

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

A Buddhist View of the Skill of Happiness

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There are 3 types of Buddhist practices: ethical practice, meditational practice, and wisdom practice, which is essentially intellectual practice. Wisdom practice combines with meditational practice and ethical practice to become transformational, but it is intellectual. So, in that sense, Buddhism is a cognitive science. Wisdom practice is also the one that is universally agreed upon within Buddhism to be that third of the Buddhist practice that leads to liberation from suffering, which of course is Buddhism's main aim. Meditation by itself cannot do that. Ethics by itself cannot do that. Only wisdom can lead to liberation from suffering.

Therefore, because of the cognitive aspect, Buddhism is essentially science in a way. Religions are founded by prophets who usually go out in the desert with a problem and eventually meet God or a goddess or somebody. That God then tells the prophet to go out and spread a particular message. The prophet tells the people to believe so that they will be saved from suffering, because God has the power to save them. In this regard, Buddha was a huge disappointment to everybody. He went out to look for God, as well as everything else—he looked to discover the nature of the world. He actually found God, which Westerners don't realize. However, unlike Moses, who received orders from God through his burning-bush conversation, the Buddha didn't listen. He said, "Why should I do that?" He dialogued with God. He was like a scientist. He queried God about

how the world worked and found God unable to explain it. During this "dialogue," God finally admitted that He didn't really make it, was not really in control of it, and didn't actually know what to do with it Himself.¹ The Buddha then went to Brahma, the creator of God in the Indian culture, who encouraged him. Buddha looked into his own mind; he looked into the universe, the atoms, the subatomic energies, the trees, the plants, animals, life, biology, everything. Then one day he said, "Now I understand" like when a scientist shouts "Eureka!" in his lab late at night after years of struggling. The scientist finally has an insight, and Buddha had this insight. However, he had an insight that any scientist would not normally believe—he understood that his insight encompassed the nature of everything. He knew exactly how atoms worked, how his mind worked, how everything worked.

He said he became what the Indians called a Buddha, which means a totally enlightened being—a being who has become free of all negative affect and who is aware of all things. In other words, according to Buddhist tradition, he was omniscient—not in the way in which every fact in the world is present in some library storage system in the mind, but in the sense of the word *omnivorous*. When we say that someone is omnivorous, we don't mean that he or she ate everything in the world, but that they are ready to eat every type of thing. An enlightened one, a Buddha, can devour whatever he or she turns their mind toward. So we mean omniscient in the sense that people will understand whatever they turn their mind toward. The

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Buddha also said he understood that it was not necessary to know every fish in the ocean, but that what we need to understand as human beings is how we suffer and why, and how to free ourselves from that suffering. That's essentially the core of Buddhist teaching.

The idea of happiness as a skill is a description of Buddhism, because the Buddha was the person in ancient times who said that we can have the happiness we want as human beings. He said he had discovered nirvana. However, he didn't say that nirvana is some abstract thing that one can find later or that we're going to build after 1,000 years of history and more machines and more research. He said nirvana is reality if one understands reality—if you know what is here, you will know that this is nirvana.

Unfortunately, when we think that what is here is our world as we understand it through our egocentric delusions, then we are in the opposite of nirvana. This is being in a total state of suffering. From this idea, Buddha got a bad reputation of teaching misery. But the Buddha only said that the unenlightened life is suffering. By "unenlightened," what does Buddha mean? Most of us—except those few who might be enlightened—think we are the main person wherever we are. We almost can't help ourselves. You are the only one that you're sure is actually here. The rest of us might be some sort of matrix delusion, but you know that you are here, and you are very real to yourself.

