The Karma of Happiness

A Buddhist Monk Looks at Positive Psychology

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> *"This is the way leading to wisdom: when visiting an awakened person, to ask …
> 'What, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?'"*
> —*The Buddha,* Majjhima Nikaya 135

By Buddhist standards, Western psychology is just beginning to get wise. After many decades of focusing on mental illness, it has finally spawned a new branch, called positive psychology, focused on what people can do to find long-lasting happiness. But as the above quotation suggests, wisdom doesn't come just from asking the right questions. It also lies in getting the right people in on the discussion.

Although positive psychology draws on research that began several decades ago, it didn't develop into an organized field until the late 1990's, when Martin Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association. Seligman had decided that his tenure in office should have a mission, which was to turn the focus of psychology from the negative to the positive emotions. In doing so, he had to fight a strong undercurrent of beliefs that Western psychology had picked up from some varieties of monotheism: that people are essentially bad, that happiness is less authentic than misery, and that negative motivation can account for all examples of what appears to be virtuous behavior. One measure of Seligman's success in bucking this undercurrent is that there is now a Positive Psychology Network of professors and researchers devoted to the study of happiness around the world. With newfound scientific respectability, happiness research has also spread into related fields such as sociology and economics.

Unlike humanistic psychologists—who also focus on issues of happiness but are largely introspective—positive psychologists actually field questionnaires, run experiments, test their results, and reach empirical conclusions about specific steps that you and I can follow to find greater happiness. But behind the issue of how the experiments are run is the larger issue of who frames the questions that the experiments are supposed to answer. As good social scientists, many positive psychologists have tried to adopt a cross-cultural perspective, drawing on literature from all over the world. Given that Buddhism has been working in this field for more than 2,600 years, you'd think that they might look to the Buddha

to help them frame and suggest answers to their questions, but you'd be wrong. Instead, they draw their framework from Western philosophers—people like Aristotle and Bentham—and then squeeze Buddhism into a very small pigeonhole within the frame.

This is a genuine shame, for the Buddha's teachings have a lot to offer on this topic, both in terms of specific techniques for attaining long-term happiness and in terms of framing the questions that give insight into how happiness actually works and what good it can do. It would be wrong to ask the positive psychologists simply to adopt the Buddha's viewpoint on happiness, for that would go against their experimental method. But there's nothing wrong in asking them to look at the questions the Buddha asked about happiness, to see if those questions would provide the framework for new experiments whose results would add greater consistency and depth to their field. The deeper and more consistent their findings, the more wisdom positive psychologists will have to offer to those of us looking for a happiness that's truly satisfying.

As of yet, positive psychologists lack a consistent theory about happiness. This is clearly evident in Seligman's book, *Authentic Happiness,* his overview of the topic. Trying to tie together the discoveries of positive psychology and provide them with a theoretical foundation, he inadvertently shows how many gaps and unanswered questions still plague the field. As we will see, some knowledge of what the Buddha taught would go a long way toward suggesting how to fill those gaps and answer the questions.

Seligman notes that positive psychology focuses on three issues: positive emotions, positive traits in the human character that can foster those emotions, and positive social institutions that foster positive emotions and traits. In *Authentic Happiness,* he focuses on the emotions and the traits. While recognizing that there are many constraints on each person's potential happiness that lie beyond his or her control, he notes that there are still many sources for lasting happiness that any person can cultivate. These sources boil down to our attitudes toward the past, future, and present.

In terms of the past, positive psychologists have discovered that people are happiest when not plagued with a deterministic view of how the past shapes the present. If you think that your past miseries doom you to a miserable future, that attitude will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you see the potential for dropping and overcoming the miseries of the past, you're more likely to find happiness.

Other helpful attitudes toward the past include gratitude and forgiveness: the ability to appreciate the good things that other people have done for you, and to forgive them for the bad.

As for the future, the attitude most productive of happiness, Seligman says, is optimism: the tendency to see positive events as pervasive and positive traits in

yourself as permanent, while viewing negative events and traits as momentary exceptions to the general rule. This much may seem obvious, but Seligman has devoted many books to showing something less obvious: that optimism is a trait that can be fostered and learned.

