

Sad is not really bad¹

One of the most difficult questions we can ask ourselves is “Am I really happy?” It’s worse when someone else asks us this same or similar question. We invariably answer, “Oh yes, of course...” and then we come up with some politically correct pitch.

The point is that we do not want others to have a “wrong” impression of us. At least, we want to appear happy so that people respect us, we can work well, we get things done, or and that we are “in charge.”

The reality is more painful, especially if we prefer to be honest people. We are not as happy as we would want to be. We even know we have a dark side (and wish people would not know about it). So we go through life always showing our bright side to others, like the moon orbiting the earth.

The rule of thumb here is that none of us are really happy, even when we say so, or think so. More often than not, we are either lying to others or to ourselves. Or perhaps, we are being politically polite to others so that we can get on with them and with what is at hand.

The good news is that if this is the case with us (and we are honest to ourselves), we are in the majority. How many parents, for example, will tell others that they are really happy with their children? For various reasons, we feel we could have done better at parenting. The same thing goes for our family situation. Or our marriage or partnership or relationship. Or our job situation. Or our life itself. We could have done better, so we think.

Despite such setbacks and other human lack or loss, we still feel we are all right: we can and will do better somehow. This kind of thinking, or rather feeling, is, however, often in the passive mode, lingering at the back of our minds. However, if we really care to examine this aspect of our thinking and feeling, we would be richly rewarded by understanding the meaning of our lives.

In fact, all this is encoded in the first two of the Buddha’s four noble truths. The first truth is that we are not really happy: despite everything, something is still lacking in our lives. The second truth is that we want to solve that lack, to fill that emptiness in our lives. These two truths give meaning to our lives, that is, *we are not really happy and we want to be happy*.

At this point, we are only just beginning to understand our humanity. But the point is clear: life has *no* meaning, but we *give* meaning to it. If life is meaningless, it is because we have not decided what meaning to put into it. The truth is that we are more likely to allow others to do this most personal task for us, and in doing so even take over our lives. We have handed our remote to another!

Now where do we get ideas for meaning in life? Very often, we are conditioned by our parents, family, community, teachers, friends, work and religion. More often than not (consciously or unconsciously), we are culturally conditioned. Ignorance and superstition are often culturally transmitted; so are values and ingenuity.

Religion tries or pretends to help by putting meaning into our lives. But religious meaning is at best a prefabricated, squinted, way of looking at things from some cultural view-

¹ This reflection is inspired by Sarah Berry’s “A sad life need not be a bad life,” *The Age* (Australia) 24 Jan 2013: see [The Sydney Morning Herald](#).

point. Judaism is Jewish; Christianity is Middle Eastern; Hinduism is Indian. Even Buddhism is Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, Japanese or Western.²

Religion feeds on our inability or unwillingness to see true realities. Religion, for example, wants us to believe in some imaginary invisible Being, and that if we were to love and obey Him (the men must have come up with such a patriarchal idea), we would be well rewarded, in this life itself or surely in the life to come.

Otherwise, and here's the rub, we would be punished, say, by hell-fire, or worse be ostracized. Thankfully such truth and talk are not as popular today as just, say, a hundred years ago. If such a key religious idea can change, surely more key religious ideas could change in due time. In other words, religious truths or "faith" truths are not absolute or immutable.

Religion ruled the dark ages of our history and where science and knowledge are non-existent or nascent. We need to ask ourselves what wholesome good can religion contribute that science and modern knowledge cannot? Perhaps, if religion were to examine itself why it arose in the first place, and why even today we feel drawn to it at some point in our lives, we could have some vital insights into better lives.

But if we look around today, organized religions are little more than reconditioning mechanisms where believers weekly or regularly "keep their faith" so that nothing happens to them. We become like prehistoric insects forever frozen and fossilized in the amber of faith and dogma.

If we allow fantasies to take over our lives, we might miss the reality that is right before us. These here-and-now realities are telling us that, even just the way we are, life is not really that bad, especially when we begin to understand that this is just our view of life.

We need to accept ourselves just as we are, without any notion of sin or guilt (religion's most pathological inventions). We then go on to ask the right questions,³ such as "How do I better myself?" Just let the answers come naturally of themselves, and they will come often at a most unexpected turn.

The next thing is to ask ourselves (ordained or lay) why we think this way. Is it because we have been brought up that way? Is it because our friends and peers hold such notions and we value their approval of us? Is it because of our religious indoctrination? Is it because such views and beliefs authenticate or justify our status or livelihood?

