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What is the Cause of Happiness? Psychological Theories and the Buddhist View

ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, research in psychology has largely focused on understanding psychological disorders and developing effective treatments. Even the most successful of these treatments, however, do not provide ultimate happiness and meaning in one's life. For the past 40 years now, the emerging field of positive psychology has been examining the causes and mechanisms of happiness. This same goal has been the aim of Buddhism for the past 2,500 years.

This paper examines different theories regarding happiness and its cause. Part one presents the psychological theories and research relating to this topic, and part two explains the Buddhist view of the cause of happiness. The final section explores the similarities and differences between these two perspectives.

KEY WORDS

happiness, positive psychology, buddhism

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According to Buddhism, “even the smallest being wants to achieve happiness and avoid suffering”¹ and Buddha gave teachings to help people achieve this goal. Today the topic of happiness is becoming an increasingly popular area of research, particularly in the field of positive psychology. From these two perspectives, we can examine theories regarding the cause of happiness and compare the ideas present in modern psychology with those found in the ancient tradition of Buddhism.

I. PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF HAPPINESS

DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

A psychological examination of happiness must begin with its definition. It is difficult to ascertain an agreed upon definition, both in philosophical and psychological terms. There are many theories aiming to describe the phenomenon and each of them stress different aspects using various nomenclature. In research literature one can find terms like: psychological well-being, subjective well-being, quality of life and happiness. “Subjective well-being is defined as cognitive and emotional evaluation of one’s life. This evaluation includes emotional reactions and cognitive judgments concerning satisfaction and fulfillment”². This definition provides a rounded description of happiness by connecting the hedonistic and eudemonistic approaches and offering an explanation of the relationship between them.

Subjective well-being can be measured many ways by examining various aspects of human life at its different stages. Of these different possibilities, one can distinguish three main approaches. The first concerns a global evaluation of life and its qualities and is measured through a self evaluation of satisfaction with life and its quality. The second concentrates more on memories of past emotions. People are asked about the frequency of experiencing both positive and negative emotions over certain period of time (e.g. week or month). The third approach measures emotional reactions occurring more than once over certain period of time and calculates the average on such a basis³.

¹ O. Nydahl O., *Budda i miłość*, tłum. W. Tracewski, Warszawa 2007, p. 11.

² E. Diener, R. E. Lucas, S. Oishi, *Subjective Well-being: The Science of Happiness and Life Satisfaction*, [in:] *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, eds. C. R. Synder, S. J. Lopez, New York 2002, p. 63.

³ C. Kim-Prieto, E. Diener, M. Tamir, C. Scollon, M. Diener, *Integrating the Diverse*

 HEDONISM AND EUDEMONISM

Most theories in the field of positive psychology are based on one of two concepts of happiness: hedonistic or eudemonistic. Both have their roots in ancient Greece, and are still today the object of the main controversies surrounding the topic of happiness. These two theories provide entirely different explanations of the essence of happiness.

In the hedonistic approach, currently represented in psychology by Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz, among others, happiness is defined as an accepted balance between pleasures and stresses. This perspective was first expounded on by the Greek philosopher Aristip (4 B.C.) who claimed that people aspire to satisfy their ad hoc desires⁴. As Watermann claims, hedonistic pleasure occurs every time a positive affect is connected to the satisfaction of needs, whether they are physical, intellectual, or social. Thus, researchers of happiness using this approach refer mostly to positive and negative emotions and use different methods to measure them.

The concept of eudemonism was explained by Aristotle in Nicoma's Ethic as conscious life in harmony with one's daimon – one's true self. This concept lies at the heart of psychological research on self-realisation, the meaning of life and the cognitive evaluation of happiness and among followers of this trend there are such names as M. Seligman or C. Ryff⁵.

