

Chapter 2

Life is not just suffering, there are joys too!

Discussion points

- **Life is not suffering, but, of course, there is suffering!**
- **Gradations of worldly happiness**
- **Unworldly happiness**
- **Unconditional happiness- abiding peace and tranquility**

One of the most profound teachings of the Buddha, the so called the First Noble Truth, is usually stated as: “There is suffering (unhappiness)”. It is often misunderstood as presenting a pessimistic view of life by interpreting it as “Life is suffering”. We need to appreciate that ‘unhappiness’ is not being posited as an absolute Truth, but a factual statement about what all of us experience during our lives; and the main objective of prince Siddhartha’s renunciation was to find a way out of this existential unhappiness. Falling ill, missing the last bus to our destination, not succeeding in spite of our best efforts, moving away from near and dear ones for higher education or for livelihood, not succeeding in the competitive examination even after putting all possible effort, losing money due to crashing stocks or burglary, losing friends due to misunderstandings, losing dear ones due to death—all these do cause varying degrees of unhappiness.

Of course, we also experience happiness in life. In many discourses addressed to householders the Buddha outlined the kinds of happiness that a householder can experience and their limitations. Thus in *Ānānya sutta*³ the Buddha identifies four types of

³ AN 4.62 *Ānānya Sutta*

happiness that householders can enjoy:

"There are these four kinds of happiness that can be attained in the proper season, on the proper occasions, by a householder partaking of sensuality. Which four? The happiness of having, the happiness of [making use of] wealth, the happiness of debtlessness, the happiness of blamelessness.

"And what is the happiness of having? There is the case where the son of a good family has wealth earned through his efforts and enterprise, amassed through the strength of his arm, and piled up through the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained. When he thinks, 'I have wealth earned through my efforts and enterprise, amassed through the strength of my arm, and piled up through the sweat of my brow, righteous wealth righteously gained,' he experiences happiness, he experiences happiness. This is called the happiness of having.

"And what is the happiness of [making use of] wealth? There is the case where the son of a good family, using the wealth earned through his efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of his arm, and piled up through the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, partakes of his wealth and makes merit. When he thinks, 'Using the wealth earned through my efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of my arm, and piled up through the sweat of my brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, I partake of wealth and make merit,' he experiences happiness, he experiences happiness. This is called the happiness of [making use of] wealth.

"And what is the happiness of debtlessness? There is the case where the son of a good family owes no debt, great or small, to anyone at all. When he thinks, 'I owe no debt, great or small, to anyone at all,' he experiences happiness, he experiences happiness. This is called the happiness of debtlessness.

"And what is the happiness of blamelessness? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones is endowed with blameless bodily kamma, blameless verbal kamma, blameless mental kamma. When he thinks, 'I am endowed with blameless bodily kamma, blameless verbal kamma, blameless mental kamma,' he experiences happiness, he experiences happiness. This is called the happiness of blamelessness."

All these statements we can easily verify in our lives. Earning wealth righteously, and then using it properly for fulfilling the needs of the family, and the society at large, does give us happiness. But if the wealth is earned through improper means – through corruption, through extortion, through cheating or other criminal methods- we all know it creates a great sense of unease and apprehension, and not happiness. Similarly, using wealth to swell our pride, not sharing it with family and the society at large, creates stinginess and arrogance, not real happiness. In modern times of plastic money and credit card economy, we all can experience the happiness of debtlessness when we payback the last installment of a loan-- unless we have taken another loan to payback the first one! 'What a great relief—no more EMIs to pay!' is the exultation of most people on such rare occasions. The sense of relief and the accompanying joy are quite different [and more abiding] from the other two kinds of happiness. The fourth kind of happiness that the Buddha identifies above is clearly of an entirely different kind, and no wonder he terms it as the best kind of the worldly happiness. It is the happiness which comes from an unsullied conscience. Even if we fulfill the requirements of all the other three kinds of happiness, if we have hurt someone by physical action or by our harsh speech, or if we harbour thoughts of malice or jealousy towards others, we would feel miserable, and not happy. Even our sleep is likely to get disturbed.

In contrast, we can easily verify that doing deeds of generosity and kindness, speaking words of comfort to a grieving man, sharing the joy of those who are successful and cultivating fraternal feeling towards all give us immense happiness.

But these do not exhaust all possibilities of happiness that one can experience.