We should find some time in our lives, busy or not, to simply be ourselves (as if we had no name, no status, no title, no work, no wealth, no religion; as if we have nothing). "What if I am free to think for myself what I really want to be?" or "How do I really want to be happy?" We have put ourselves above everything else, just for this vital formative moment of self-search. No one else can do this for us, and we should not let anyone else do so. For whatever we decide, we have to live with it.

This courageous self-search is in fact the beginning of true happiness for us, especially if we are able to envision an ideal life or goal for ourselves. It's like when our Bodhisattva Siddhattha sees the first three sights of an old man, a sick man and a dead man. He thinks deeply why decay, disease and death must ravage us? Is there a way out? Then he

² This should not be any problem, however, if we are able to understand and accept where ethnicity ends and spirituality takes precedence. If we are able to rise above ethnic limitations, then we can be better "Buddhists" of a more global community. Otherwise, Buddhism is merely a tool in ethnic integration, predominance or even triumphalism.

³ See Reflection on "Who what why how? (R277), [link](#).

sees a happy and peaceful holy man, and at once gets the hint of the solution. He knows he has to give up his worldly happiness for a greater happiness.

We may neither see nor attain such a goal, but ideals are like distant and constant stars: we may not reach them, but we can chart our course by them. This is an application of the third noble truth – that of the goal of true happiness and liberation, nirvana – in our daily lives.

Now that we have a good idea of what we *want* to be and what we *can* be, we need to connect with others who share our vision, or who can inspire us further in our goal. How do we discover or meet such people because no one wears tags or labels for such high ideals? This is our next life's quest.

More often than not we would meet the wrong people, wrong friends, wrong work, wrong teachers, wrong teachings, wrong relationships. Any of these can be detrimental to our happiness – that is, if we do not know the Dharma. This is like the Bodhisattva going to wrong teachers, or to those who could not really help him. Then he goes on to try self-mortification and almost kills himself. But he learns from all this. He finds the “middle way.”

Finally, when he has awakened and realizes the truth, when someone asks him who his teacher is, he answers that he has none. This is because he has worked out the final question and answer for himself. If life is a puzzle, it is a puzzle unique to each of us: we have to work it out ourselves. It's like being in a maze: we have to keep moving. The idea is never to stop, not too long anyway, even for a rest. As long as we keep moving, keep looking, we will find the way out of suffering, we will find the meaning to life.

Once we are out of the maze, we might meet many others who are just going into it, or we could hear them lost in it. There's no way we can tell them what to do because we are not in that maze. However, like what I'm doing here now, we can and must tell them to keep on moving. Perhaps they could stop at forks and junctions to recall which paths they have taken before and those paths not yet taken. They, and we, must choose where to go.

For various reasons, helping others may not always make us happy. Maybe we give the wrong advice, or maybe the other party does not appreciate us, or maybe we think are not doing enough, or maybe we tire of helping others because there seems to be no end to it. The point is that we are learning something from all this: that there are a lot of people out there who are not as fortunate as we are.

Once we begin to understand the meaning of all this, our actions too become more meaningful and purposeful. Our past is always a failure if we think of it. The past often has a negative impact on our happiness, but it puts greater meaning into our efforts to reach a higher happiness.

Happiness is often our ability to simply see good in the present moment, enjoying or sharing it. Meaning comes from seeing a pattern of conditions from the past into the present, so that we have a good idea what the future would be like. We may not be able to predict such a future, not accurately anyway, but we should wisely prepare ourselves for it.

If we do not understand the nature of conditionality, of many causes bringing about many effects, we might resort to the idea of a single cause, even a “first cause.” If we see meaning in life, then we also know that when anything goes wrong or does not turn out as expected, there is *no one* single cause of any problem, *no one* single person to be

blamed, not even ourselves. We are all conditioned beings: wisdom begins with understanding this.

if we think that our life's aim is only to seek happiness, what happens then when we have achieved it? Do we simply stay in the rut of that happiness living a cyclic and predictable life? Often this is what some religions do to us: we think we have found life's answer: everything has come to a stop. How different is this from the animals that live cyclic predictable lives in their remote abodes? The only difference is perhaps our "happy" lives are more complex.

To honestly look at ourselves and to accept ourselves at this very moment is to see the meaning within. All meaning comes from within, never from outside. Only this inner meaning can wholesomely empower us to understand and accept our lives and those of others. This meaning further encourages (*en-cour-ages*), puts the heart of courage, in us to seek beyond even happiness itself for something higher, that is, "awakening." And this quest must begin now before our happiness domesticates us into its self-satisfied but dependent pets.

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