THE CAUSES AND CORRELATES OF HAPPINESS

In the literature concerning subjective well-being, one can find the tendency to focus on the correlation between well-being and external factors such as income, age or marital status. From the basis of this established correlation, studies are now shifting their focus to better understand what causal relationship may exist between external factors and happiness. Some studies are examining the possibility that external factors cause happiness, while other studies are investigating how internal processes may cause the perception of external conditions as gratifying. There are also attempts to combine both of these approaches using a bidirectional model wherein the potential interaction

Definitions of Happiness: A Time-Sequential Framework of Subjective Well-Being, "Journal of Happiness Studies" 2005, No. 6, p. 263.

⁴ N. White, *A Brief History of Happiness*, Oxford 2006, p. 32.

⁵ A. S. Waterman, *Two Conception of Happiness: Contrasts of Personal Expressiveness (Eudaimonia) and Hedonic Enjoyment*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 1993, No. 64, p. 678.

of these two possibilities is explored⁶. As these possibilities are investigated however, the results from the cross-sectional research do not allow definite conclusions to be drawn about cause and effect relationships.

Viewed from different approaches, happiness can be defined as a personality trait or as a temporary state. When viewed as a trait, happiness refers to one's predisposition to experience satisfaction frequently, in which case there is the possibility at any given time that a happy person is feeling unhappy. This approach assumes that a person experiences positive emotions frequently because they have the stable trait of happiness. When viewed as a state, happiness refers to a specific moment in time when one is experiencing positive emotions, and therefore would not apply to a person when they are feeling unhappy⁷.

EXTERNAL FACTORS AND HAPPINESS

According to theories that view happiness as a state, it is understood to be the result of positive external circumstances, situations, and demographic variables. However, these factors together explain only 20% of the variance observed in subjective well-being. The most frequently investigated variables are income, age, sex, employment, education, intelligence, religion, marital status⁸.

1. DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Most research that examines a correlation between age and well-being shows ambiguous results. The popular view that younger people are happier was demonstrated not to be true long ago⁹. Though studies have found that younger people report experiencing positive emotions more often than older people, these results do not necessarily suggest that younger people are happier. What these studies have demonstrated is that younger people experience strong emotions more often, both positive and negative. Other research measuring happiness at different ages has shown that during an average lifespan, the positive affect diminishes over time while satisfaction with life increases¹⁰.

⁶ C. E. Lance, G. J. Lautenschlager, C. E. Sloan, P. E. Varca, *A Comparison Between Bottom-Up, Top-Down, and Bidirectional Models of Relationship Between Global and Life Facet Satisfaction*, "Journal of Personality" 1989, No. 57, p. 603.

⁷ E. Diener, *Subjective Well-Being*, "Psychological Bulletin" 1984, No. 95, p. 565.

⁸ E. Diener, E. M. Suh, R. E. Lucas, H. L. Smith, *Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress*, "Psychological Bulletin" 1999, No. 125, p. 278.

⁹ W. Wilson, *Correlates of Avowed Happiness*, "Psychological Bulletin" 1967, No. 67, p. 294.

¹⁰ E. Diener, E. M. Suh, R. E. Lucas, H. L. Smith, op. cit., p. 291.

Though research suggests that the general level of happiness is fairly equal in both sexes, data also show that depression occurs more often among women. This surprising paradox may be explained by women's tendency to experience stronger emotions in general, both positive and negative¹¹.

Another positive correlation has been shown between satisfaction at work and subjective well-being. The causal relationship cannot be determined and the variables that may be affecting one's well-being would be difficult to pinpoint. It is certain, however, that unemployment is strongly correlated with higher stress and lower life satisfaction¹².

Most research shows a weak yet statistically significant correlation between education and well-being. However, when the variables of income and employment status are factored in, no correlation is found. Analysis suggests that despite the possibility of higher education leading to higher life satisfaction, it also often leads to a greater difficulty in satisfying aspirations and expectations¹³. A similar relationship is found between happiness and intelligence. Some studies show a strong correlation between these variables, while others do not. As Wilson noticed, intelligence itself probably does not have a direct influence on the level of happiness experienced, but constructs related to it, such as social or emotional intelligence, may be accurate predictors of one's happiness¹⁴.

