



The Dalai Lama: Happiness from within

Matthieu Ricard

Abstract: The Dalai Lama often speaks of a 'Buddhist science,' a science of mind and, for the last thirty years, he has engaged in numerous dialogues and collaborations with scientists within the Mind and Life Institute. How can this 'science of mind' contribute to our understanding of happiness? What does the Dalai Lama mean by this simple and straightforward statement "the main goal of life is happiness?" In this essay, I discuss what enduring happiness means according to the Buddhist perspective and the ways in which the Dalai Lama embodies this enduring happiness. I will approach happiness as a way of being, not a gift that good fortune bestows upon us and a reversal of fortune takes back, but a skill that can be cultivated. In order to become happy, we have to learn how to change our selves.

Keywords: wellbeing, well-being, happiness, Buddhism, Dalai Lama

1. Introduction

During the last thirty years I have been fortunate to spend extended periods of time in the presence of the Dalai Lama and I have gained great insights by witnessing his attitude in the face of very challenging circumstances. Most of the time the Dalai Lama is ebullient with joy and kindness, but I have also seen him deeply saddened. Yet he also says that deep within he retains his inner peace, no matter what the outer circumstances might be.

In 2008, a few months before the Beijing Olympic Games, thousands of Tibetans demonstrated throughout Tibet as an impassioned plea to the world. They were expressing their frustration and resentment at fifty years of harsh oppression under the Chinese totalitarian regime. The government's reaction was brutal. Hundreds of unarmed Tibetans were killed, thousands imprisoned and tortured. The Dalai Lama expressed his deep sorrow and confided how powerless he felt to alleviate the suffering of his people. "Yet," he added, "I can always relate to a sense of equanimity and inner peace."

The Dalai Lama is certainly not indifferent to the pleas of others. I heard him once confiding: "For the last thirty years, every day during my early morning meditation tears come to my eyes when I consider the innumerable sufferings of sentient beings." Is sadness compatible with happiness? Some contemporary research shows that people sometimes report being sad and happy at the same time (Larsen *et al.*, 2001), but this research refers to the juxtaposition of different feelings. In the case of the Dalai Lama, it seems that emotional sadness coincides with happiness as an enduring way of being. Whether sadness is compatible with happiness thus all depends on what we mean by 'happiness'.

To understand what we mean by 'happiness,' we need to explore the Buddhist understanding of *sukha*, a Sanskrit term that can be defined as:

[A] state of flourishing that arises from mental balance and insight into the nature of reality. Rather than a fleeting emotion or mood aroused by sensory



and conceptual stimuli, *sukha* is an enduring trait that arises from a state of mental balance. It entails a conceptually unstructured and unfiltered awareness of the true nature of reality. (Ekman, Davidson, Ricard and Wallace, 2005, p. 60)

One may thus understand that sadness in the face of a tragedy, such as an injustice or a massacre, is by no means incompatible with *sukha*, since it remains compatible with compassion, with a sense of direction and meaning in life, with inner strength and deep confidence in our resolve to bring about a better world. Even in sadness we can continue to pursue a meaningful and constructive life. So the Dalai Lama does feel sadness, but not despair, which is to lose all hope, meaning, and inner freedom.

Similarly, the Buddhist concept of *duhkha*, often translated as ‘suffering,’ is not simply an unpleasant feeling. Rather, it refers to a basic vulnerability to suffering and pain due to the misapprehension of the nature of reality and to the influence of afflictive mental states such as hatred, craving, pride, and envy.

The Dalai Lama often speaks of a ‘Buddhist science,’ a science of mind and, for the last thirty years, he has engaged in numerous dialogues and collaborations with scientists within the Mind and Life Institute. How can this ‘science of mind’ contribute to our understanding of happiness? What does the Dalai Lama mean by this simple and straightforward statement “the main goal of life is happiness?”

In this essay, I will attempt to consider what enduring happiness means according to the Buddhist perspective. I will approach happiness as a way of being, not a gift that good fortune bestows upon us and a reversal of fortune takes back, but a skill that can be cultivated. In order to become happy, we have to learn how to change our selves.

2. Outer and inner conditions for happiness

We all strive, consciously or unconsciously, competently or clumsily, to be happier and to suffer less. Instinctively most people put all their hopes and fear in the outer world. But our control of this outer world is limited, temporary, and often illusory. In addition to that, the universe is not a mail order catalogue for all our desires.

No one would deny that it is eminently desirable to live long and in good health, to be free in a country at peace where justice is respected, to love and to be loved, to have access to education and information, to enjoy adequate means of subsistence, to be able to travel the world, to contribute as much as possible to the wellbeing of others, and to protect the environment. Sociological studies of entire populations clearly show that human beings enjoy their lives more in such conditions.

But in pinning all our hopes on the external world, we can only end up being disappointed. The reason is that it is our mind that experiences the world from morning till evening. Our mind can be our best friend or our worst enemy. We all know that we can feel miserable in a little paradise and, conversely, retain our ‘joie de vivre’ in the face of adverse, undesirable circumstances. As the Buddhist thinker Alan Wallace wrote:

If you bank on achieving genuine happiness and fulfillment by finding the perfect mate, getting a great car, having a big house, the best insurance, a fine reputation, the top job — if these are your focus, wish also for good luck in life’s lottery. ([sic.] 2003, p. 20)

It is thus very naïve to imagine that external conditions alone can ensure happiness. That is the surest way to a rude awakening. As the Dalai Lama once said when visiting a city in Portugal where a lot of building activities were taking place: “If a man who has just moved into a luxury

apartment on the hundredth floor of a brand new building is deeply unhappy, the only thing he'll look for is a window to jump out of."