If Buddha had said that the way we are wired is the only way we could be wired, then he would have only had the first noble truth, that we are unenlightened and will therefore suffer inevitably. He called worldly happiness, or happiness that is dependent on temporary circumstance, the suffering of change. Because worldly happiness changes, it doesn't last; and since it's addictive and you need more and more of it, it is not real happiness. Real happiness comes out of the nature of reality. Real happiness is the awareness of nirvana, according to the Buddhists. Real happiness is realizing that one's deeper reality, one's self, like the subatomic energies of the universe, is in fact happiness. Therefore, real happiness is not dependent on some circumstantial situation. In Buddha's view, the ultimate reality of the world was nirvana. Buddha had discovered that as human beings, we are capable of regulating the things that emerge out of the basic negative structure of the egocentric mentality, which are those negative affects, those negative emotions. Because if I am here versus everyone and everything else, then I am going to be greedy for more things to make the *I* feel bigger so that I don't feel overwhelmed. I am going to be angry as I see the universe coming to take things away from me. I am going to be jealous of those who have things that I think I should have, and I am going to be proud when I think I've got something that they don't have. Those affects and emotions are going to keep me constantly dependent upon what happens outside of my

control. Since I can't regulate my inner reactions to these things, I am going to be a basket case. Of course, there are some medications that I can resort to to palliate that suffering, but they won't cure it, and then I will be dead, and that won't solve it either, from the Buddhist point of view.

The idea that you at least have a negative nirvana (pure oblivion, pure anesthesia) is extremely attractive, but if it was that simple, Buddha would not have bothered with all of this affect regulation. The good news is that you don't have to have that negative nirvana. Bliss is the nature of the universe if we understand it—and we are capable of understanding it—and that is the only way we are going to obtain freedom and real happiness. According to Buddhism, the skill of happiness cannot be achieved by belief; it can be achieved only by understanding. Again, real happiness cannot be achieved by meditation alone because one can meditate negative affects upon negative affects and become more and more freaked out, more and more angry, and more and more miserable. In fact, you can meditate hatred and get to where hatred will enable you to blissfully cancel your life and become incredibly dangerous, violent, and difficult. Meditation has to be directed, and what directs meditation is understanding.

Buddhism is primarily a cognitive science and an art of cognitive self-regulation. Therefore, what is an art of other-regulation? An art of other-regulation is education. So Buddhism is ultimately an educational movement rather than a religious movement. According to tradition, Buddha basically said something to the effect of, "Oh, I know everything, but believing that I do will not necessarily help any of you. So go ahead and doubt everything that I say. All I ask is that you investigate your own experience and your own reality; you will begin to experience yourself differently. I am suggesting that if you find that it doesn't work, then drop it." That is how the Buddha proceeded—empirically, scientifically, educationally—because his concern was how to develop our own understanding because, again, it is only through that understanding that we can find freedom from suffering, that we can find happiness.

When I decided to come back to academia after being a Buddhist monk, it was an easy transition for me because Tibetan Buddhist Monks and Indian Buddhist Monks are not sitting and praying all of the time. They are studying, learning, and even debating. There are 2 different levels of wisdom: wisdom born of learning and wisdom born of critical analysis, which is generated privately in the mind during meditation by generating it in public through debating. Monks believe that you can't develop a very intense awareness that will be critical of your own deluded convictions unless you expose those convictions in public and have others criticize you in a non-lethal, combative way. You are shown the aspect of your view that you didn't see, and by being critically engaged with others in a debate, you learn to debate within your own mind.

Then you learn to peel away those layers of your own deluded convictions, where you can come down to a deeper and deeper dogma-free, conviction-free, theory-free, concept-free experience of your own deeper reality. You are essentially peeling apart the layers of cognitive mis-structure that are the source of negative affect.