The results from many opinion polls suggest that religion has a positive influence on subjective well-being, but the relationship is not strong. One explanation attributes the correlation to the social support received from people within the religious community¹⁵. Another explanation, proposed by Ellison, addresses the role of cognitive differences. According to this researcher, religion provides certain frames of interpretation that lead individuals to experience situations as meaningful, as opposed to accidental occurrences¹⁶. The majority of research in this field, however, is not representative of the general population as the participant groups are almost all exclusively Christian.

Research conducted throughout many countries has demonstrated that close relationships, especially marriage, are significantly correlated with well-being.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 292.

¹² M. Argyle, *Causes and Correlate of Happiness*, [in:] *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, eds. D. Kahneman, E. Diener, N. Schwarz, New York 1999, p. 357.

¹³ J. Czapiński, *Psychologia pozytywna. Nauka o szczęściu, zdrowiu, sile i cnotach człowieka*, Warszawa 2004, p. 246.

¹⁴ E. Diener, E. M. Suh, R. E. Lucas, H. L. Smith, op. cit., p. 294.

¹⁵ M. Aryle, op. cit., p. 359.

¹⁶ C. G. Ellison, *Religious Involvement and Subjective Well-Being*, "Journal of Health and Social Behavior" 1991, No. 32, p. 83.

Married couples are happier than those who are divorced, widowed, separated or single¹⁷. Psychologists have two explanations for this correlation. First, longitudinal research shows that happy people are more attractive and therefore more likely to find a partner and stay married. Second, marriage brings a feeling of security, provides opportunities for psychological and physical intimacy, and allows individuals to confirm their identity by having children and filling the social roles of a spouse or parent¹⁸. These explanations are similar to those seen in relation to subjective happiness and friendship. From one point of view, happy people are more often chosen as friends, and from the other, people with friends are happier as a result of satisfying their need for social affiliation.

2. INCOME

A vast amount of research shows the difference between rich and poor countries in terms of the population's subjective well-being. As one would predict, inhabitants of richer countries have significantly higher levels of happiness than those in poor countries¹⁹. When countries are examined individually however, no significant difference in subjective well-being is found between rich and poor individuals within the same nation. It appears that income is positively correlated with well-being up until the point at which basic needs are satisfied²⁰.

Interesting conclusions can be drawn from research examining lottery winners. These studies show that as soon as the short-lived joy of winning has passed, these individuals are no happier than before winning²¹. Some researchers explain this effect with the "hedonistic mill" theory, which suggests people adapt quickly to new situations which cause happiness and return to a hedonistic neutrality²². By analysing the behaviour of lottery winners, one can conclude that although the winner's life situation has changed dramatically, their approach to life has remained the same, and therefore their well-being remains unchanged.

¹⁷ E. Diener, op. cit., p. 556.

¹⁸ A. Carr, *Positive Psychology. The Science of Happiness and Human Strengths*, East Sussex 2004, p. 41.

¹⁹ E. Diener, E. M. Suh, R. E. Lucas, H. L. Smith, op. cit., p. 288.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 287–288.

²¹ P. Brickman, D. Coates, R. Janoff-Bulman, *Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 1978, No. 36, p. 920.

²² E. Diener, R. E. Lucas, C. N. Scollon, *Beyond the Hedonic Treadmill*, "American Psychologist" 2006, No. 61, p. 305.

When attempting to explain the influence of income on well-being, researchers have concluded that there is no direct effect. It is assumed that the social status and power connected with money have a more direct influence on well-being than the money itself²³.

3. BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

A considerable amount of research has shown a positive correlation between well-being and health, particularly subjective evaluations of health and indicators such as amount of sleep or physical activity²⁴. Many people believe that happiness leads to good health, but a causal relationship has not been determined scientifically. Research shows that healthy people are happier than sick people, and happy people are healthier than unhappy people²⁵.

INTERNAL PROCESSES AND HAPPINESS

1. PERSONALITY

From research conducted with twins, Lykken and Tellegen have concluded that 40-50% of the variance in current well-being and 80% of long-term well-being is hereditary. It may be assumed that short periods of happiness are dependent on life circumstances, while longer periods of happiness (ten years or more) show more stability and are conditioned by personality features and genes²⁶.