We willingly spend fifteen years in school, then go on to professional training for a few more; we work out at the gym to stay healthy; we spend a great deal of time enhancing our comfort, our wealth and our social status. We put a great deal into all this, and yet we do so little to improve the inner condition that determines the very quality of our lives.

As the Tibetan teacher Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche writes in *The Joy of Living*:

Unfortunately, one of the main obstacles we face when we try to examine the mind is a deep-seated and often unconscious conviction that 'we're born the way we are and nothing we can do can change that.' (2007, p. 32)

According to Buddhism, the state we generally consider to be 'normal' is just a starting point, and not the goal that we ought to be setting for ourselves. Our life is worth much more than that! It is possible, little by little, to arrive at the 'optimal' way of being.

What strange hesitancy, fear, or apathy stops us from looking within ourselves, from trying to grasp the true essence of joy and sadness, desire and hatred? Fear of the unknown prevails, and the courage to explore that inner world fails at the frontier of our minds. I once met a Californian teenager who told me: "I don't want to look inside myself. I'm afraid of what I'd find there." I mentioned this to the Dalai Lama, who exclaimed: "But that is the most interesting thing to do! There is so much happening within the mind, much more than in any movie." He was echoing Marcus Aurelius' sentiment that we should 'Look within where we find the fountain of all good' (Marc-Aurèle, 1953).

And yet, looking within is something that we must learn how to do. Why should we be able to delve inside ourselves without the slightest effort? Simply because we want to? Such an assumption makes about as much sense as hoping to be able to play a Mozart concerto simply by tapping on the piano keys from time to time. We are all a mixture of light and shadow, strengths and weaknesses.

But this state of affairs is neither optimal nor inevitable. Each of us has the potential to become free from mental states that cause suffering for ourselves and others, to find inner peace and to contribute to the wellbeing of others. But just wishing for this is not enough. We need to train our minds (Ricard, 2006; 2010). Happiness is a skill that requires effort and time.

As influential as external conditions may be, suffering, like wellbeing, is essentially a state of mind. It is the mind that translates good and bad circumstances into happiness or misery. The search for happiness is not about looking at life through rose-colored glasses or blinding oneself to the pain and imperfections of the world. It is the purging of mental toxins, such as hatred and compulsive desire and, above all, of ignorance, that poison the mind.

If happiness is a state that depends on inner conditions, one must recognize those conditions with awareness and then bring them together. It is important to emphasize that the cultivation of inner conditions for happiness does not mean wallowing in egocentric introspection and failing to be concerned with others. It is not a 'selfish' process, as its aim is to diminish self-centeredness and cultivate altruism. A key component of 'finding inner happiness' is to cultivate benevolence, altruistic love, and compassion. These qualities are cultivated within, but expressed towards others. In essence, according to Buddhism, seeking happiness for oneself alone is doomed to failure, since self-centeredness is a major source of our discontent.

3. Extrinsic and intrinsic values

According to the Buddhist, by pinning all our hopes and fears on the external world, we can only end up being disappointed. For instance, in hoping that money will make us happier, we work to acquire it; once we have it, we become obsessed with making it grow and we suffer when we lose it. A friend from Hong Kong once told me that he'd promised himself that he'd save a million dollars, then quit work and enjoy life, and thereby become happy. Ten years later he had not one million but three million dollars. What about happiness? His answer was brief: "I wasted ten years of my life."

Wealth, pleasures, rank, and power are all sought for the sake of happiness. But as we strive, we forget the goal and spend our time pursuing the means for their own sake. In so doing, we miss the point and remain deeply unsatisfied. This substitution of means for ends is one of the main traps lying across the pursuit of a meaningful life. As the economist Richard Layard puts it:

Some people say you should not think about your own happiness, because you can only be happy as a by-product of something else. That is a dismal philosophy, a formula for keeping oneself occupied at all costs. (2005, p. 235)

According to Tim Kasser (2008), cross-cultural studies have clearly demonstrated that, in accordance with Buddhist views, the pursuit of extrinsic, materialistic values is detrimental to wellbeing. Kasser defines 'consumerism' as a mindset that makes one believe that a happy, meaningful, and successful life occurs when a person is wealthy and owns many possessions that convey a high social status (Kasser & Kanner, 2004). Multiple studies of a variety of types of people in a variety of settings have shown that to the extent people take on consumerist beliefs, the more they report high levels of personal suffering (Kasser, 2002), of depression and anxiety, as well as physical discomfort (headaches, stomachaches, and backaches). They also report stronger, more frequent experiences of unpleasant emotions such as anger, frustration, sadness, anxiety, and worry. Materialistic values are also associated with using more drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, and other mind-altering substances.

Other studies have demonstrated that materialistic aims typically stand in opposition to the kinds of values that promote good interpersonal relationships (Grouzet *et al.*, 2005; Schwartz, 1992). They tend to oppose values such as being 'helpful' and 'loyal,' obtaining 'true friendship' and 'mature love,' and having close, committed relationships. They also oppose aims such as working for 'social justice' and 'equality,' and trying to make the world a better place.