In another discourse he classifies the kinds of happiness in a different manner into two broad categories, viz. those dependent on sensory pleasures [worldly happiness] and those independent of these [unworldly happiness]⁴:

"Now, O monks, what is worldly happiness? There are these five cords of sense desire: forms cognizable by the eye... sounds cognizable by the ear... odors cognizable by the nose... flavors cognizable by the tongue... tangibles cognizable by the body that are wished for and desired, agreeable and endearing, associated with sense desire and alluring. It is the happiness and gladness that arises dependent on these five cords of sense desire which are called 'worldly happiness.'

"Now what is unworldly happiness? Quite secluded from sense desires, secluded from unwholesome states of mind, a monk enters upon and abides in the first meditative absorption... With the stilling of thought-conception and discursive thinking, he enters upon and abides in the second meditative absorption... With the fading away of joy as well, he dwells in equanimity, mindfully and fully aware he feels happiness within, and enters upon and abides in the third meditative absorption of which the Noble Ones announce: 'He dwells in happiness who has equanimity and is mindful.' This is called 'unworldly happiness.'

Thus all the four kinds of happiness mentioned earlier are essentially 'worldly happiness' being dependent upon interactions of five senses⁵. Another category of happiness is introduced in this discourse, namely those resulting from exalted states of mind experienced during various meditative absorptions. These are independent of the five physical senses and their objects, and depend entirely on cultivation of the mind. The kind of happiness experienced during these meditative absorptions is much different from that experienced in worldly sensory interactions. But even these are impermanent, as these depend of conditions suitable to attainment of the meditative absorptions. There is, however, another kind of happiness, that arising from destruction of all defilements, which the Buddha terms as 'still greater unworldly happiness':

"And what is the still greater unworldly happiness? When a taint-free monk looks upon his mind that is freed of greed, freed of hatred, freed of delusion, then there arises happiness. This is called a 'still greater unworldly happiness.'

⁴ SN 36.31 Nirāmisā Sutta

⁵ The Buddha identifies eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin and mind as the six senses; their corresponding objects of interaction being the forms, sounds, odours, tastes, tactile touch, and thought. Here the pleasures resulting from the interaction of the five 'physical' senses are classified as 'worldly' [Pali word: sāmisā] and those resulting from exalted states of the mind are termed 'unworldly' [Pali word: nirāmisā]. In an alternative more literal translation these two categories are termed as 'corporeal' and 'incorporeal' ; SN 36.31: Nirāmisā Sutta

Once the mind is completely freed from defilements, the happiness is no longer dependent on external conditions. The pure mind has intrinsic characteristics of loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity⁶. A person with pure mind thus abides in peace and harmony with himself and with the world. It is this happiness that the Buddha advises us to strive for - surely a worthy, albeit challenging, goal. In the Dhammapada⁷ we find a pithy verse elucidating this point:

Health is the greatest gift, contentment is the greatest wealth, trust is the best of relationships, Nibbāna is the greatest bliss

Nibbāna is the name given to the experience of complete freedom from all attachments, which happens when all mental defilements have been extinguished. All other kinds of 'happiness' – be it the happiness obtained through sensory pleasures, or that obtained through meditative absorptions -- are impermanent as these are dependent on conditions. For how long can one 'enjoy' the happiness of earning wealth, or enjoying sensory pleasures using this wealth, or the happiness of being free from debts? All these wither off soon, leaving only a lingering memory which can cause great anguish when due to changed conditions – the wealth getting exhausted or the sense-organs themselves becoming weak-- it is no longer possible to enjoy these pleasures any more. Even while a sensory pleasure is being enjoyed - a musical treat or a grand reunion dinner – soon there sets in a satiation as one recalls the next appointment or the pending assignment, and one begins to long for it to end soon so that the next urgent task could be taken up. The craving for happiness of deep meditative absorption can also lead to great unhappiness when conditions change and meditative absorption is not possible.

Indeed there is happiness in life, but these usual 'happiness-es' are not fully satisfying since these have ingrained in them the seeds of future suffering due to their inherent nature of impermanence and dependence on conditions.. No wonder the Buddha identifies these too as forms of 'suffering'. Unless we understand this deeply and have an experiential insight into the nature of suffering, there is no possibility of getting motivated towards the abiding happiness resulting from extinction of defilements. That is the reason that the Buddha lays so much emphasis on 'understanding' suffering.

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⁶ Also known as divine abodes, being the states of mind that arise in enlightened being

⁷ Dhammapada, verse 204.