The predisposition to experience happiness or unhappiness causes a relative stability in the level of happiness experienced, regardless of changing situations over time. Researchers have shown that extroverts experience more positive emotions than introverts regardless of the amount of social contacts, but found no difference between the two groups in the degree of negative emotions experienced. A difference was found in the case of neurotic people, who experience more negative emotions than people with a low intensity of this characteristic²⁷.

²³ E. Diener, op. cit., p. 553.

²⁴ A. Campbell, P. E. Converse, W. L. Rodgers, *The Quality of American Life*, New York 1987, p. 67.

²⁵ A. Zautra, A. Hempel, *Subjective Well-Being and Physical Health: A Narrative Literature Review with Suggestions for Future Research*, "International Journal of Aging and Human Development" 1984, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 91-110.

²⁶ D. Lykken, A. Tellegen, *Happiness is Stochastic Phenomenon*, "Psychological Science" 1996, No. 7, p. 187.

²⁷ C. L. Rusing, R. J. Larsen, *Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Susceptibility to Positive and Negative Affect: A Test of Two Theoretical Models*, "Personality and Individual Differences" 1997, No. 22, p. 608.

One of the most interesting explanations for the difference between extroverts and introverts suggests that the characteristic of extroversion is the result of experiencing more positive emotions. Another explanation refers to matching personality with environment; that is, people may be predisposed to experience more positive emotions, but the emotions arise only when positive circumstances happen in their life. On the basis of their research, Diener, Fujita and Pavot come to the conclusion that personality may even create situations which increase or decrease subjective well-being²⁸.

2. OPTIMISM

One of the suggested causes of subjective well-being is a particular personality trait - optimism. Psychologists view this trait as a kind of naivety, an illusion essential for survival. The phenomenon is often described as self-deception, positive illusion, or as is found in literature, Pollyanna syndrome. Many researchers claim that pessimism is a more realistic approach to the world, but the majority of healthy people undergo positive illusions. Optimists have stronger motivation to act, are able to deal better with problems, and are happier²⁹. The personality trait of optimism is characterised by the predisposition to expect positive things to happen in the future. This leads to the application of effective coping strategies which focus on solving a problem³⁰.

Another approach to the phenomenon of optimism was proposed by Seligman, who defined it as a method of explaining circumstances. Optimists differ from pessimists in the way they attribute failures, which they ascribe to external factors which are specific and unstable, such as unfavourable circumstances, whereas successes are attributed to stable, long-term and internal causes. An extreme pessimistic approach may lead to the conviction that one has no influence over anything which results in "learned helplessness", characterised by failure to take action even when there is a possibility for change. Optimism and pessimism are developed in childhood and are largely depend on the style of explanation children have seen their parents use. There is also a method to modify an individual's pessimistic tendencies based on the model of cognitive therapy³¹.

²⁸ E. Diener, E. M. Suh, R. E. Lucas, H. L. Smith, op. cit., p. 281.

²⁹ A. Carr, op. cit., pp. 97–98.

³⁰ M. Scheier, C. Carter, *Optimism, Coping and Health: Assessment and Implication of Generalized Outcome Expectancies*, "Health Psychology" 2004, No. 4, p. 222.

³¹ M. Seligman, *Optymizmu można się nauczyć*, tłum. A. Jankowski, Poznań 1996, p. 67.

3. COMPARATIVE THEORIES

Comparative theories examine the influence of comparisons on happiness. Michalos suggests that people compare themselves with others, but also relate to past conditions, aspirations, needs and goals³².

Psychologists often investigate social comparisons. It is well known that individuals who make downward comparisons (i.e., with people they consider weaker in the field of the comparison) are happier than people who make upward comparisons. However, more complex analysis shows that both upward and downward comparisons may increase or decrease subjective well-being³³. Social comparisons do not have long-term influence on the level of happiness experienced. In particular, happy people seem to be less influenced by social comparisons³⁴.

