

## On Happiness

Many years ago, a good friend and mentor told me that in Buddhist thinking, the source of all unhappiness is to want what one does not need. My friend added that we need air, water, food, and a certain amount of clothing and shelter.

Left out of this concept, it seemed to me, is whether getting what one wants yields happiness. Certainly, my friend on many occasions took great joy in getting something he wanted, and so have I, and so have you. It seems that the Buddhist idea does not address how to be happy, but rather how not to be unhappy.

Recently, a friend of mine, whose husband died a month ago, was lamenting her fate: good things that would be no more, a future that would be bleak in many respects, owing to her age, stage, and lack of resources for meeting the many new challenges before her. She was very unhappy.

Of course, at a time like that, one says all the encouraging things one can think of, in the hope that some may help. My favorite bromide is, "In this life, the bad news is that nothing lasts. In this life, the good news is that nothing lasts." As I was carrying on this way, I wished I had a more profound insight that I could offer her, and not least offer myself. I said to her:

Y'know, if you did not feel grief, you would have an emotional problem much more serious than feeling grief. The same is true for your regrets over lost pleasures and fear of future pains. No one, absolutely no one, escapes the travails of human existence, and the longer you live the more you will experience. If you had the choice, I asked, would you rather be the mourner, or the deceased? She had no trouble responding, "I'd rather be alive."

OK then, I said, do not mistake these perfectly normal for unhappiness. You are suffering one of the common pleasures of being alive. If you are not happy, it is because you are doing something wrong. In the general case, you want things you do not need. I suddenly had a profound insight into the Buddhist dictum quoted above.

The source of unhappiness, I would like to say now, is to want and to do things that are not compatible with who you are and where you find yourself now. All that matters is that you do day by day whatever is most beneficial for you. In every change there is also an opportunity that did not exist before. Look for it.

In the novel "The Red and the Black," Julien Sorel has failed to find a place in the world, by turns the Church (black) and the Army (red). Julien, in a psychotic break, attempts to murder a woman he once loved. At the end of the book, Julien is in prison, sentenced to hanging the following morning. He is happy, and he has never been so happy.

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