

Applied Buddhism

All sentient beings want happiness. This truth is hard to argue. Of course we want other things as well, and we care about the world around us. However, when we really think about it, each individual is motivated to the greatest extent by personal interest – in other words, our mind's intent is on finding happiness. Is there anything wrong with wanting to be happy? Buddhism says no, but along the way, we screw it all up – our actions are not in line with our goal.

There are very few of us who actually become entirely happy, to say nothing of humanity as a whole. There is suffering, disappointment, violence, cruelty, and betrayal everywhere we look. That doesn't mean the opposite is happening too, but they are obviously incomplete. We tend to cultivate negative emotions and there are serious consequences to this. The worst consequence is that our negative emotions harm others. The other tragedy inherent in our negative emotions is that in appealing to these emotions to *find* happiness, those same emotions deny us of the *possibility* of happiness.

Therefore, the challenge is to find the correct causes of happiness and act on these true causes, rather than our negative ones – avoid the negative path. Everything we do and everything we have has a cost attached to it – this is a basic cause and effect relationship.

The problem with finding the right causes of happiness is not in understanding or intelligence – everyone is capable of the righteous path. Everyone can figure out what actions cause suffering, but we never really actively engage in the solutions.

Our mind is flooded with disturbing emotions. In the cultivation of these negative emotions, one can never feel physical or mental peace. The practice of meditation can slowly reduce and then remove the cultivation of such emotions. There are six primary negative/disturbing emotions that cause most of our problems. They are:

1. Ignorance
2. Attachment/Desire
3. Anger
4. Jealousy
5. Pride
6. Avarice

Each of these has a warning attached to it in Sanskrit. Those warnings are translated roughly as follows:

Ignorance – One cannot find true accomplishment – not understanding makes it impossible to achieve.

Attachment/Desire – One will find no time of contentment.

Anger – One will never have harmony within ourselves and with Others. The result is suffering based on disharmony.

Jealousy/Envy – One will not find a time of well-being, peace of mind.

Pride – One will never appreciate others and will never be pleased by (value) anyone else.

Avarice – One will have no time or feeling of plenty. There is a constant feeling that what we have is not enough – anxiety and fear of losing one's things.

At the same time that these six emotions overtake us, there is a subtler undercurrent of negativity that floods the brain – wisps of thought, or a constant low-level negativity directed against the self and others. For example, pride may lead to a distrust of others – no faith that others will fulfill their obligations. Therefore you belittle or disrespect them by treating them as inferiors who need help or need “someone competent” to do things for them. By the way, parents often engage in this behavior and it usually drives their older kids crazy (lack of faith/respect).

What is the source of all this negativity?

The answer is that we have an intense fixation on the self. We are simply self-absorbed. Because of this fixation we have an intense desire for happiness “for ourselves.” Thus, our happiness is more important than the happiness of others. It is this fixation that causes the six negative emotions. For example, anger is a reaction to the thought “this is not good for me.” It is the same with the other five. “I am more important than any other individual.” The greater the fixation, the more pronounced the problem.

This is the source of our failure to find happiness. One cannot accomplish the goal of happiness through a singular concern for the self – which is the elimination of our own suffering. If one can exhaust these six emotions and can end this self-fixation, only through this path may one find true happiness. The elimination of the six emotions means an elimination of suffering. If we can get rid of the primary enemy of self-fixation, our lesser enemies will be healed as well.

How do we achieve this?

Everything we do is directly or indirectly based on the belief that “I am more important than others.” We act based on what is for “my benefit.”

One can say, yes, but I do community service and I volunteer to help others. What is the motivation for such action – is it a pure and selfless concern for the well-being of others, or is it because community service is required to graduate, looks good on a college transcript, can be rewarded by recognition, offers a tax break, or gives you a good feeling within yourself? Is there truly such thing as a selfless act? Perhaps, but the point is we must actively engage our mind to decrease this self-absorption. It can only happen with work and practice. Our way of thought must change to be “what is needed for others?” We still want happiness, but we don’t find it through the self, but we find it by looking out for the happiness of others. This is what the Buddhists define as true love and compassion. This love and compassion is the true path of happiness. We must develop a *true desire* that all people find happiness. Through the process of this mentality shift, our self fixation decreases, thus our negative emotions as well. They are not completely removed, but their effects are less “heavy and sharp.” We learn to control them more easily. Negative emotions make one like ground frozen solid in the winter – bound up with tension and a refusal to yield. With spring comes release and relaxation – one truly breathes.

Here is the method:

Our goals through meditation are to a. See all beings as equal to us, and b. sincerely desire happiness and well being for others. For, all beings are the same. We feel love for a few, indifference to the vast majority, and hostility to another few. We must cultivate a love for all beings equally – even those we despise. This has staggering implications because it is both an enormous task and because it means that to harm another is to harm all, and oneself, equally. It is pure sincerity and this is exceedingly rare.

At first, these thoughts are forced, insincere and contrived. However, as one practices, these thoughts become more and more natural and sincere. It is hard work. However, remember that our body has not always been with our conscious – it is new to us, because we have only had it for this one life, so we can learn to master it.