A strong focus on money and possessions also seems to increase the likelihood of 'objectifying' other people (Kasser, Vansteenkiste, & Deckop, 2006) and treating them as instruments to be manipulated in the pursuit of one's self-centered goals. Materialistic individuals also report engaging in fewer pro-social and more anti-social activities, including questionable ethical behaviors in business settings. Thus, the beliefs of consumerism seem to work against healthy, compassionate human interactions.

The cross-cultural research of Schwartz (1992) reveals that to the extent people value aims such as wealth and status, they tend to care less about values such as 'protecting the environment,' 'attaining unity with nature,' and having 'a world of beauty.'

Conversely, abundant research shows that intrinsic goals are positively associated with personal, social, and ecological wellbeing (Kasser, 2006). People oriented towards intrinsic values are more empathic, more cooperative, and more likely to engage in the kinds of pro-social, generous behaviors that promote good will and the wellbeing of others.

In short, according to R. H. Tawney:

The psychological evidence suggests that the social system of consumerism is one that does indeed encourage the egotism, greed, and quarrelsomeness that contribute to personal suffering, lower compassion, and greater damage to other living things. Buddhism, in contrast, is a proven means of discouraging such qualities and helping people fix their minds on much higher ends, ends that will benefit their own well-being, the well-being of other people, and the well-being of other species of living things. ([1920/2004], p. 180 cited in Kasser's unpublished [2008])

The Dalai Lama continually encourages the enhancement of intrinsic values, which are those that can contribute something to the world. These include kindness, inner contentment, self-discipline, tolerance, non-violence towards human beings, animals and the environment, and a sense of global responsibility.

4. Pleasure and happiness

It is very common to confuse pleasure with happiness. Buddhism argues that there is no direct relationship between pleasure and happiness. The fleeting experience of pleasure is mostly dependent upon outer circumstances, on a specific location or moment in time. It is unstable by nature and the sensation it evokes soon becomes neutral or even unpleasant. It leads to 'hedonic adaptation' and when repeated it may grow insipid or even lead to disgust; savoring a delicious meal is a source of genuine pleasure, but we are indifferent to it once we've had our fill and would even sicken of it if we were to continue eating.

Pleasure is almost always linked to an activity and naturally leads to lassitude by dint of being repeated. Listening to beautiful music requires a focus of attention that, minimal as it is, cannot be maintained indefinitely. After a while, fatigue kicks in and the music loses its charm. If we were forced to listen to it for days on end, it would become unbearable.

Furthermore, pleasure is an individual experience, most often centered on the self, which is why it can easily descend into selfishness and sometimes conflict with the wellbeing of others. Pleasure can be joined to cruelty, violence, pride, greed and other mental states that are incompatible with true happiness. Therefore, it stands to reason that if we identify happiness with pleasure, we would never be able to achieve enduring happiness.

Instead of being, like pleasure, vulnerable to outer circumstances, genuine happiness gives us the resources to deal with the inevitable ups and downs of life. It does not mutate into its opposite, but endures and grows as we keep on experiencing it. It imparts a sense of fulfilment that, in time, becomes second nature.

This distinction does not mean that we should not seek out pleasurable sensations. There is no reason to deprive ourselves of the enjoyment of a magnificent landscape, of swimming in the sea, or of the scent of a rose, as long as such sensations do not lead to craving. Although intrinsically different from happiness, pleasure is not its enemy. Whether pleasure poses any threat to happiness depends on how it is experienced. If pleasure is tainted with grasping, gives rise to avidity and dependence, and impedes inner freedom, it has become an obstacle to happiness. On the other hand, if it is experienced in the present moment, in a state of inner peace and freedom, pleasure adorns happiness without overshadowing it.

As observed by Tsong-kha-pa:

[C]linging to such stimuli as the actual source of one's happiness can easily give rise to at least intermittent, if not chronic, anxiety as one faces the possibility,

likelihood, or certainty that stimuli will not last. ([sic.] 2000, pp. 281–284, c.f. Wallace and Shapiro 2006, pp. 691–692)

The collaborative research between neuroscientists and Buddhist contemplatives seems to support this distinction between pleasure and happiness. The mental states that long-term meditators generate are related to emotional balance and positive affects (involving, for instance, the left prefrontal cortex), rather than with sensations and pleasure (involving the reward areas of the brain).

The distinction between pleasure and happiness is found throughout Buddhist literature and is not foreign to western psychology. According to Ryan and Deci (2001), hedonic happiness occurs when we are primarily seeking pleasant feelings and avoiding unpleasant ones, while eudaimonic happiness is conceptualized more in terms of optimal functioning. Ryff (1995, p. 100) describes eudaimonia “as the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one’s true potential.” A recent study (Steger, Kashdan, and Oishi, 2008) shows that the wellbeing resulting from hedonic behaviors is unstable. This notion is also traceable to Aristotle’s ethics.

In essence, for the Dalai Lama, happiness does not consist of an uninterrupted succession of pleasurable experiences. Rather, it is an optimal way of being, an exceptionally healthy state of mind that underlies and suffuses all emotional states, that embraces all the joys and sorrows that come our way. It is also a state of wisdom purged of mental poisons and of insight free from blindness to the true nature of reality. *Sukha* includes a combination of various fundamental human qualities, such as altruistic love, compassion, inner peace, inner strength, and inner freedom.