The training of compassion is very important, although we have to realize that compassion is defined fundamentally as a reaction to the suffering of others. Therefore, when you empathize with another person, that empathy is normally regarded as motherly love or the love of a lover, as in when the beloved suffers or when the infant suffers. The compassionate person feels empathy with that suffering and wants to free the other person from that suffering. The other side of the coin in the definition of compassion is that the compassionate person wants the beloved, either the infant or relative or an actual lover, to be happy. For the Buddhists, love is not defined as desire for the beloved. It's defined as desire for the happiness of the other person. Compassion is the desire for the other person to be free from suffering. Therefore, object-less compassion is the highest form of compassion and it isn't really object-less in a way. In fact, this compassion takes all beings as its object. Hence, one could say that the only gateway to object-less compassion is wisdom. Again, object-less compassion is a natural reflex of an enlightened person. Enlightenment means that a person becomes selfless. Object-less compassion is the antidote to what I described earlier, where you are enclosed in your own self-center and the universe is somehow opposed to you.

Ultimately, in the long run, you get crushed by the universe. You can't oppose it. So you suffer when you're enclosed in yourself versus all the others. Enlightenment is attained when you realize that that structure of self-versus-the-universe is deluded. This isn't realized by believing that you don't exist—that's another way of putting it that's misunderstood. That will just make you a nihilist. Selflessness means that I do not exist in any ultimate way or real way, apart from my relativity within the universe. That's a shift from being an absolute separated self (a self-absolutizing self, as we say in Buddhist psychology) versus an absolute other universe, to being a relational self, totally interrelated with the universe. Most of us logically know that we are integrally related to everything, especially modern people who think that the soul or the self is nothingness, that in essence we're nothing and our mind is only our brain. So we are ready for this analytic idea that, as material entities, we are totally interrelated with everything.

From the Buddhist psychological view, however, we do not viscerally feel that way. When someone steps on our toes or says something unforgivable, what often rises out of us is "I won't stand for that." It comes out in speech,

in movement, in expression. All of that is based on the sense that there is an absolute me in there that has absolute parameters. When we see our way through that self-image, by investigating ourselves and dealing with the fact that we can't find any such thing when we look really hard, we must go further than Descartes did. Remember, Descartes rejected everything as himself—*res extensa* (the physical world)—his body, mind, and brain. But then he thought that his subjective-thinking agent was still there because he was even doubting that he was there. Descartes wasn't philosophizing when he went to sleep, so I don't know why he didn't think he could get rid of it, but he didn't have a Zen master to give him a whack. Otherwise, he would have realized that he could have definitely gotten rid of that. He thought it was an absolute, as we all do.

So we have to go beyond that, and when we do go beyond that in wisdom-critical meditation, we achieve an experience known as the "realization of selflessness" where the self becomes "transparent." Instead of feeling like you are this absolute thing, you become like something that is etched on glass and you see through yourself, through your whole genetic makeup, your ancestors, your whole culture and history, your society, and as the Buddhist would say, your "whole karma and beginningless future existences." You actually back into an infinite regression. Once you have viscerally experienced this transparency, this regression, your relationship to the universe radically changes in the following way: if you are nothing but the nexus of interconnection between all other beings and there is nothing that is ultimately separate that is you, then there's really no real difference between you and others. There is only a conventional or practical difference, and therefore your feeling of empathy with others arises naturally in you. It's just like when we really love someone, or a mother loves her child, or someone loves a dear friend. When someone cuts a finger as he or she chops an onion, or when someone burns him- or herself, everybody around that person involuntarily jumps. Our imaginations are working, and we get a jolt of adrenaline so that we practically feel it ourselves. That's empathy. Now if you realize that selflessness, the transparency of the self, then others' feelings of pain become almost indistinguishable from your own.

In Buddhist literature, people argue with the teachers of universal compassion and say, "I hate to feel my own headaches and pains and anxieties and worries. I couldn't bear to feel those of everyone else, so don't ask me to develop compassion." Although selflessness enables us to experience the pains, anxieties, and worries of others, we have a broader vision that allows us to bear them, as well as our own, because we have tapped into the nature of reality, which is like an ocean of bliss. Therefore, while we're totally sympathetic and empathic to others' pain, based on their delusions, we also can feel it more deeply. Their selves

know that they are not suffering in *samsara* (the eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth). Their atoms know they are not suffering in *samsara*. Their mentality is all tortured and twisted around things that they are having an awful time separating from the universe, but they aren't really like that. Not only can the Buddhas in these people bear this empathic experience, it doesn't bother their delight. They are still totally happy. They are completely engaged in helping the other being not suffer because they feel they are not suffering. If we feel for other beings in that way, we're naturally moved to help them.