It's about how we develop useful attitudes to the present, however, that Seligman has the most to say. He bases his remarks on an important distinction, between pleasure and gratification. Pleasure he defines as delight in the "raw feels" of sensory and emotional experience: ecstasy, thrills, mirth, and comfort. Gratification he defines as the activities in which we become so absorbed that we lose self-consciousness in a strong sense of "flow": the feeling of timeless, effortless control and concentration that can come in the midst of any skill or worthwhile activity that leads to total immersion, such as shooting a basketball, building a cabinet, or playing the violin.

Based on this distinction, Seligman identifies four levels to the happy life.

The first is *the pleasant life,* one in which you can learn to enjoy the pleasant feelings that life has to offer. This, as Seligman points out, provides the lowest level of happiness, for pleasures are fleeting and undependable. The more you indulge in them, the less pleasure they provide, and the greater your craving for new and unusual pleasures grows. Unfortunately, it's at this lowly level that Seligman reserves a place for Buddhist practice, which he sees as a means for being fully present to the pleasures of the present so as to savor them mindfully and fully. It's hard to fault him for this perception, though, as this has been the emphasis of most books peddling what might be called Consumer Buddhism: the effort to sell Buddhist mindfulness techniques to the West by advertising them as a means for consuming the simple pleasures of life—eating raisins, sipping tea—more intensely and with greater presence.

The next stage up is *the good life*, one in which you find gratification in developing skills: finding a sense of flow in whatever you learn to do well, and developing your personal strengths and virtues as a result. Seligman has no role for Buddhism on this level, and this is one point where we can fault him, given the large number of popular writings on meditation as a means for inducing flow.

The next stage up is *the meaningful life,* one in which you gain a sense of purpose and fulfillment in devoting your strengths and virtues to a goal larger than yourself. Here Seligman is at his weakest. Trying to formulate what he thinks is a scientifically respectable ideal for a meaningful life, he comes up with nothing better than the idea of a God toward which the universe is evolving. In developing interactive systems of greater complexity, he says, the cosmos will someday arrive at a system consisting of nothing but win-win games. However, as chaos theory has shown, the more complex the system, the more unstable it is,

and the more likely to break down. And from the personal point of view it's hard to get enthusiastic about working toward an abstract goal whose fruition you won't live to see.

At any rate, the most encompassing level of the happy life, Seligman says, is *the full life,* one in which the pleasant, good, and meaningful are seamlessly combined. In his view, there need be no conflict among the three.

This all sounds very encouraging and empowering, but when you poke around the footnotes of his book, you find that even Seligman has his doubts. To begin with, although he argues that strict determinism is a bad attitude to have toward the past, he is unable to formulate a theory of causality that's scientifically respectable and yet avoids determinism. The best he has to offer is the idea that the *appearance* of free will and unpredictability is, in evolutionary terms, a useful strategy for survival. If we can seem unpredictable enough to fool an enemy with limited knowledge, that's all the free will we need. But, Seligman notes, this does not mean that an omniscient being, knowing all scientific laws, might not be able to predict everything we do. So what he offers is a determinism that looks unpredictable but really isn't. This is hardly an encouraging message for taking your life into your own hands.

As for the future, Seligman notes that optimism is not always the best attitude to maintain, for there are many situations that require great care and a capacity to prepare for the worst. You don't want a beaming optimist to run the check on your airplane before it flies, and you might die if you're overly optimistic as you prepare for a trip to the Alaskan wilds. Thus optimism on its own is hardly a reliable prescription for lasting happiness.

As for the present, even though Seligman asserts that there is no conflict among the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life, he notes that, on any given evening, he is more likely to go for the pleasure of watching a football game than for the gratification of tackling Sandberg's biography of Lincoln. This is not a trivial point. Life is full of choices like this, where we have to choose one form of happiness over another, and all too often we choose the more fleeting pleasure. Any positive psychology worth its salt will have to address this issue head-on.

Finally, and most tellingly, Seligman notes that—given his definitions—you could argue that a serial killer leads a pleasant life, a skilled Mafia hit man leads a good life, and a fanatical terrorist leads a meaningful life. Seligman argues that the moral repugnance we might feel about such ideas is not a disproof of his theory about the happy life; it's simply a sign that the theory is scientific in its moral neutrality. Reading this, though, you realize that Seligman has forgotten his original question: how to create *lasting* happiness. The serial killer, the hit man, and the terrorist may find some measure of happiness in their activities, but

that happiness is not going to last. The way they pursue happiness contains the seeds for its end. And any useful positive psychology, if it wants to understand long-term happiness, will have to ferret out why.