Aspirations, or the difference between the present state and that which one would like to achieve, are also considered to be a factor that influences happiness. Aspirations that are either too high or too low may decrease well-being and lead to fear or boredom. However, it is now considered that the act of working toward one's aspirations has a stronger influence on happiness than actually fulfilling them³⁵.

4. THEORIES OF GOALS AND MOTIVATION

According to the theory of goals, happiness is a result of accomplishing conscious goals and desires or satisfying less conscious needs. Some researchers emphasise the importance of having goals, which increase well-being by giving meaning to daily life³⁶. It is possible that happiness does not come from achieving the goal, but rather from the process of working toward it.

³² A. C. Michalos, *Multiple Discrepancies Theory (MDT)*, "Social Indicators Research" 1985, No. 16, p. 350.

³³ B. P. Buunk, R. L. Collins, S. E. Taylor, N. W. van Yperen, G. A. Dakot, *The Affective Consequence of Social Comparison: Either Direction has its Ups and Downs*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 1990, No. 59, p. 1240.

³⁴ S. Lyubomirsky, *Why Are Some People Happier Than Others?*, "American Psychologist" 2001, No. 56, p. 242.

³⁵ M. Csikszentmihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York 1990, p. 45.

³⁶ N. Cantor, C. A. Sanderson, *Life Task Participation and Well-Being. The Importance of Taking Life in Daily Life*, [in:] *Well-Being: The Foundation of Hedonic Psychology*, eds. D. Kahneman, E. Diener, N. Schwarz, New York 1999.

Burnstein, Schultheiss and Grassman demonstrated that only progress toward goals consistent with motivation was correlated with subjective well-being³⁷.

External motivation depends on the expected result of an action. In the context of Ryan and Deci's theory, internal motivation, which is connected to a higher level of well-being, is "a tendency toward spontaneous interest, exploration and becoming familiar with new pieces of information, abilities and sensation"³⁸. These authors describe a continuum of self-determination with the extremes of internal motivation and non-motivation within which one may distinguish different grades of external motivation.

The majority of internal motivation is connected with so-called "autotelic" activity, which we perform not for external benefit, but because the activity itself brings an internal and immediate gratification. Michaly Csikszentmihaly, who created the concept called "flow", explains that happiness is achieved when a person has the conditions to experience flow, a state of full commitment in whatever one is doing. Such an autotelic person experiences more positive states and has a stronger conviction that life is useful and meaningful³⁹.

ASPIRING FOR HAPPINESS

Despite research that suggests our level of happiness is biologically determined, the majority of psychologists claim that over time happiness can be changed as a result of conscious effort. Data show that individuals may change the amount of experienced happiness by noticing patterns of thinking and altering the way one interprets the world. According to the broaden-and-build theory from Barbara Fredrickson, frequent experiences of positive emotions over time leads to greater openness, improved ability to respond to difficult situations, increase in personal resources, and further experiences of positive emotions. Fredrickson asserts if a person's experiences of positive emotions in relation to negative ones exceeds 3:1, such a person is in a so-called ascending spiral and will experience "flourishing", an optimal state of functioning connected with well-being, productivity, progress and resilience⁴⁰.

³⁷ J. C. Brunstein, O. C. Schultheiss, R. Grässmann, *Personal Goals and Emotional Well-Being: The Moderating Role of Motive Dispositions*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 1998, No. 75, p. 496.

³⁸ R. Deci, R. Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior*, New York 1985, p. 58.

³⁹ M. Csikszentmihaly, op. cit., p. 39.

⁴⁰ B. Fredrickson, *Positivity*, New York 2009, p. 33.

II. THE BUDDHIST VIEW

Buddhist teachings are traditionally categorised into three levels: Small Way (Hinayana), Great Way (Mahayana), and Diamond Way (Vajrayana)⁴¹. Each of these levels teach a different system of ethics connected with view and practices. As Lama Jigme Rinpoche writes, “It does not mean that there are three separate categories of practices. This division demonstrates more difference in the personal attitude of the practitioner and his individual abilities”⁴². Each level is more demanding than the one before and contains the teachings of the previous one. Psychology inspired by Buddhism tends to focus on the first of these levels⁴³.

