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MINDFULNESS IN PRACTICE

Mindfulness of Happiness

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According to the Dalai Lama (1999), all sentient beings seek to be happy and not suffer. Clearly, however, a lot of people fall short of achieving this. Based on current research, in spite of global wealth increasing, happiness is declining, although not evenly across countries (Sachs, 2017). In this paper, we offer reflections on happiness from a contemplative viewpoint, including discussing how certain ways of seeking and relating to happiness can result in suffering. We then advocate the merits of moving beyond dualistic notions such as happiness and suffering, as well as outline contemplative principles that can facilitate such a shift in perspective.

Defining Happiness

As a modern global society, we are very good at defining and categorising phenomena. Perhaps this is because we feel reassured when we believe we understand how a given phenomenon works, particularly regarding how it might enhance or impede our ability to function on this earth. But a problem with such categorisation is that it invariably leads to a restrictive view, because if we decide that something is "this", it can make us less receptive to the idea that it can also become "that".

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Our personal view is that it's generally advantageous to remain open to the idea that a phenomenon can become "this" and "that". Or at the very least, it's helpful to try to see a given phenomenon in its entirety, understanding that whatever physical, psychological or spiritual constructs manifest to our perception, they are an expression of a much greater whole (Van Gordon et al., 2017).

A good way to think of how phenomena exist is like waves on the ocean. Waves can take on many different shapes and sizes. There can be small waves, big waves, curling waves, crashing waves, waves that subside before they have fully emerged, waves that gently lap the shore, and waves that engulf the land with tremendous force. But of course, each wave is just a surface expression of the larger ocean from which it emerges. Also, the wave exists for only a brief period, meaning that at one moment it can be gathering momentum and emerging into existence, while in the next moment it has already began to dissipate into the ocean.

Happiness is like this also as it is just one expression of a wider ocean of emotional energy that exists within each of us. Of course, there exist many definitions of happiness, each emphasising different attributes or life conditions that must be met for happiness to arise. For example, happiness is typically linked to well-being, a sense of meaning in life and contentment (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Happiness can be seen as a state, a trait, and an aggregation of emotional reactions over time (Kim-Prieto et al., 2005). Many researchers distinguish between hedonic happiness which is linked to achievement, resource acquisition and elevated positive affect in contrast to eudaimonic happiness, that is linked to a sense of meaning and a feeling we can make a contribution to life (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

However, if one subscribes to the view that happiness is an emotion (Goldman, 2017), then in truth, only a hair's breadth of difference separates it from sadness, or from any other emotional state, such as joy, fear, worry or excitement. A good way to think of emotions is like a child's cut-out-lampshade that projects different shapes onto the ceiling or wall as the lampshade changes orientation. While the child may see different images moving across the room, they are all emitted by a single light bulb. In other words, happiness

and suffering, however we choose to define them, reflect different sides of the same coin — they are both of the texture of consciousness and generate from the same mind and brain. Change the pattern of neuronal firing in the brain and you change the mental state and thus the emotion. How and why a given brain state gives rise to this or that *conscious* feeling, is of course one of the great scientific mysteries.

When we create a notion of happiness, we tend to monitor if we are experiencing it and then strive to cultivate the associated brain states. But since all things are in flux, it is impossible to do this all of the time, meaning that we eventually end up suffering and restart back on the trail of trying to recapture and recreate happiness. We might become self-critical if we cannot create happiness or feel there is something wrong with us or the lives we are living (Gilbert & Choden, 2013). When such self-critical schemas become dominant in the mind, people can even become frightened of being happy (Gilbert et al., 2014).

What we are trying to articulate is that for as long as we relate to happiness as a goal and keep thinking in terms of happiness and sadness, we will remain on a roller coaster of pain and suffering with interluding periods when we feel happy or relatively less sad.

Non-attached Existence

If we accept the assertion of the Buddha that suffering is a mark of existence, what we can try to do is live in a way such that existence does not "mark" us by distorting our clarity of awareness. Of course, this does not mean our bodies and minds will not react to and be changed by our life interactions. Rather, it means cultivating a right view (Pali: *sammā diṭṭhi*) that is not burdened or marked by attachment. The way to do this is to fully relish, enjoy and learn from each moment of our life, but without holding on to anything we experience. Existing with full presence of mind and heart whilst remaining non-attached to existence is the path of an authentic spiritual practitioner (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2021). It is a path that has been walked by those who have allowed their mind to unify with the universal consciousness, regardless of which spiritual or religious modality they may have navigated. It reflects a way of being that is captured nicely by the words of the English poet William Blake: "He who binds to himself a joy does the winged life destroy; But he who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sun rise" (Erdman, 1988, p. 470).