5. Altruism and happiness

A series of studies conducted on hundreds of students found an undeniable correlation between altruism and happiness, determining that those who believe themselves to be happiest are also the most altruistic (Myers, 2000). Research done by Seligman (2002) indicates that the joy of undertaking an act of disinterested kindness provides profound satisfaction. Some students were given a certain sum of money and asked to go out and have fun for a few days, while others were told to use this money to help people in need (elderly, sick patients, etc.) All were asked to write a report for the next class. The study has shown that the satisfactions triggered by a pleasant activity, such as going out with friends, seeing a movie, or enjoying a banana split, were largely eclipsed by those derived from performing an act of kindness. When the act was spontaneous and drew on humane qualities, the entire day was improved; the subjects noticed that they were better listeners that day, more friendly, and more appreciated by others. “The exercise of kindness is a gratification, in contrast to a pleasure,” Seligman (2002, p. 9) concludes.

According to Buddhism, there is a direct relationship between having a good heart and happiness. Joy and satisfaction are closely tied to love and affection. As for misery, it goes hand in hand with selfishness and hostility.

Compassion is also deeply related with wisdom. Altruistic love and compassion are attuned to reality insofar as they recognize and appreciate the interdependent nature of all beings. This naturally brings more empathic concern for others (Batson, 2011) through the recognition that we are all the same in wanting to avoid suffering. Being attuned to reality, altruistic love and compassion are ‘functional’. Someone who sees phenomena as interdependent cultivates compassion, and who then acts accordingly, will feel a sense of

harmony. This is a win-win situation. On the contrary, an exceedingly self-centered person views the world as consisting of intrinsically separate entities: 'me,' 'others,' 'the rest of the world.' Such a person attempts to build his individual happiness within the bubble of self-centeredness. This is essentially dysfunctional because the world is not made of separate entities. Such a worldview leads to a lose-lose situation where the person is miserable and makes others miserable.

The research in neuroscience also indicates that loving-kindness and compassion are among the most positive of all positive emotions or mental states.

The collaborative research involving neuroscientists and Buddhist contemplatives began in earnest fifteen years ago. Following an initial exploratory phase, about twenty experienced meditators were tested: monks and laypeople, men and women, easterners and westerners. All of them had devoted between ten thousand and fifty thousand hours to meditation—to developing compassion, altruism, mindfulness and awareness. These studies led to the publication of several articles in prestigious scientific journals, establishing the credibility of research on meditation and on achieving emotional balance, an area that had not been taken seriously until then. In the words of Richard Davidson: "It demonstrates that the brain is capable of being trained and physically modified in ways few people can imagine" (Kaufman, 2005)¹.

Experienced meditators have the ability to generate mental states that are precise, focused, powerful and lasting. In particular, experiments have shown that the region of the brain associated with emotions such as compassion, for example, showed considerably higher activity in those with long-term meditative experience. These discoveries show that basic human qualities that contribute to wellbeing can be deliberately cultivated through mental training.

During meditation on compassion (Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard and Davidson, 2004), most experienced meditators showed a dramatic increase in the high-frequency brain activity called gamma waves in areas of the brain related with positive emotions and with empathy. Other studies (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek and Finkel, 2008) have also shown that 'loving-kindness meditation' significantly increases positive emotions and decreases psychological distress.

Twenty years ago it was almost universally accepted by neuroscientists that the brain contained all its neurons at birth, and that their number did not change with experience. We now know that new neurons are produced up until the moment of death, and we speak of 'neuroplasticity', a term which takes into account the fact that the brain changes continuously in relation to our experience. For example, a particular training, such as learning a musical instrument or a sport, can bring about a profound change. Mindfulness, altruism, and other basic human qualities that contribute to happiness can be cultivated in the same way, and we can acquire the 'knowhow' to enable us to do this.

In Buddhism, 'to meditate' means 'to get used to' or 'to cultivate'. Meditation consists of getting used to a new way of being, of perceiving the world and mastering our thoughts. Meditation is a matter not of theory but of practice, just as it does not satisfy our hunger to read a restaurant menu if we are not going to eat something from it. It is essential to maintain the continuity of meditation day after day, because in this way our practice gradually gains

¹ Richard Davidson's words here are reported by M. Kaufman, in his (2005) interview of Davidson for the Washington Post.

substance and stability. Cultivating loving-kindness and compassion is, according to Buddhism, essential to happiness (Ricard, 2010).

The Dalai Lama often speaks of two kinds of compassion. The first is a 'biological' compassion that we feel towards those who are close to us, to our children, relatives, and close friends. This compassion is naturally present in most people, but is limited and biased. The second one is an 'extended' compassion for all sentient beings—friends, strangers, or difficult people—that is unbiased and unlimited, but needs to be cultivated, emotionally and cognitively.

The Dalai Lama also stresses the fact that compassion is a source of courage in the face of suffering. When we experience in a self-centered way, either our own suffering or others' sufferings, the greater those sufferings are, the more discouraged we will become. Conversely, if we are deeply concerned with others' wellbeing and not overly focused upon ourselves, our own sufferings will seem flimsy; and the more we are exposed to others' sufferings, the more our compassionate courage to do whatever it takes to dispel these sufferings will grow.

6. Dealing with emotions

According to the Dalai Lama, one important aspect of the 'Buddhist science' of happiness is to develop methods for dealing skilfully with emotions, reinforcing constructive ones and counteracting afflictive ones. Buddhism considers that if an emotion strengthens our inner peace and seeks the good of others, it is positive, or constructive; if it shatters our serenity, deeply disturbs our mind and is intended to harm others, it is negative, or afflictive. That is what differentiates, for instance, 'holy anger'—indignation before injustice—from rage born of the desire to hurt someone. The former has freed people from slavery and domination; it seeks to end injustice or to make someone aware of the error of his ways. The second generates nothing but sorrow. Likewise, the thirsts of obsessive desire and greed that latch onto the objects of their attachment are other examples of afflictive emotions.