This is precisely where the Buddha's teachings have the most to offer on the question of how to understand and foster a lasting happiness. And the most useful of his teachings in this regard is the one most maligned and misunderstood in Western Buddhism: the teaching on karma, or intentional action. The teaching of karma offers an important perspective on how best to relate not only to the present, but also to the past and future in a way that can make you lastingly happy.

Karma is often understood as the idea that what you experience now comes from what you did in the past, but that's getting it all wrong. The Buddha's teachings on causality are much more complex than that, and in fact resemble chaos theory with their many feedback loops. In their lack of determinism, they resemble the laws describing the nonlinear behavior of chemical systems operating far from equilibrium—systems very similar to the human mind.

What the Buddha taught about karma is this: Your experience of the present moment consists of three things: 1) pleasures and pains resulting from past intentions, 2) present intentions, and 3) pleasures and pains resulting from present intentions. With reference to the question of happiness, this teaching has three main implications.

• The present is not totally shaped by the past. In fact, the most important element shaping your present pleasure or pain is how you fashion, with your intentions in the present, the raw material provided by the past.

• Pleasures and pains don't just come floating by of their own accord. They come from intentions, which are actions. This means that they have their price, in that every action has an impact both on yourself and on others. The less harmful the impact, the lower the price. If your search for happiness is harmful to others, they will fight to undo your happiness. If it's harmful to yourself, your search has failed.

• Your search for pleasure or gratification in the present has an impact not only on the present but also well into the future. If you want a long-term happiness, you have to take into account the way your present actions shape future events. And you have to pay careful attention *now,* for you can't come back from tomorrow to undo any careless mistakes you had made today.

Taken together, these observations about the connection between action and happiness show the need to be skillful in your pursuit of happiness. If you want your happiness to last, you have to look for pleasure, gratification, and meaning in ways that are harmless. You have to carefully choose which skills to develop

that you're sure to need in the future—strengths of character that will enable you to be happy in the midst of aging, illness, separation, and death.

Fortunately, the nature of this connection between actions and their results means that it's possible to develop skill in areas where you're not yet skilled. There's enough of a pattern between actions and results that you can discern the pattern and put it to use. At the same time, because the pattern is not deterministic, you have the freedom to learn and change your ways.

In this way, the Buddha's teachings see a clear connection across past, present, and future as to the best way to pursue happiness. You develop the right attitude toward past mistakes so that you can learn from them. You approach the present as an opportunity to respond skillfully to whatever arises. And you face the future with the confidence that you're developing the full range of skills you need to handle whatever lies in store. Of course, the Buddha's teachings on happiness go beyond this, to a happiness—nirvana—that doesn't depend on actions or intentions, but just this much should be enough to suggest many new avenues of inquiry for positive psychology.

First, with regard to our attitude toward the past, Seligman focuses attention on helpful attitudes toward the good and bad things that other people have done to us. But the Buddha's teachings suggest that it would be more useful to learn positive attitudes toward the good and bad things we have done ourselves. That way we can recognize and appreciate the situations we handled skillfully, and learn from the ones we didn't.

How can people best learn to learn from their mistakes? How can they best learn to live with the things they did, and can't go back and undo? This is an especially important area for psychologists to explore, for in the upcoming years we're facing a flood of psychologically damaged veterans from the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Past experience with Vietnam veterans has shown that the deepest psychological wounds come not from memories of the horrible things that were done to them, but from the horrible things they chose to do in or outside the line of duty. Current psychology is ill-equipped to handle these wounds, and yet the future happiness of our society depends on how we can teach people to relate in healthy ways to past mistakes, learning not to be debilitated by them without at the same time growing so callous and careless that they keep repeating the same mistakes again and again.

Second, with regard to our attitude toward the future: As noted above, Seligman himself admits that optimism is not always the best attitude toward what lies ahead. From a Buddhist point of view, optimism is simply one of a series of useful attitudes to have toward the future. Sometimes confidence is called for, sometimes caution, sometimes obsessive care. What we need is skill in discerning which attitude is most appropriate for which situation and then

putting it into use. Rather than focusing just on teaching optimism, positive psychologists should look into the full range of potentially skillful attitudes and into ways to develop a sense of judgment that can accurately determine which attitude is appropriate when.

