

Happiness – a natural and healthy human impulse

Wanting to be happy... is a natural and healthy human impulse. How can we wish for the happiness of others if we are alienated from our own desire for happiness?

Unfortunately, many of us in the West were given to understand when we were young that it is selfish to want happiness for oneself, and we therefore feel unnecessarily guilty about wanting it. As a result, we can feel guilty even about being happy. 'After all,' the perverse logic goes, 'with all my selfish desires for my own happiness, how could I possibly deserve to be happy?' This further produces the still more perverse belief that if we are to make spiritual progress, we will necessarily have to subject ourselves to great suffering. Such a deep-down belief that you are undeserving, even basically wicked, will inhibit your practice of the Dharma from the very beginning.

This unfortunate state of affairs arises partly from our failure to distinguish between happiness and the good on the one hand and what is pleasant on the other. If we are to lead a spiritual life, it is imperative that we distinguish between happiness and pleasure. We have to realize that doing what is good for us is not the same thing as doing what we like or what we enjoy. However, it can sometimes be so difficult to disentangle the two that it is tempting to assume that the good cannot be pleasant, and that the pleasant is bound to do us harm. To avoid following one's blind desires, one may even make it a rule always to follow the advice of others and do what they think is best for one. From this it is only a short step to thinking that one's natural desire to benefit oneself and to be happy is reprehensible.

If you find yourself in this sort of dilemma, it might be best just to do what you enjoy doing, regardless of people's approval or disapproval, and in this way re-establish contact with your feelings. Ideally, we should act spontaneously, with ease and flexibility, rather than acting out of a sense of being hedged in on every side by self-recrimination or out of fear of transgressing some immutable moral law. Having said that, our wider aim should be to reach out beyond our personal happiness towards what is of profounder concern to us, namely, benefiting others. If you succeed in doing this, you are being a true friend to yourself.

Sangharakshita, *Living Ethically*, p.17-18

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