

A truly purposeful life

The National University of Singapore Business School, in a recent survey, found that Singaporeans with university degrees or earn S\$5000 or more a month are the happiest. Yet they are unhappy with their lot and enjoy life the least, compared to others who make less money.

This unhappiness, says the Straits Times editorial of the Sunday Times (17 January 2010) “could stem from their higher, unfulfilled expectations.” The high-incomers probably define their happiness as having fine food, fancy cars and fabulous homes. But this kind of happiness is only physical and external and, as such, very limited.

These “successful” high-incomers are generally dissatisfied and unhappy probably because they keep measuring themselves against others. Other people may be perceived to be “happy,” but in reality they, too, have their own issues.

Moreover, happiness is not a regular event like one’s work, meals, or toilet, and one’s circumstances often change. The point is that we are unlikely to be really happy if we define our happiness by others’ standards; for, it is a form of emotional dependence.

Many thinking Buddhists would also say that happiness has to do with our purpose in life. But first, we need to understand what “purpose” here really means. If there is any purpose in life, I would say that it is to grow. Understandably, this does not mean merely growing old, ending in death, as this happens whether we wish it or not. A very important purpose of life, in fact, must be to grow up, that is, to grow spiritually.

To grow in the spirit is to understand at least two important things. First, it has to do with happiness, which for our present purpose can be said to be a feeling of interconnectedness with everyone (especially those we love) and with everything around us.

Secondly, growing spiritually means that we see the physical world and material things are only means to an end, and not ends in themselves. Money, for example, is what money buys. What we buy or keep should be guided by necessity and wisdom.

An effective way of living happily is to have a wholesome purpose-driven life. Such a purpose can be merely instrumental (such as working hard to be able to bring happiness to those we love) or intrinsic, that is, being passionate about what we believe in and do. An intrinsic purpose of life must be a wholesome one because we enjoy doing it for itself. Not only are we happy doing it, but it benefits others, too.

We can never be truly happy by ourselves while others around us suffer; that is, if we are really wholesome beings capable of being moved by goodness and compassion. In this sense, we can be happy by being devoted to something bigger than our self.

This sense of something bigger than our self is naturally something that transcends the notion of a personal self. We first need to understand or at least accept that any notion of self is merely a limiting construct, a wall to keep others out of our lives. We begin to break down this cold wall by doing something as simple as giving up a seat in a train to someone who needs it more, or something more difficult such as switching off our phones in a study class and giving our undivided attention and respect to another (the teacher or speaker), or something much bigger like doing beneficial social work.

For me that bigger-than-self task is the Sutta Discovery translation work which I always look forward to after my daily duties of parenting, teaching and counselling have been done. It is a joyful adventure I always look forward to. And then there is the joy of teaching these Suttas to a Dharma-moved audience. And to know that there are others who are studying or teaching these Suttas themselves. For, this is the on-going education of our Buddhist community for their happy future.

My wife Ratna enjoys working with our children's school's parents' association, getting more parents, involved in their children's education and the school itself. She is also a very compassionate and effective mentor of ex-inmates from the Boys' and Girls' Homes. She is simply happy to see her mentees grow and progress happily. In fact, she is so good that she has been commended by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

Yet, we all know that such happiness is the fleeting by-product of doing what we are good at, and enjoying it. We also know that this happiness is the fruit of a deeper happiness in the Buddha's Teachings of emotional independence.

Emotional independence means that our view of success, our happiness, is not dependent on other's praises, nor from financial gains, nor status and titles, nor fame. To be emotionally independent means to see our own inner joyful stillness, especially through the Buddha's methods of mental cultivation.

The Buddha's methods of mind-training bring us true happiness that is the profound peace and joy of the aloneness of our still mind. This spiritual aloneness not only dispels worldly loneliness (which arises through lack of inner peace), but also empowers us abandon our self-centredness, superstitions (dependence on succour from external sources), and self-doubt (that we *can* liberate ourselves from evil and suffering through our own efforts). This in fact is the first step on the path to awakening.

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