Conversely, altruistic love directed towards the wellbeing of others, compassion focused on their suffering in thought and deed, are considered to be examples of nourishing emotions that help to generate happiness.

6.1 Negative emotions

The Tibetan word *nyön-mong* (*klesha* in Sanskrit) refers to a state of mental disturbance, torment and confusion that 'afflicts us from within.' Hatred, jealousy or obsession make us deeply uncomfortable. Moreover, the actions and words they inspire are usually intended to hurt others. Conversely, thoughts of kindness, affection and tolerance give us joy and courage, open our minds and free us inside. They also spur us on to benevolence and empathy.

In addition, the disturbing emotions tend to distort our perception of reality and to prevent us from seeing it as it really is. Craving idealizes its object, hatred demonizes it. These emotions make us believe that beauty or ugliness is inherent in people and in things, even though it is the mind that decides if they are 'attractive' or 'repulsive.' This misapprehension opens a gap between the way things appear and the way they are, clouds the judgment and makes us think and act as if these qualities were not largely based on how we see them.

6.2 Positive emotions

On the other hand, 'positive' emotions and mental factors strengthen the clarity of our thinking and the accuracy of our reasoning, since they are based on a more accurate appreciation of reality. Selfless love reflects some understanding of the intimate interdependence of beings, of

our happiness and that of others, a notion that is attuned to reality, while selfishness opens an ever-wider abyss between us and other people.

Buddhism's sole objective in treating the emotions is to free us from the fundamental causes of suffering. It starts with the principle that certain mental events are afflictive regardless of the intensity or context of their formation (Ekman *et al.*, 2005). That is particularly true for the three mental processes considered to be basic mental 'poisons:' desire (in the sense of hunger or tormenting greed), hatred (the wish for someone to be harmed), and delusion (which distorts our perception of reality.) Buddhism usually includes pride and envy as well; together, these are the five major poisons associated with some sixty negative mental states. The texts also refer to '84,000 negative emotions.' These are not all specified in detail, but the symbolic figure gives a sense of the complexity of the human mind and helps us to understand that our methods of transforming the mind must be adapted to the enormous variety of mental dispositions. That is why Buddhism speaks of the '84,000 doors' that lead to inner transformation.

7. Ignorance: Clinging to the notion of self undermines happiness

Ignorance, in the Buddhist lexicon, is an inability to recognize the true nature of things and the law of cause and effect that governs happiness and suffering. Among all the ignorant ways we go about building happiness, one of the most sterile is egocentrism. According to Buddhism, we can never be truly happy if we dissociate ourselves from the happiness of others. Echoing Romain Rolland (1952); life soon becomes goalless when selfish happiness is life's only goal.

Among the many aspects of mental delusion and ignorance, the most radically disruptive is the grasping onto the concept of a personal identity: the individual self. Buddhism distinguishes between an innate, instinctive 'I'—when we think, for instance, 'I'm awake' or 'I'm cold'—the notion of the 'person', which refers to the dynamic flow of our personal history, and a conceptual 'self' shaped by the force of habit. We attribute various qualities to it and posit it as the core of our being, autonomous and enduring. A similar distinction between the 'I', the 'person' and the 'self', has been presented by psychologist David Galin (2003).

As to the 'self', we imagine it as an invisible and permanent thing that characterizes us from birth to death. The self is not merely the sum of 'my' limbs, 'my' organs, 'my' skin, 'my' name, 'my' consciousness, but their exclusive owner.

At every moment between birth and death, the body undergoes ceaseless transformations and the mind becomes the theatre of countless emotional and conceptual experiences. And yet we assign qualities of permanence, uniqueness, and autonomy to the self. Furthermore, as we begin to feel that this self is highly vulnerable and must be protected and satisfied, aversion and attraction come into play—aversion for anything that threatens the self, attraction to all that pleases it, comforts it, boosts its confidence, or puts it at ease. These two basic feelings, attraction and repulsion, are the founts of a whole sea of conflicting emotions.

Out of fear of the world and others, out of dread of suffering, out of anxiety about living and dying, we imagine that by retreating inside the bubble of ego, we will be protected. We create the illusion of being separate from the world, hoping thereby to avert suffering. In fact, what happens is just the opposite, since ego-grasping and disproportionate self-cherishing are powerful magnets to attract suffering.

Some Western psychologists share this Buddhist perspective. In a theoretical paper and review of the subject (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011), it was argued that the perception of a structured self that takes the form of a seemingly unitary, permanent, and independent entity leads to a self-centered psychological style and seems to be a significant source of both

affliction and fluctuating, hedonic, happiness. Conversely, a selfless psychological style emerges when perception of the self is a dynamic network of transitory relations, and this seems to be a source of durable eudaimonic happiness.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) also distinguish between an independent self and an interdependent self. They postulate that individuals have strikingly different concepts of their self, and these variations are a function of differences in cultural settings. These different self-constructs affect the ways in which individuals experience themselves and others, and also affect their cognitions, emotions and motivation.

One of the characteristics of entering a state of 'flow', a very rewarding mental state, is precisely the vanishing of the self. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi², at such times, one becomes...

completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost.

