burden. If we can let go completely of our clinging to things in the world, then this relinquishment will bring more happiness than occasional acts of renunciation.

Another form of happiness is generated through letting go of mental irritants. This kind of happiness arises naturally when we work and develop our minds, letting go of anger, desire, attachment, jealousy, pride, and other mental irritations, as they occur. Avoiding

such mental baggage harboring in the mind is a great relief. Preventing generation and accumulation of bad thoughts and frustrations would allow the mind to become free, joyful, and clear.

The highest source of happiness:

The highest happiness is achieved through attaining enlightenment. With each stage of our progress, our life's burdens are lightened, and we feel happy and free. The final stage of enlightenment, permanent freedom from all negative states of mind brings uninterrupted, sublime sustained happiness. Letting go of our attachments to lower forms of happiness, and focus our efforts on obtaining the highest form of happiness, is the path to enlightenment.

For those of us who cannot see beyond the happiness based on the sense pleasures, the Buddha offered wise advice for avoiding worldly troubles and for finding optimal worldly happiness; cultivating qualities leading to material success or a satisfying family life. For those with the higher ambition to be reborn in blissful realms, He explained how to accomplish that goal. For those who are interested in reaching the highest goal of enlightenment, He taught the path on how to achieve it—the Eightfold Noble Path.

The trap of unhappiness:

The Buddha illustrated that the relentless search for happiness in pleasurable worldly conditions traps us in an endless cycle of “cause and effect,” attraction and aversion. Each thought, word, and deed is a cause that leads to an effect, which in turn becomes a cause. Pointing out how the cycle of unhappiness works, the Buddha said: *“Because of feeling, there is craving; as a result of craving, there is pursuit; with pursuit, there is gain; in dependence upon gain, there is decision-making; with decision-making, there are desire and lust, which lead to attachment; attachment creates possessiveness, which leads to stinginess; in dependence upon stinginess, there is safeguarding; and because of safeguarding, various evil, unwholesome phenomena [arise]—conflicts, quarrels, insulting speech, and falsehoods”* (Sutta 15 of the Digha Nikaya). We all experience various versions of this each day.

Cravings and our mind:

Once craving arises in the mind, selfish and stingy behavior is inevitable. In our drive for small sensual pleasures, we may act rudely and risk making an enemy. When the craving is for something major, such as someone else's valuables or an adulterous sexual contact, the stakes are much higher, and serious violence and endless suffering may result.

If we can reverse this cycle, starting from our negative behavior and moving backward step by step to its emotional and mental “root causes,” we may be able to eliminate our unhappiness (root causes) from our minds, at its source. It only makes sense that when our cravings, inner chatter, and grasping is wiped out, happiness would manifest automatically. We may have no idea how to accomplish such a feat, but when we recognize what we have to do, we have already started the journey to happiness.