SMALL WAY

The first people who wanted to learn from Buddha after his enlightenment were egoists interested in their own liberation from suffering and achieving peace of mind. Buddha taught them hiragana teachings called “the Four Noble Truths”, which concern the theories of cause and effect (karma) and the emptiness of ego. As Frauwallner explains, “in Buddhism, all factors which create personality and which may be considered as real ego are grouped in five aggregates (skandhas). There are: form or - in this context a much more suitable term – body (rupa), feeling (vedana), perception (samjna), dispositions (samskara), and consciousness (vijñana)”⁴⁴. The emptiness of the subject means the lack of a unifying principle which could be the bases for the five skandhas. The realisation of this is enlightenment in hinayana. The way towards this goal is to respect the cause and effect found in daily life, firstly by avoiding negative actions and engaging in positive ones. Negative actions are understood as those which cause harm to others and positive actions as those which bring benefit. Acting in this way, the practitioner may achieve relief from emotional confusion, or individual liberation (pratimoksa)⁴⁵.

⁴¹ Typology followed by the article is specific for some of Vajrayana schools and does not reflect the view of each of mentioned schools.

⁴² Jigme Rinpoche, *Po prostu praktykujemy*, tłum. W. Tracewski, „Diamentowa Droga, kwartalnik Związku Buddyjskiego Karma Kagyu” 2008, No. 44, p. 33.

⁴³ Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, *Buddhist Ethic*, trans. the Kalu Rinpoche Translation Group, New York 2003, p. 303.

⁴⁴ E. Frauwallner, *Historia filozofii indyjskiej*, tłum. L. Żylicz, t. 1, Warszawa 1990, p. 206.

⁴⁵ Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, op. cit., p. 87.

GREAT WAY

On this level, Buddha taught altruists interested in activity that would benefit all beings. Great Way teachings concern compassion connected with the Bodhisattva attitude, the wish to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all, and the understanding of emptiness, both of ego and phenomena. Emptiness of phenomena is understood to mean lack of substance which, according to non-Buddhist philosophies, guaranteed reality and independent existence to all things. That is why Buddhist philosophy describes phenomena (dharma) constituted of the mind, not of things. Balanced development of wisdom and compassion understood in this way is the basis of Mahayana.

The basis of ethics in the Great Way is an altruistic motivation to act for the benefit of all. The focus shifts from actions in the external world to the internal conditions that cause them. Compassion, defined in Buddhism as the wish for others to avoid suffering and its cause, and love, defined as the wish for others to have happiness and its cause, are the motivation of these practitioners actions and lead to the development of all inherent qualities. Of course, the broad motivation also includes the hinayana goal of individual liberation and avoidance of negative actions, so that one may be of more benefit to others without being caught up in one's own suffering. One's happiness is then a method to develop and a side-effect of acting for the benefit of others.

DIAMOND WAY

The most skilful students of Buddha were able to see him not as an external teacher, but as a mirror of the potential of their own mind, which is in its essence able to experience the world as perfection. The teachings in the Diamond Way concern holding a "pure view", i.e., seeing everything on the highest level, experiencing phenomena as manifestations of one's mind, and perceiving beings as having the nature of Buddha, or the potential for enlightenment. One can say that the philosophical basis of Diamond Way is the view of Mahayana with the emphasis put on teachings about Buddha nature, or the nature of the mind itself. As III Karmapa writes in his *Wishes of Mahamudra*, "Observing phenomena, none is found. One sees mind. Looking at mind, no mind is seen, it is empty in essence. Through looking at both, one's clinging to duality naturally dissolves. May we realize mind's nature, which is clear light"⁴⁶. The insight that the one who is experiencing, the act of experiencing, and the experience

⁴⁶ O. Nydahl, *The Great Seal, Limitless Space and Joy*, San Francisco 2004, p. 150.

itself are parts of the same totality (because they are empty), allows one to see the world from the point of view of a Buddha, one who has realised the nature of the mind.