There are various levels of compassion. The first level is the compassion where we see other beings suffering and believe in their suffering. We believe in their view of their own suffering and want to help. Buddhists consider this a false compassion. They call it "sentimental compassion." It has the motive of wanting to help, but is completely ineffectual because we're believing in their suffering and are therefore suffering as much as they are, so we can't help them. The more open one's self-image is, the more relaxed, flexible, and resilient the self-image is, the more our happiness is not dependent on this or that external circumstance but simply wells up from within. Then we feel real compassion because we know that others are suffering when they don't feel that way, and we know what they really need. They need to open their external being to feel their own inner happiness rise within them.

So the first level of real compassion is compassion combined with the wisdom of impermanence. The reason why this is an effective compassion is that it regards everything as momentary and constantly transforming and therefore doesn't believe the other's deluded sense that their compassion is an absolute. You know that when you've broken your leg or had something terrible happen to you, when you're experiencing real pain, or when you're really agonizing, suffering, or grieving, it's as if you're the only one in the world who's suffering, right? Someone tells you it's okay, and you get mad and say, "Don't tell me it's okay! I'm more miserable; no one was ever miserable like me."

However, when one who knows impermanence sees you suffering, he or she is very sympathetic but knows that you're going to change. Therefore, you don't completely shut down their happiness, so they have some bliss to send to you through action or through mind. They have compassion for you since there's some hope of removing your suffering because they know what your suffering isn't. That form of compassion is called the "compassion that perceives beings," which is combined with the wisdom of impermanence. The second level of real compassion is called the "compassion that perceives events or processes" and is combined with the wisdom of personal selflessness. You have had the experience of challenging your absolute self-sense and you've had the experience

of your "face falling off" (as they say in Zen), in which your persona or mask of your own self-image has been released. You realize you are more than whatever your self-image was, so your "face falls off." Then you don't believe in your deluded sense of self-image being the one that is suffering, so you see more deeply your potential for freedom because you are free of your rigid personality as you understand it.

The third and highest level of compassion is one called "objectless or unconditional or non-perceiving, universal compassion." This compassion is combined with the wisdom of emptiness, where it doesn't even consider the being's contortions as a process because it sees through everything, and all it sees is bliss. I always refer to the movie, *The Matrix*, because it teaches that what you think is a real world is actually a mind-constructed delusion, although it has to be computer-constructed to be believable within the terms of our materialist culture. That objectless universal compassion actually does see beings; it sees all beings, but it sees *through* them at the same time. This compassion realizes that these beings are a matrix product—a product of delusion, as separated, suffering, tortured beings. Universal compassion, therefore, sees beings as waves in an ocean of bliss. That is why Buddhism is so powerful and indomitable. It provides so many effective methods, activities, and educations to help people relieve themselves from their suffering.

How can these 2 traditions of science ("inner sciences," as known by the Indians and Buddhists, and "physical sciences" as known by the Western world)—psychology in a way is both—work together? I think they work together in the context of education, not just in therapy, which is concerned with returning abnormal to normal and doesn't really address the issue of what is "normal" in a militaristic society with the threat of nuclear annihilation hanging over everyone's heads, and how normal it is to adapt to such a society. On the other hand, there is an idea in history that human beings have the ability to be happy and that by being happy they are not even afraid of death and will not inflict violence or unhappiness on others. Naturally, they won't do this because that would be inflicting it on themselves. Our educational tradition should be aligned with our scientific tradition, both in terms of research as well as therapy, and they should work together.

Reference

1. Kevaddha Sutta. In: *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Maurice Walshe, trans. Boston, Mass: Wisdom Publications; 1995.