“The most sublime treasure is contentment.”

We start our practice by settling the mind. To do this, we engage in shamata meditation. This is a meditation of abiding and calmness. The only way to develop love and compassion is to settle the mind first. Shamata meditation is a preliminary meditation. The purpose is to focus and relax. After we do this, we will engage in the meditation of compassion, which is called Tonglen meditation.

EARLY LIFE

NAMED SIDDHARTHA ('HE WHO ATTAINS SUCCESS AND PROSPERITY') BY HIS FATHER, SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA IS PORTRAYED AS A COSSETED AND PROTECTED INFANT, BUT ALSO AS A CHILD WITH EXTRAORDINARY ABILITIES AND UNUSUAL SENSITIVITIES.

Many tales of the Buddha's birth and early life were recorded in the *Lalitavistara Sutra*, a text believed to have been written around the 3rd century CE, some 700 years after his death.

"Legend is often a poetic form of history, and lifts the story to a plane above the accidents of time and place", wrote Christmas Humphreys, founder of Britain's Buddhist Society, in *Buddhism*, published in 1951. He interpreted the Buddha's life as it is presented in the Pali canon and later scriptures as a hagiography (a religious biographical account), a great symbolic story, like that of Jesus Christ or Moses. He believed that the writers of the scriptures were

Below This ancient stone relief depicts the visit of the sage Ashita to the infant Buddha, and his revelation to his parents, Shuddhodana and Mahayama, that their newborn son would become a great leader.



more concerned with conveying the meaning of the big events in the Buddha's life than their chronological accuracy and that their aim was to relate a wider truth than could be told by an accurate historical record. Thus, everything in the Buddha's life may be read as an allegory – "the mystery story", as Christmas Humphreys put it, "of the evolution of man from birth to final attainment".

CHILDHOOD

Five days after Siddhartha's birth, an ascetic and seer called Ashita came down from his mountain retreat to see the child. Renowned for his supernatural gifts, Ashita had already seen many portents of a great event, such as a vision of gods in the sky, around the tenth month of Mahayama's pregnancy. When he saw Siddhartha's body, the sage recognized all the signs of



Above A Nepalese gilded bronze statue of Mahayama, the moment before she gave birth to the Buddha, dating from the 18th century. Seven days after her delivery she died, symbolizing her purity. The young Siddhartha was cared for by her devoted sister.

a *mahapurusha*, or 'Great Man': the 32 major signs – for example, tightly curled hair circling to the right on his head – and the 80 minor signs. Ashita cried to think that he would be gone when Siddhartha began to reveal his wisdom.

Despite the relative modesty of the Sakka state, the Pali chroniclers emphasize Siddhartha's luxurious upbringing and his education in the 64 spiritual arts, as well as in skills such as archery and horsemanship. They also describe his heroic qualities – how as a youth he defeated all in an archery competition and how, during a ceremony, he fell into a deep meditative trance, although he was untrained in meditation.

The young Siddhartha displayed unusual sensitivities. The scriptures highlight his kindness

to animals and recount an incident when he saved a swan that his cruel cousin Devadatta had shot.

Forewarned by the sage Ashita's prediction that Siddhartha might turn to the *shramana* tradition of wandering ascetics and leave the Shakya clan in search of spiritual enlightenment, his father resolved to protect him against life's uglier realities, such as ageing and decay. The scriptures recount that members of the household who fell ill were kept away from Siddhartha, and that gardeners even removed flowers before they began to wilt.

MARRIAGE

At 16, Siddhartha, now of marriageable age, was presented to eligible young women of his clan and won the hand of the desirable Yashodhara by defeating rival suitors in a contest of strength and martial prowess. Siddhartha married Yashodhara and the couple lived in luxury,

THE SEARCH FOR KAPILAVASTU

After the Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini, was rediscovered in 1896, archaeologists, guided by chronicles written in the 5th and 7th centuries by the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang, identified a site 25km (16 miles) west of the village of Tilaukot as Kapilavastu, the place where Siddhartha Gautama grew up.

Excavations led by Dr Robin Coningham and Dr Armin Schmidt of the University of Bradford, England, began in 1997, and the team identified moated fortifications, streets and houses, and found jewellery, toys and pottery shards dating from before the 5th century BCE.

Piprawha, a village 93km (58 miles) south of Lumbini in Uttar Pradesh, India, may have been the site of the old Kapilavastu city, before it was moved, or part of Kapilavastu's territory. Excavations of the site by the Archaeological Survey of India during the 1970s located several stupas and a building some believe to be the palace of Shuddhodana. Like many other places associated with the Buddha's life, the site has become a focus of pilgrimage.

moving their household as the seasons changed among three palaces built for them by Shuddhodana in a vast enclosed park on his estates. Yashodhara later gave birth to a son, Rahula. According to some scriptures, Siddhartha had four wives, of

whom Yashodhara was the second, and was surrounded by sensual pleasures.

Below Drawing a bow was one of the feats Yashodhara's suitors had to accomplish in order to win her hand in marriage.