In the West, transient and spontaneous states of 'no-self', such as in shamanic trances, are often identified as altered states of consciousness and are said to reflect an abnormal psychological functioning (Ward, 1989). This contrasts with the various Eastern traditions where the concept of 'no-self' is often associated with an optimal way of being, awareness and wisdom. In Buddhism, the understanding of the lack of reality of an independent, unitary self corresponds to a state of great lucidity and wisdom. It represents the culminating point of a thorough analytical and contemplative investigation, which is very different from an uncontrolled, confused state of trance.

According to Buddhism, an erroneous sense of self forms the basis of all mental affliction, be it hatred, clinging, desire, envy, pride, or confusion. From that point on, we see the world through the distorting mirror of our illusions. We find ourselves in disharmony with the true nature of things and that inevitably leads to frustration and suffering.

This notion is also found in Western psychology, which recognizes that cognitive distortions, resulting from various egocentric biases, are also associated with self-centeredness (Greenwald, 1980).

The Buddhist analysis leads us to conclude that the self does not reside outside the body, or in any part of the body, nor is it some diffuse entity permeating the entire body. We willingly believe that the self is associated with consciousness, but consciousness too is just a flow or experience: the past moment of consciousness is dead (only its impact remains), the future is not yet, and the present doesn't last. How could a distinct self exist, suspended between something that no longer exists and something that does not yet exist?

Where then is the self? It cannot be exclusively in my body, because when I say, 'I am proud,' it is my consciousness that is proud, not my body. So is it exclusively in my consciousness? That is far from certain. When I say: 'Someone pushed me,' was it my consciousness being pushed? Of course not. The self obviously cannot be outside either the body or the consciousness.

The only way out of this dilemma is to consider the self as a mental or verbal designation linked to a dynamic process, to a series of changing relations that incorporate the perception of

² This passage is from an interview of Csikszentmihalyi conducted by John Geirland for Wired.com (http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.09/czik_pr.html).

the outer world, sensations, mental images, emotions, and concepts. The self is merely an idea that does not match any real entity.

When the self ceases to be the most important thing in the world, we find it easier to focus our concern on others. The sight of their suffering bolsters our courage and resolve to work on their behalf, instead of crippling us with our own emotional distress.

Psychologist Paul Ekman has been inspired to study ‘people gifted with exceptionally human qualities.’ Among the most remarkable traits he has noted among such people are “an impression of kindness, a way of being that others can sense and appreciate, and, unlike so many charismatic charlatans, perfect harmony between their private and public lives.” (Ekman, 2001)³ They emanate goodness. Above all, notes Ekman, they exhibit “an absence of ego. These people inspire others by how little they make of their status, their fame—in short, their self. They never give a second thought to whether their position or importance is recognized.” Such a lack of egocentricity, he adds, “is altogether perplexing from a psychological point of view.” Ekman also stresses how “people instinctively want to be in their company and how, even if they can’t always explain why, they find their presence enriching. In essence, they emanate goodness.” According to Ekman, the Dalai Lama is someone who embodies all these qualities.

8. Craving

No one would dispute the fact that it is natural to desire and that desire plays a driving role in our lives. But let us not confuse the deep aspirations of making oneself a better human being, of working for the good of others or of achieving spiritual awakening, with the desire that is mere hunger and tortures the mind.

As natural as it may seem, desire degenerates into a ‘mental toxin’ as soon as it becomes a craving, an obsession, or an unmitigated attachment. Such craving is all the more frustrating and alienating in that it is out of synch with reality. When we are obsessed by a thing or a person we misconstrue them to be one hundred percent desirable; and possessing or enjoying them becomes an absolute necessity. As the Buddha Shakyamuni taught: prey to craving, like a monkey in the forest you jump from branch to branch without ever finding any fruit, from life to life without ever finding any peace.

9. Hatred

Of all the mental poisons that cause suffering, hatred is the most toxic. It is one of the chief causes of unhappiness and the driving force of countless acts of violence. When someone hits us, instinct would have us hit back. Likewise, human societies give their members the right to retaliate in varying degrees of justice, depending on the societies’ level of civility. Tolerance, forgiveness, and understanding of the aggressor’s situation are generally considered to be optional. We are rarely able to see the criminal as a victim of his own hatred. It is even harder to understand that the desire for vengeance stems from basically the same emotion that led the aggressor to assault us. So long as one person’s hatred generates another’s, the cycle of resentment, reprisal and suffering will never be broken. If hatred responds to hatred, hatred will never end, taught the Buddha Shakyamuni. Eliminating hatred from our mind stream is therefore a critical step in our journey to happiness.

Hatred exaggerates the faults of its object and ignores its good qualities. We perceive the hated person or group as 100% detestable (Dalai Lama and Cutler, 1998).

³ The preceding quoted passage as well as the ones that immediately follow come from personal communication with Paul Ekman in 2001.

Under the influence of anger our mind sees things in an unrealistic way, the source of endless frustration and sorrow. As noted by the Dalai Lama:

By giving in to anger, we are not necessarily harming our enemy but we are definitely harming ourselves. We lose our sense of inner peace, we do everything wrong, we cannot sleep well, we put off our guests or we cast furious glances at those who have the impudence of being in our way. We make life impossible for those who live with us, and even our dearest friends are kept at a distance.

