

Happy Here and Now

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1. Introduction

- △ Happiness is a hot topic for the world today. Why? Because happiness is fading further away from us, even though our GDP is on the rise. No wonder Bhutan's happiness index has attracted a lot of attention, especially from developed countries like the UK.
- △ Dale Carnegie said, “Happiness has nothing to do with who we are or what we have. It is related to our thinking and perception.”
- △ There was an old lady who cried every day. People in her village called her “the crying old lady”. One day, a wise man passed by. He saw the crying old lady sitting aside crying. He was concerned and asked her the reason of her sadness. She said, “I have two daughters. One married a man who sells umbrellas, the other's husband is selling noodles. During sunny days, I am worried that nobody will buy umbrellas and my elder daughter and her family will have a hard life. During rainy days, I think of my younger daughter. She would have no sun to dry her noodles and not having noodles to sell, the family will suffer in hunger. ” The wise man asked her to think of her younger daughter who will have shining sun to dry much noodles during sunny days, and the elder daughter will sell many umbrellas during rainy days. Both of them are having good lives. After the old lady changed her perception, she became a happy lady.
- △ Thus, happiness is a state of mind. The same situation with different perceptions, will change the outcome. Thus, the association of happiness with the environment is much lower than we recon.
 - We could be happy even we do not possess many. When we were young, simple food and toys made us happy.
 - When we harbour bitterness, happiness will dock elsewhere. If we are not happy, we will bring the feeling with us no matter where we go. We cannot enjoy beautiful scenery or delicious food in an unhappy mood.
- △ The image of the Buddha shows a peaceful smile and downcasted eyes. He does not look outwards to search for happiness. His image reminds us that happiness arises from within and cannot be found from the external environment.

2. Misconceptions:

- △ Many of us are unhappy due to three misconceptions:
 - The first misconception is, “I will be happy if”(things turn out my way). But the grass is always greener at the other side.

- The Buddha says, “This is an imperfect world”. We cannot have all things turn out our way. For example, teenagers have time and energy but no money; working adult have money and energy but no time, because they need to work to service their mortgage, their car loan, and to support their families. Senior citizens have time and money but no energy. This imperfection delays our happiness. This imperfection makes us miserable.
 - There were two monks discussing a visit to Pu Tuo Shan in China, as a pilgrimage to Avalokitesvara (Goddess of Mercy or Guan Yin). One monk started preparing a list of things to take with him. The other monk just took his alms bowl and started his journey right-away . Two years later, he returned with a light heart. His friend was still preparing for his pilgrimage. Is our list of self imposed conditions for happiness equally long?
 - The Buddha said, “our life is between our breaths.” If we keep on delaying our happiness, when could we even dream to have it?
 - The second misconception is “regret for the past”. We always say, “ If I had known better, I should have/have not done it.”
 - Regret for our past actions is another source of unhappiness.
 - A friend's mother passed away in the hospital. He was upset and said, “If I have known this, I shouldn't have sent her to the hospital.”
 - Another friend's father passed away at home. She was upset and said, “If I have known this, I should have sent him to the hospital.”
 - Regret brings tears. It makes us guilty, makes us miserable. It is useless to regret because time is like running water, we cannot touch the same water twice.
 - Third misconception is “worry for the future”. After doing something, we are anxious about the outcome.
 - We are afraid of losing what we have, such as our health, our property, our position and our loved ones.
 - Worry cannot cure our illness. Worry cannot prolong our lives. Worry cannot help recover lost property, position, powers, or loved ones. It can only cause unhappiness and bring fear.
 - Statistics show that out of 100 things we worry about, only 2 or fewer will actually turn out badly. Is it worthwhile worrying?
 - Plan carefully after considering pros and cons. When the decision is made, our job is complete. We do not have to worry or fear for the outcome which is out of our control.
- △ In Bhaddekaratta Sutta, the Buddha taught: “Do not regret the past. Do not worry for the future. The past no longer is. The future has not yet come. Looking deeply

at life as it is in the very here and now, the practitioners live in stability and freedom.”

- Throw away the three misconceptions: “if”, “regret” and “worry”. Never commit and make decision when we are overjoyed or angry. Think twice and act wise. It will save us from later regret for the past and worry about the future. Never delay our happiness waiting for things to turn out our way. Live in the present moment and enjoy everything passing-by. It will bring cheers.

3. Take charge of our own Happiness

^ Happiness is a Choice

- We often look for 5Cs (condo, car, club membership, credit card and cash). But these 5Cs may bring along other undesirable Cs, such as cancer, cardiac problem, crime, etc. In Buddhism, there are 3 Cs which are not accompanied by these undesirable side effects. These 3 Cs are Cause, Choice and Consequence.
- The formula of cause and effect is
$$\text{Karma (Seed) + Conditions (soil, air, sunlight, water, fertilizer etc) = Effect (Fruit)}$$
- We could also rename it as
- Cause + Choices = Consequence
- Cause (karma) is done in the past + choice (condition) is what we can control today = consequence (effect, outcome, our future) which is influenced by the choices we make today.
- The Buddha said, “We are our own masters. We create our own future”.
- Since we are not a puppet of others or the surrounding environment, never depend on others to bestow happiness on us. We decide whether we choose happiness or unhappiness.