This is also consistent with the advice of the Buddha as recorded in the Maṅgala Sutta (Sutta Nipāta 2.4), which some Buddhist scholars have translated as the discourse on happiness (Nhat Hanh, 2007). According to the Maṅgala Sutta, when the Buddha was asked by a Deva (a type of celestial being) how to live a peaceful and happy life, he replied that we should try to live in the world with your heart undisturbed by the world (Nhat Hanh, 2007).

For reasons of how our minds evolved and function, people find it difficult to allow the present moment to unfold without becoming attached to it, including becoming attached to themselves. Despite the fact that all things are changing all of the time and the fact that all phenomena — like ocean waves — exist only for a short time, we are biologically evolved to want to assign properties of permanence, concreteness and definitude to them (Shonin et al., 2016).

Mistakenly believing that lasting happiness can be cultivated in this manner is basically what is referred to by the following words from the Dvayatanupassana Sutta (Sutta Nipāta 3.12): "Forms, sounds, tastes, scents, bodily contacts and ideas which are agreeable, pleasant and charming, all these, while they last, are deemed to be happiness by the world … But when they cease that is agreed by all to be unsatisfactory … What others call happiness, that the Noble Ones declare to be suffering".

Indeed, it is precisely this propensity for attachment that propels the roller coaster of happiness and suffering referred to above. We experience a form of happiness for as long as we continue to convince ourselves that we have managed to control and concretize a given situation. However, as soon as the situation reaches its inevitable expiry date and disintegrates around us, suffering invariably returns (Van Gordon et al., 2018).

Cultivating an Observing Mind

So how do we step off this roller coaster of happiness and suffering? Actually, we do not need to and, in fact, we cannot step off. But what we can do is take a big psychological and spiritual step back and start to observe the unending oscillation of happy and sad experiences that seem to define our existence. In other words, we stay on the roller coaster, but we allow a part of our awareness to assume the role of an observer mindfully watching from a balcony.

If something happens that gives rise to happiness or other positive feelings, we stop, breathe, sit in stillness on the balcony, and simply observe the experience of happiness as it unfolds inside and around us. And if something happens that gives rise to feelings of sadness or other negative feelings, we do precisely the same thing — breathe, sit in stillness and observe from the balcony, and let the experience unfold whilst participating in it. We relate to the feelings of happiness and sadness in precisely the same way as we relate to whatever situation might have prompted them to arise. Each of these feelings or events is part of the array and succession of occurrences that we observe from the balcony.

Of course, there are likely to be occasions when this practice is hard to do because emotions are very powerful brain states that are designed by evolution to take control of us. At such times, a helpful grounding practice is to deliberately mindfully recall a time when we were happy and sit with that for a while and then do the same for a time when we were sad. In each case, we learn to notice that although these two states appear different and affect us in very different ways, they both have the underlying texture of an emotion and manifest from the same body and brain. By practicing this, we gradually increase our ability to stand back from whatever emotion might be arising and allow emotions to come and go without holding on to them.

A key point to remember with the mindful observer practice is the need to persevere and be consistent. Some people are good at practising when things go well but forget to practise when faced with adversity. Conversely, some people only remember to practise when things are not going their way. But it's only by mindfully observing on a day-in day-out basis, regardless of the weather, that the practice starts to manifest beneficial effects.

By mindfully observing the roller coaster in a consistent manner, we start to understand that if it goes up it will soon come down, and if it goes down it will soon come back up. Because ups lead to downs and downs to ups, the mindful observer gradually becomes less fazed by such undulations and begins to relate to them as more or less the same thing. Indeed, does an incline really begin at the point a decline ends, or could it be said that a given incline on the roller coaster began at the summit preceding the previous decline, or even well before that?

By becoming mindful of the true nature of happiness and suffering, we start to change our relationship with them. They become embodiments of each other such that we no longer see one as better than the other. And then something rather amazing and beautiful starts to happen. As the observing mind becomes more accustomed to viewing the roller coaster of experience in this manner, the inclines and declines become less steep and frequent. The roller coaster gradually evens itself out until the ride becomes smooth and free flowing.