This rigid frame, the prison of the mind, is responsible for much of the hate and violence that plague us. By forming the image of the 'enemy' as despicable, we generalize it as being the whole person or the entire group. The mind, steeped in animosity and resentment, encloses itself in illusion and is convinced that the source of its dissatisfaction is entirely exterior to itself. Our perception of being wronged or threatened leads us to focus exclusively on the negative aspects of a person or a group. We solidify the 'evil' or 'disgusting' attributes we see in them as being permanent and intrinsic traits, and turn away from any reevaluation of the situation. We thus feel justified in expressing our animosity and retaliating. By then, we have obscured the basic benevolence that makes us appreciate everyone's aspiration to avoid suffering and achieve happiness. This process has also been clearly recognized in Western psychology (Beck, 1999). According to Ekman (2003), anger is inaccurate in its assessment of reality in that it does not perceive a situation in a balanced way, but views it through the distorted filter of 'me, I, my, and mine.' He also writes of a 'refractory' period during which only perceptions that support our anger come to mind and we do not register any interpretation that contradicts our view.

As one of the Dalai Lama's teachers, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1993, pp. 126-127) wrote: "Instead of hating so-called enemies, therefore, the real target of your hatred should be hatred itself." As appropriate as patience, without weakness, may be towards those we consider our enemies, it is entirely inappropriate to be patient with hatred itself, regardless of the circumstances.

One day, the Dalai Lama received a visit from a monk arriving from Tibet after spending twenty-five years in Chinese labor camps. His torturers had brought him to the brink of death several times. The Dalai Lama talked at length with the monk, deeply moved to find him so serene after so much suffering. He asked him if he had ever been afraid. The monk answered: "I was often afraid of hating my torturers, for in so doing I would have destroyed myself."

10. Is it possible to be free of afflictive emotions?

How can one develop constructive emotions while ridding ourselves of destructive ones? As emphasized by the Dalai Lama (1998):

[R]ecognition of the nature of the mind and an accurate understanding of the phenomenal world are essential for our quest for happiness. If the mind relies on totally erroneous views about the nature of things and maintains them, it will be very difficult for us to transform ourselves and achieve freedom. Developing a correct view is not a question of faith or adherence to dogma but of clear understanding. This arises from a correct analysis of reality.

In addition, we need to work on our thoughts one by one, analyzing the way they emerge and evolve and gradually learning to free them as they arise, defusing the chain reactions that allow thoughts to invade the mind. Furthermore, being able to repeatedly free oneself of such

afflictive thoughts as they occur gradually erodes their very tendency to form again, until they stop appearing altogether. Just as our emotions, moods and tendencies have been shaped by the accumulation of countless instantaneous thoughts, they can be transformed through time by dealing in a mindful way with such thoughts.

The experience of introspection shows that the negative emotions are transitory mental events that can be obliterated by their opposites, the positive emotions, acting as antidotes.

We have to gradually familiarize ourselves with each antidote—loving-kindness as antidote to hatred, for instance—until the absence of hatred becomes second nature. The Tibetan word *gom*, which is usually translated as ‘meditation,’ more precisely denotes ‘familiarization,’ while the Sanskrit word *bhavana*, also translated as ‘meditation’ means ‘cultivation’. *Gom* is about familiarizing oneself with a new vision of things, a new way to manage one’s thoughts, of perceiving people and experiencing the world.

10.1 The use of antidotes

The first method of freeing oneself of afflictive emotions consists of neutralizing afflictive emotions with a specific antidote, just as we neutralize the destructive effects of poison with anti-venom, or of acid with an alkali. One fundamental point emphasized by Buddhism is that two diametrically opposed mental processes cannot form *simultaneously*. We may fluctuate rapidly between love and hatred, but we cannot feel, *in the same instant of consciousness*, the desire to hurt someone and to do him good. The two impulses are as opposed to each other as water and fire.

In the same way, by habituating your mind to altruistic love, you gradually eliminate hatred, because the two states of mind can alternate but cannot co-exist at the same time. So the more we cultivate loving-kindness, the less there will be space for hatred in our mental landscape. It is therefore important to begin by learning the antidotes that correspond to each negative emotion, and then to cultivate them.

Since altruistic love acts as a direct antidote to hatred, the more we develop it, the more the desire to harm will wither until it finally disappears. It is a question not of suppressing hatred, but of turning the mind to something diametrically opposed to it: love and compassion.

It is equally impossible for greed or desire-passion to co-exist with inner-freedom, which allows us to taste mental peace and to rest in the cool shade of serenity. Desire can fully develop only when it is allowed to run rampant to the point where it monopolizes the mind.

As for anger, it will be neutralized by patience. This does not require us to remain passive, but to steer clear of being overwhelmed by destructive emotions. As the Dalai Lama (1999) explains, patience safeguards our peace of mind in the face of adversity; it is a deliberate response (as opposed to an unreasoned reaction) to the strong negative thoughts and emotions that tend to arise when we encounter harm. There are many other such methods to free ourselves from afflictive mental states.

Another way to deal with afflictive emotions is to dissociate ourselves mentally from the emotion that is troubling us (Ricard, 2010). Usually we identify with our emotions completely. When we are overcome by anxiety or by a fit of anger, we are at one with that feeling. It is omnipresent in our mind, leaving no room for other mental states such as inner peace or patience, or to consider reasoning that might calm our discomfort. However, if at that moment we are still capable of a little presence of mind—a capability that we can be trained to develop—we can stop identifying with our anger.

The mind is, in fact, capable of examining what is happening within it. All we need to do is observe our emotions in the same way we would observe an external event taking place in

front of us. The part of our mind that is aware of the anger is just simply aware—it is not angry. In other words, awareness is not affected by the emotion it is observing. When we understand that, we can step back, realize that this emotion has no solidity, and allow enough space for it to dissolve by itself.