^ What are right choices for happiness?

- Smile: Happy people always smile
 - Smile is the cheapest cosmetic that makes us look gorgeous and young. When we smile, 16 wrinkles go upward. But when we are angry 65 wrinkles go downward. If you don't believe, look at yourselves into the mirror, you will discover that a stern face makes you look arrogant and old. But a smiling face makes you look lovely and young.
 - Beside, smile is an universal language for love, favour and happiness, regardless of race, nationality and religion. It is a gift of generosity and encouragement. Do you prefer your boss, spouse, in-law and Bhante to show a stern face or a smiling face when he/she sees you?

- Enjoying rather than owning material wealth
 - Some people say, “Money is not everything but without money you can't do anything.” It is right but many times we can enjoy a lot of things without actually owning them.
 - My friend and her husband own a big house with a tennis court and a swimming pool. But only their maid and driver are enjoying these facilities. Because the owners are very seldom at home. They have to work very hard to pay for the housing loan. Another friend lives with his family in a 3-room HDB flat. He said, “Small place is easy to maintain. Since 4 of us are all working, we only come home in the evening. A bed of 3.5 foot by 6 foot to sleep in is enough for us. When we need to enjoy a big house with luxurious facilities, we normally travel and stay in a five star hotel. In addition, we get to see the world.” No wonder he and his family are happy and often travel.
 - Walking on a well maintained path of a beautiful public park/garden probably makes us happier than owning a big garden which needs painstaking maintenance.
 - Using public transports (with a driver thrown in) is more economical than owning a car with a huge car loan, road tax & ERP. In addition, walking to an MRT station or a bus stop gives us a good exercise.
 - A friend owned many pieces of jewellery which she seldom wore but kept in a bank's safe deposit box. One time, I met her in the bank's safe department when I went to get my certificates for my further study. I saw her wearing her jewellery piece by piece. Looking at each of them for a few minutes. Then put them back in the safe box again. I advised her not to waste money for the safe rental in keeping her unusable old jewellery. Actually, she could try out some new designed jewellery from a goldsmith shop when she felt like to wear any piece of jewellery for only a few minutes.
 - Why don't we choose more leisure time to enjoy things over working overtime to own things?
- Assistance and Appreciation
 - There were two brothers. One was willing to give and the other prefers to receive. They were reborn in a rich family and a beggar family respectively due to their inclination. Thus, the rich man continued to give generously, and the beggar continued to receive handouts from others.

- When we are able to give, we are already rich. We are also happy when we see the receiving party smile. Happiness is like perfume, spray it on others, we will also enjoy the sweet smell.
- A man prayed to have a chance in visiting hell and heaven. A deva answered to his prayer and brought him to visit hell and heaven during their lunch hour. He found that people at both places were eating same type of delicious food and using same type of 3 footed chopsticks. However, the people in hell were angry and quarrelled with one another because they weren't able to feed themselves with the 3 footed chopsticks. While trying to get food to their own mouths, they would poke a neighbour in the nose or eye. And more often than not, the food they had on the chopsticks would be stolen by a neighbour before they could eat it. The people in heaven were happy because they used the same 3 footed chopsticks to feed the person sitting opposite them. There was gratitude and appreciation among them. This story tells us that people who are willing to help and who appreciate others are the happy ones. Those who are selfish and like to complain are often unhappy.
- Thus, the Buddha taught us to appreciate four groups: our parents, our teachers, our nation and all beings. Because our parents bring us up, our teachers teach us knowledge and skills, our nation protects us and all beings contribute to what we are having now. When we have right thoughts, thinking of surrounded by nice people, we are always happy.
- Positive thinking
 - There is a Chinese saying, “One's appearance is a reflection of one's mind.” Because our speech and action are based on our thoughts. A famous Chinese poet and writer Su Dong Po loved to argue with a zen master Fo Yin. Unfortunately he always lost his debate. One day, Su Dong Po visited Master Fo Yin again. He asked Master Fo Yin, “what do I look like to you?” Master Fo Yin smiled and answered immediately, “You look like a Buddha, Mr Su.” Su Tong Po was very happy. Master Fo Yin then asked, “What do I look like to you?” Looking at his yellow robe and cross-leg sitting posture, Su Tong Po answered, “you look like cow-dung.” Master Fo Yin was not angry, instead he smiled. Su Tong Po was very happy and sang his way home. His sister asked him why he was so happy, he said, “This time I won the debate with Master Fo Yin.” “Why?” “Fo Yin said I looked like a Buddha and I said he looked like cow-dung. Of course, a Buddha is much superior to cow-dung. Therefore I won.” “No, this time you are not only losing but have lost badly.” “Why?” “Fo Yin has Buddha in his mind, thus, everything in his eyes is Buddha. But you only have cow-dung in your thoughts that is why you see everything cow-dung.” We better look after our thoughts.