Ethics on this level are based on continuously holding this pure view and are no longer focused on individuals' internal conditions or external circumstances, but rather on the very consciousness of the one who is experiencing. As Ole Nydahl writes, "Whoever dares to trust his basic goodness and, regardless of the reflection in the mirror, to touch the mirror itself, gets everything. When consciousness stops to run after waves and rests in the ocean itself, when it turns from impermanent experiences to the one who is experiencing them, the only spontaneously arising joy remains"⁴⁷.

TWO TRUTHS

The frame in which Buddhist teachings are given is known as the two truths. The absolute truth is what Buddhas perceive and is connected with the experience of timeless consciousness in which everything manifests, while the relative truth relates to mistaken recognition from the perspective of conceptualising the mind. Everything that can be intellectually recognised, that is the object of experience of unenlightened beings, that is changing and therefore not absolute, belongs to the level of relative truth. Despite this distinction, both truths ultimately share the same nature of one reality⁴⁸.

The question of the cause of happiness has to do with conditions and therefore relates to the relative level. On this level, the causes of happiness are positive thoughts, words, and actions. However, the relative truth, commonly perceived as intersubjective, is illusory. "The highest level of functioning is the highest level of truth. The better one feels, the smoother everything moves"⁴⁹. In other words, happiness and joy as the highest level of the mind's functioning are expressions of its nature, timeless and without cause. In this sense, joy and happiness are perceived as unconditioned because they are inseparable qualities of the nature of mind. From the point of view of absolute truth, happiness has no cause.

⁴⁷ Idem, *Happiness*, [in:] *From Buddhism to Science and Back*, ed. A. Przybysławski, Opole–Velez–Malaga 2007, p. 141

⁴⁸ Jamgon Mipham, *Introduction to the Middle Way*, transl. Padmakara Translation Group, Boston 2002, p. 195.

⁴⁹ O. Nydahl, *Happiness*, op. cit., p. 145.

III. BUDDHISM AND PSYCHOLOGY

Although different psychological concepts give distinct definitions of happiness, it is most often understood as a positive emotion, and therefore pleasant to experience. According to Buddhism, emotions that are experienced incorrectly are considered negative phenomena, regardless of whether they are pleasant to experience or not. In this context, emotions are said to be disturbing because they cause mental activity and cause mind to be constantly following something instead of resting calmly. They are connected with “the state of mind which appears when mind in functioning in a dualistic way, they are the habitual clinging which causes us to automatically classify our experiences depending on whether our ‘ego’ considers them as desired, repellent, or neutral”⁵⁰. However, as long as an individual is not enlightened, cultivating some of these states of mind is more beneficial than others. The teachings of *abhidharma* speak of 51 mental states, 11 of which are described as positive and are the basis for development, including trust, respect for oneself, and diligence⁵¹. A similar view of positive emotions is presented by Barbara Fredrickson in her broaden-and-build theory. Frequent experiences of positive emotions leads to a broadening of cognitive perspectives and an increase in personal resources, which enables further development and even more frequent experience of these emotions⁵². The Buddhist term describing unconditioned happiness is a Sanskrit word, *sukkhā*, which in a psychological context can be defined as a state of flourishing. This flourishing results from mental balance and insight into the nature of reality, not from fleeting emotional states arisen on the basis of the senses or conceptual stimulation⁵³.

Psychological theories differ on the issue of how much influence one can have on the level of one’s own happiness. However, despite the underlining the possibility of change, the majority of theories accept the existence of a certain biological level unique to each individual which cannot be overcome. Buddhism proposes in this point the concept of Buddha nature, or potential for the unconditioned happiness of enlightenment, which is inherent in every being and is possible to achieve in a single life time.

⁵⁰ Gendyn Rinpoche, *Praca z emocjami*, tłum. M. Góralski, Katowice 1993, p. 13.