By doing so, we avoid two extremes, each as bad as the other: repressing our emotion, which would then remain in a dark corner of our consciousness like a time bomb; or letting the emotion explode at the expense of those around us and of our own inner peace. Not identifying with emotions is a fundamental antidote that is applicable to all kinds of afflictive emotions.

11. Happiness and ‘goodness’

In Plato’s *Georgias* it is stated that: The happiest man is he who has no trace of malice in his soul. During a five-day meeting with scientists at Dharamsala in India, psychologist Paul Ekman, one of the world specialists on emotions, and his daughter Eve sat near the Dalai Lama for a private conversation. Throughout their conversation, as he often does, the Dalai Lama casually held Paul’s hand in his. Paul was very moved by this moment and confided later: “I felt some kind of compassionate warmth flowing from his hand. I never thought that goodness could be palpable.”

The Dalai Lama is one of the few people in this world who enjoys a high moral stature. He inspires respect and deep sympathy in millions of people, as do Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu. As the Dalai Lama’s long-time student and friend Robert Thurman writes:

Everyone tends to like the Dalai Lama even when they don’t think they will. The question is “Why?” [...] I have witnessed this strange phenomenon time and again over the years whenever the Dalai Lama appears in public, as well as in private meetings with noted scientists, dignitaries, and heads-of-state. (2008, p. ix)

More than anything else, the Dalai Lama is a good human being. When he says, “My religion is good heart,” his words ring true because he embodies them. When he was asked why, wherever he goes, tens of thousands of people come to see him and listen to him, he first answered with his usual simplicity: “I don’t know.” Then, after a pause, he added: “I have no special qualities, but perhaps it is because all my life I have meditated on love and compassion with all the strength of my mind.”

I remember one evening when the Dalai Lama was leaving a meeting with students at Bordeaux University in France and walked through the crowd of people who had not managed to get a seat in the theatre. An old couple was standing to one side, afraid of getting caught up in the crush. The husband was standing behind his frail wife, who was in a wheelchair. The Dalai Lama’s ever-alert gaze lighted on them. He broke through the crowd and went and took the old lady’s hands in his and looked at her closely, smiling. His only words were inexpressible words of loving-kindness. After those few minutes, which seemed like an eternity, the old man said to his wife, “You see, he is a holy man.”

The Dalai Lama would certainly not describe himself as a ‘holy man’—‘nonsense’—he would reply and add: ‘We are all basically the same human beings. We all share the wish to be free from suffering, we all strive towards happiness and have the same kinds of emotions, whether in the East or in the West.’

In fact, another characteristic of the Dalai Lama is his authenticity. He is exactly the same in public and in private, with heads of states or with the person who works in a hotel where he is

staying, seeing them as a fellow human being and showing them all exactly the same kindness, concern, and openness, being fully present with them. I have seen him at the Strasbourg European Parliament, disappearing in the kitchen to greet the cooks, while the chief representatives of the fifteen European countries watched with charmed amusement, standing at the banquet table waiting for him to sit.

He is not concerned with his image and laughs with the same glee when he hears a Chinese official calling him 'a wolf in monks' clothes' and other people describing him as a 'living god.' He enjoys saying, having undergone gall-bladder surgery in India in 2008: "Now it is scientifically proven that the Dalai Lama has no healing power." I believe that this is a manifestation of his inner peace and freedom from the preoccupations that so often afflict our minds: gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and anonymity, pleasant and unpleasant circumstances.

It is not surprising that both in the Dalai Lama's life and in Buddhist contemplative practice, the notions of wisdom and compassion are intimately intertwined with the notion of happiness.

Altruism does not preclude in any way pursuing our own aspirations to flourish in life. In fact, the best way to achieve happiness is to be altruistic. So, according to Buddhism, wishing that *all beings* be free from suffering and achieve happiness, which is the heart of compassion, surely includes yourself, since you are one of those many beings. Your happiness is as desirable and legitimate as anyone else's. This is known as the 'two-fold accomplishment of other's and our own aspirations.'

12. Conclusion

So when the Dalai Lama declares that 'the main purpose of life is happiness' (Dalai Lama and Cutler, 1998), I have come to think that in his mind happiness is inseparable from wisdom (the understanding of the true nature of reality) and compassion. Happiness is incompatible with various mental states that cause us to see reality in a distorted way and to give rise to afflictions such as hatred, jealousy, arrogance and selfish greed.

After having been fortunate to have known the Dalai Lama intimately for many years, I am convinced that the goal of life is a deep state of wellbeing and wisdom, accompanied by love for every being: the immutable simplicity of a good heart. It is therefore only at the price of constant cultivation of wisdom and compassion that we can become really the guardians and inheritors of happiness, true 'felicitors'.

The Dalai Lama's message is always the same and he repeats it to anyone willing to hear it:

Anyone, even if they are hostile, is a living being like me who fears suffering and aspires to happiness. They have every right to be spared suffering and to achieve happiness. That thought makes us feel deep concern for the happiness of others, whether friends or enemies. It is the basis of genuine compassion.

In essence, someone who looks for happiness outside takes everything from the world, someone who cultivates happiness within, has something to give to the world.

Author

Matthieu Ricard
Shechen Monastery and Mind and Life Institute

Publishing Timeline

Received 13 February 2011

Accepted 4 April 2011
Published 20 July 2011

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