- Positive thinking brings happiness and negative thinking brings anger. A travelling monk visited a respectful Zen Master Wu Xiang. Unfortunately, Master Wu Xiang was out. His disciple, a young monk asked, “ May I help you, sir?” “Oh no, you are too young to discuss Zen with me,” the travelling monk smiled and answered. “Young in age does not equate to lesser wisdom,” said the young monk proudly. “He is quite smart. Let me use hand signs to test him in Zen,” the travelling monk thought.

He pointed to the young monk, then formed a small circle with his fingers in front of his heart. In reply, the young monk formed a big circle with both hands. The travelling monk quickly showed his pointer. The young monks stretched out his five fingers. The travelling monks put up three fingers. In response, the young monk pointed at his own forehead. The travelling monk was very shocked. He knelt down and bowed to the young monk three times and left quickly. He told himself, “I asked him how big his heart was. He used his two hands circle to tell me that his heart could take in the whole universe. I asked him what is the most important practice in Buddhism. He answered five precepts. I asked him where are the three realms (realm of sensual desires, form and formless). He pointed at his forehead to tell me that all are in our mind. Wow, even a young monk has such a good understanding in Zen! The achievement of Master Wu Xiang must be terribly high.” After Master Wu Xiang returned, the young monk reported to him the visit of the travelling monk. He said, “there came a mad monk. I do not know from where he discovered that my family owns a bakery. He asked me whether the donuts sold in our bakery were small. I clarified that our donuts were big. He then questioned how much each donut was sold. I said it costed five cents each. He was unreasonable and bargained for three cents each. I scolded him that he was mad for not able to appreciate good donuts. He was so scared that he bowed to me and left quickly with a smile.” One who sees things in a positive way always ends up with happiness and one with negative thoughts is often unhappy.

- Positive thinking helps us put a stop to our unhappiness especially during adversity. A friend was bedridden for two and a half years. But he was not like other bedridden patients. He was happy everyday. His friends asked him why. He said, “there are so many unfortunate people in this world. They suffer from hunger, from war, from natural disaster, etc. I am so lucky to be able to lie in bed and be served by others. I can practice my lying meditation and silent chanting comfortably without disturbance. It will bring me to a better rebirth. Why should I be unhappy? ” Positive thinking always let us see hope and light at the end of the tunnel. It will help us turn the adversity into a stepping-stone and bring us to a higher ground.
- Ignore negative comments

- Once the Buddha told Ananda, “It is not by worshiping me with flowers or incense that you honour me best. It is through practice, through living in accordance with the Dharma, that you accord me the highest honour. Therefore, those who would follow me should train to live in the way of the Dharma, entering upon the proper way and walking in the Dharma.”
- He also said, “recite the sutras is not better than understanding the sutras, understanding the sutras is not better than practicing the sutras.” Because “understanding it without practising it is like counting someone else's cow but do not own any oneself.” No wonder “when you see the Dharma, you see the Buddha.” It is through practice that we see the Dharma and the Buddha.

4. Conclusion

- △ The Buddha reminded us, our present condition is a result of our past perception, our present perception will determine our future condition. President Lincoln said, “happiness is created by ourselves.” Being a kiasu Singaporean, I want to make sure that I am happy everyday, I decide to create happiness daily.
 - Every morning, when I wake up, I ask myself, “you have two choices today, to be happy or to be unhappy?” Then, I choose to be happy. After that, I go to the bathroom, brush my teeth, then look into the mirror, smile to myself and said, “Hi, ABC, you are very lucky. You did not die in bed last night. You have one more day to be happy and cheer others up”. I wear my smile and start my day with happiness.
 - Every night after I brush my teeth in the bathroom, I look into the mirror, give myself a smile again and say, “Hi, ABC, you are very lucky today, not being knocked down by a vehicle. Now you have time to count how many people you have helped and cheered up today.” After reviewing my practice in the day, I am happy and sleep well.
- △ Researchers told us that an adult would take 14 to 21 days to set up a new thinking habit.
 - One day I went to Mt Vernon crematorium by a taxi. When I saw a new building which I had not seen before, I pet the taxi driver's shoulder but before I asked, “ what is this building?” He left both of his hands from the steering wheel and shouted “Ah!” I quickly apologised. He said, “ nothing wrong with you. That is my own problem. “ “What problem do you have?” I was hoping to help him. He answered, “Today is my first day driving a taxi. Before this, I had driven a casket van for 25 years.” No wonder when I pet his shoulder, he shouted. He must have been thinking that a dead person stretched the hand from the back touching him.
 - A habit has been with us for many lives, changing it takes time. Although it is not easy to change, as Chinese saying, “do not stand still, moving on slowly will bring us to the destiny.”

- ^ Running water does not flow back, so is life. We can't go back and make a brand new start. But we could make a change now and have a brand new ending. Let us catch hold of the present moment, be a practicing Buddhist, move on step by step and have a happy life here and now.