Beyond Accepting and Rejecting

Happiness and suffering arise from changing brain states that are triggered by internal or external events. These changing brain states then give rise to textures of "felt" emotion in consciousness. Our consciousness can be ruled by them or we can learn that we have another faculty of consciousness, which is to "stand back" and become a mindful observer of these changing states. We are "aware that we are aware" of observing the changing textures of emotion, but without being fazed by what we are observing. Coming to an experiential understanding of this happens when we learn to remember and switch to an observing mind mode, whilst still fully participating in life.

As our practice of contemplative awareness progresses, although it might appear that the roller coaster of happiness and suffering has straightened itself out, it turns out it was flat and smooth from the start. Without exception, the emotional undulations were due to our perceptions and were caused by us attaching to and trying to control situations (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015). What this means is that we learn not to fight with our minds to either push away or grasp and try to hold onto that which inevitably cannot be held. This does not mean we become aimless, apathetic or simply drift without reaction. Rather, it's quite the opposite because we become aware of the sources of suffering for people and make every effort to help them become mind aware themselves, rather than ruled and tormented by, the changing states of their brain chemistry. Indeed, a mindful mind that is not grasping after his or her own happiness naturally moves towards working for the benefits of others.

Most human beings have, under guidance, the capacity to awaken to a mode of being and awareness that transcends the dualistic notion of happiness and suffering, as well as transcending subjectivity in terms of what reflects desirable life circumstances (Dalai Lama, 1999). This is a way of being that fully accepts, enjoys and works with whatever is happening, regardless of whether such circumstances are commonly regarded as favourable or arduous. Whatever happens, "good" or "bad", becomes a source of nutrition that feeds and furthers our awareness and wisdom.

At such a point, we still engage with life but we have moved beyond the need to be someone, be somewhere or do something other than allow self-arising compassion to work toward easing others' suffering. We have moved beyond dualistic notions such as "happy and sad" or "this and that". Rather than try to observe the present moment, we have become one with it and let go of the idea of a separate self that needs to observe something that exists outside of us. Existing both as and within the present moment means that we are in constant touch with the universal reality of impermanence. We experience that there is constant transience and that nothing endures, including to the extent that it becomes questionable whether a given phenomenon ever fully crystallises into existence (Van Gordon et al., 2017).

However, it is important to note that this does not mean we are immune to the arising of pain or grief when we lose something or someone dear to us, or that we do not feel joy when something beautiful happens. In fact, such emotions are felt in all their intricacy, rawness and intensity. Yet if we are adequately grounded in our practice, then we understand that just like everything else, these emotions and the people or scenarios to which they relate arise and unfold within the

expanse of our awareness and have no permanent or intrinsically existing basis to their existence.

If we fail to grasp this truth of impermanence and the certainty that everything we are accustomed to will reach a point of disintegration, we will unfortunately miss the essence of mindfulness, and of spiritual practice more generally. Just think of looking in a mirror when we are in our 20s. At that time, we might think we are beautiful and healthy and that we will always remain so. However, when we look in the mirror when in our 80s, it's easy to forget that we were once 20. We have a propensity to think that we are always the same and that nothing changes. But things most certainly change and this can be difficult to accept. It is only through surrendering ourselves to impermanence that there arises a permanence in respect of our ability to access and remain united with the deepest truth of reality. Effectively, the only thing that is permanent is impermanence itself.

Final Thoughts

Buddhism tries to illuminate the illusion of the dance of happiness and suffering, and offer different ways of how to ride the waves of success and tragedy, gaining and losing, and becoming and ending. In the Buddhist position, it's not so much that we pursue happiness but rather that we try to undermine the conditions that cause suffering to arise. We do this by moving beyond dualistic notions of happiness-good and sadness-bad through understanding the true nature of self as a non-independent and interconnected entity. We replace the notion of struggling to achieve or become with learning how to be fully present, tranquil and open in the present moment.

Although you are reading these words on paper or a digital monitor, like all things they are an expression of a much greater whole. Not only do they embody our heartfelt love and compassion for you, but they carry the full wisdom and potency of all spiritual teachers that have ever existed, including those that have never taken form on this earth. We hope that our words penetrate your heart deeply and inspire you to foster a new relationship with suffering and happiness, whereby you can equally embrace both the adversities and triumphs of your life with wonder, humility and unperturbable quietude.

Declarations

The authors declare no competing interests. This is a Mindfulness in Practice article. No ethical approval is required. The preparation of this manuscript did not involve the collection or analysis of any data or the involvement of any human or animal participants. Informed consent is not applicable.

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