⁵¹ Mipham Rinpoche, *Gateway to Knowledge*, trans. Erick Pema Kunsang, Vol. 1, Hong Kong 1997, pp. 24–25.

⁵² B. Fredrickson, op. cit., p. 55.

⁵³ P. Ekman, R. J. Davidson, M. Ricard, A. Wallace, *Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives on Emotions and Well-Being*, “Current Directions in Psychological Science” 2005, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 54.

It is also worth noting differences in the goal. In psychology, especially in the field of positive psychology, the goal of development is to be a well-functioning individual and attain happiness. This is also the goal of hinayana Buddhism. In the view of Mahayana, conditioned happiness is only a side effect, a beneficial condition for development, but the goal is to help others to attain enlightenment, the state of unconditioned happiness.

Summarising this overview of psychological concepts, one can say that the majority of them address correlations and not causes. Psychologists are not able to affirm what the cause of happiness is, they can only describe the probability of the coexistence of feelings of happiness with other factors. In Buddhism, the answer to the question of the cause of happiness is twofold. On the relative level, the cause is positive thoughts, words and actions, while on the absolute level there is no cause, happiness is a quality of mind inseparable from mind itself. Comparing those two fields, one can say that psychological explanations of conditioned happiness using bottom-up models that refer to external phenomena are similar to the teachings of hinayana Buddhism. On the other hand, the top-down models which concern internal determinants are closer to the view of Mahayana Buddhism. Very few psychological theories go beyond those two fields. The exception may be the theory of flow, which puts the emphasis on the one who is experiencing instead of focusing on outer conditions.

In both psychology and Buddhism it is difficult to make a clear distinction between one level of explanation and another. External conditions influence feelings of happiness while internal conditions determine the perception of experiences as being happy or not. Both of these processes happen at the same time, and happiness is the result of both. The three levels of Buddhist ethics can not be separated either, as Gampopa explains, because regardless of the distinctions, they all have the same nature. If there is a conflict between different ways of behaving resulting from different kinds of ethics, one should act according to the ethics of the higher level, because it contains the ethics of the lower levels. On a practical level, the emphasis is put on the conscious decision to adapt one's behaviour both to the situation and to one's ability to solve it in the most productive way⁵⁴.

The causes and mechanisms of happiness and other positive emotions is of limited interest for psychologists. In the last few decades, the majority of research has focused on furthering our knowledge of disorders and effective ways to treat them. With the development of positive psychology, an opportunity has appeared to balance the two fields of psychology and Buddhism.

⁵⁴ Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

Such a balanced approach would relate to the meaning of the word Buddha, which is best illustrated in its Tibetan translation: sangs rgyas (sangye). Sangs means purifying mind from all disturbances or negative states of mind which prevent individuals from being able to experience the nature of mind with its inseparable unconditioned primary happiness, and rgyas means development of all mind's inherent positive qualities and among them the ability to experience this unconditioned happiness.

SUMMARY

The philosophy and methods found in Buddhism have inspired researchers for decades. Meditation in particular seems to be an effective tool for improving functioning in many aspects of life. As research has shown, meditation practitioners appear to be happier and to manage stress better than non-meditating people⁵⁵. Buddhist methods have also had wider application in therapies (e.g. mindfulness MBSR).

The growing interest of psychologists in this field results in even better methodologically designed research, based not only on the methods of self-report. Research conducted with modern methods of neuroimaging show that meditative practice may lead to permanent changes in the brain⁵⁶. Psychologists also notice the need to examine not only the meditative technique, but also the context in which it is used and the influence it has on the practitioner's life.

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⁵⁵ Cf. R. König, Malinowski P., *Does Buddhist meditation increase happiness?*, 4th European Conference on Positive Psychology: Book of Abstracts, 1–4 July 2008, Opatija, Croatia 2008, p. 314; M. Rydzewska, *Praktyka medytacyjna a subiektywne poczucie szczęścia*, „Psychologia Jakości Życia” 2011, nr 2, pp. 117–130.

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