And as for the pleasant and good life in the present, the Buddha's actual teachings on the relationship of action and pleasure give the lie to the idea that he simply taught a technique for savoring raisins and tea. When counseling lay people, he taught them to enjoy the pleasant fruits of their labor but never to forget what they had to do in order to experience those pleasures. If what they did was harmful to themselves or others, they should give up the pleasure and abandon that line of action. When counseling monks and nuns, he taught them to reflect on all the labor that went into producing their food—given the miseries of grape pickers, even a raisin isn't a totally harmless pleasure—and to reflect on how they planned to use the strength gained from the nourishment it provided. Only the pleasures of nirvana and *jhana*—meditative absorption—he said, were totally blameless. In other words, the Buddha taught that every pleasure has to be regarded in terms of where it comes from and where it will lead.

This teaching applies to the way we pursue gratification as well, yet to explore this issue would require a massive reorientation for positive psychology. Take, for instance, the research done on gratification and flow. A common assumption is that what you do to induce a sense of flow is purely a personal issue, and ultimately what you do doesn't really matter. What matters is the fact of psychological flow. You're most likely to experience flow wherever you have the skill, and you're most likely to develop skill wherever you have the aptitude, whether it's in music, sport, hunting, meditating, etc. From the Buddha's point of view, however, it really *does* matter what you do to gain gratification, for some skills are more conducive to stable, long-term happiness than others, due to their long-term consequences. Also, they develop a better range of strengths to deal with the vicissitudes of life. It would be useful for positive psychologists to explore this issue: Do people whose skills in life are harmless experience more long-term happiness than those whose skills lead to harm? Is the Buddha right in saying that generosity, moral restraint, and the development of good will are essential to a happy life? Do those who invest their time in developing skills of the mind—mindfulness, concentration, discernment—benefit more over the long term than those who invest in physical skills and strengths? If so, how do we train people to develop these wiser skills if they show little aptitude for them?

This is one area where our current educational system is severely lacking. Students are channeled into areas where they show aptitude, and so are rarely taught the psychological skills needed to work at becoming competent in areas where their original aptitude is weak. As a result, we are becoming a society of

people overdeveloped in one or two areas of life, and atrophied everywhere else, like a bodybuilder with bloated pecs and spindly legs. Positive psychology would do us a great service if it could identify ways to make us more skillful in harmless, productive ways whether we show innate aptitude or not, so that we could all face life with a balanced repertoire of skills.

Finally, on the question of a meaningful life, every Buddhist tradition offers its own take on the larger goals to which we could devote our skills. For Mahayanists, it's working for the salvation of all beings. For Theravadins, it's working to keep the Buddha's teachings alive and intact, available to all. But early Buddhism, with its teachings on karma and the end of karma, points to a vision of happiness that involves deconstructing the very question of meaning. Although this vision of happiness doesn't lend itself to the type of experimentation that positive psychologists engage in, it's useful to keep in mind if only as a reminder that not every happiness can get caught in the net of a scientific theory.

The Buddha's vision is this: Even our sense of self is the result of action. It's a strategy for happiness. Every time we act on a craving, we create at least two selves: the sense of self that identifies with whatever powers we can muster to satisfy that craving, and the self that identifies with the act of consuming the pleasures and gratifications we hope to achieve. Having created these producing and consuming selves, we then forget that they're creations—and that they're multiple. We assume that our self is unitary, a primal "given" in our life, and we wonder what it's for. Is life simply for the pursuit of pleasure and gratification of this self? If so, it's a miserable life, for this self doesn't last very long. So we start looking for a larger meaning to the whole enterprise, and most religions and philosophies are designed to answer that question of meaning.

But instead of trying to answer that question, the Buddha decided to take it apart at the root. What happens if, instead of continuing to produce a sense of self, you learn how to stop? That's the purpose of the teaching on not-self: learning how to uproot attachment to the process of producing a self. And the Buddha found, as a result, that when the mind stops fabricating a self, everything opens to a happiness totally independent of conditions—the one happiness that doesn't depend on actions, doesn't have a price, one so total that no questions have to be asked.

This sort of happiness doesn't lend itself to being tested by the experimental methods of positive psychology or any other branch of psychology. But if psychologists could remain open to the possibility that there's an unadulterated happiness that doesn't fit into their framework of a full or meaningful life, it would serve as a sign that they had become genuinely wise.