

# Perfect Happiness

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translated by Robin Moore

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## Anumodana – Appreciation

About five years ago, the Buddhist congregation at Wat Nyanavesakavan, both monastics and lay supporters, deemed that it was a fitting time to put concerted effort into translating Dhamma books into English and to publish them in a determined, systematic fashion. At that time, Mr. Robin Moore was entrusted with the responsibility of doing the translation work, with Khun Peeranuch Kiatsommart faithfully and generously providing all financial assistance.

Before long, in 2016, two Dhamma books translated into English were completed, namely: *The Unheralded Value of the Vinaya* and *True Education Begins with Wise Consumption*.<sup>1</sup> In the next two years, these were followed by another two books: *Honouring the Claim: 'We Love the King'* and *Education Made Easy*.<sup>2</sup>

This year, 2018, four new books have been completed and are being prepared for publication, namely:

- *May the Days and Nights Not Pass in Vain*
- *Perfect Happiness*
- *Growing in Merit*
- *Prelude to Buddhadhamma: Noble Life – Healthy Society – Delightful Nature*<sup>3</sup>

The study, teaching, and propagation of the Dhamma, along with its accompanying practice and realization, whereby the Dhamma becomes embodied in individuals and society, lies at the heart of Buddhism. Translating and publishing the Dhamma are key meritorious deeds enabling this process to reach success and fulfilment.

I wish to express my appreciation to Mr. Robin Moore for performing this important work with diligence and determination.

This wholesome work has been accomplished as a 'gift of the Dhamma' (*dhamma-dāna*) by way of the patronage and supervision of Khun Peeranuch Kiatsommart. She has acted with devotion to the Triple Gem, enthusiasm for promoting the study and dissemination of Dhamma, and great goodwill and kindness towards practitioners of Dhamma; indeed, towards all people. May I express my gratitude to Khun Peeranuch Kiatsommart for her dedication and assistance, which has enabled this gift of the Dhamma to come to fruition. These efforts and achievements promote wisdom and truth, leading to long-lasting value and benefit.

Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto)

21 September 2018

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<sup>1</sup> Original titles: วินัย เรื่องใหญ่กว่าที่คิด & การศึกษาเริ่มต้นเมื่อคนกินอยู่เป็น.

<sup>2</sup> Original titles: ทำอย่างไร จะพูดได้เต็มปากว่า "เรารักในหลวง" & การศึกษาฉบับง่าย.

<sup>3</sup> Original titles: คินวันไม่ผ่านไปปล้ำ, ความสุขที่สมบูรณ์, ก้าวไปในบุญ & บทนำสู่ พุทธธรรม, respectively.

# Table of Contents

<b>Perfect Happiness.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Birth of Wholesome Mind States Is the Supreme Birth.....	1
Skilful Behaviour Is Permeated by Happiness.....	3
Unskilful Behaviour Exacerbates Suffering.....	5
Good Fortune Is a Support for Virtue Misfortune Is an Opportunity for Growth.....	7
Vying for Happiness Leads to Shared Misery Sharing Happiness Leads to Shared Delight.....	10
Shared Happiness Leads to Global Peace and Contentment.....	13
Righteous Happiness Related to Incorrectly Becomes Impure.....	15
Perfect Happiness is Independent Happiness.....	18
Perfect Happiness Amongst the Constraints of the World.....	21
Cultivating Virtue – Cultivating Happiness.....	23

# Perfect Happiness<sup>1</sup>

## Birth of Wholesome Mind States Is the Supreme Birth

Everyone is searching for happiness. Undeniably, happiness is a desirable thing. Although some people may not realize it, however, happiness is something we can generate on the spot, within our own hearts. Whenever we are endowed with such qualities as faith, love, a sense of friendship, joy, and clarity of mind, happiness arises spontaneously, in an instant.

Today we are celebrating a birthday. If we think of a birthday as marking the day when our lives began—when we came into the world—then we are thinking of the past. The past is no longer the present; as its name suggests, it has passed us by and can only be remembered. We cannot go back in time and relive any past events.

But if we are familiar with the Buddha's teachings, a birthday offers us an immediate and important opportunity to engage in spiritual practice, namely, to bring about and cultivate such qualities as trust, lovingkindness, gladness, serenity, and contentment. In short, we give birth to wholesome mind states. Generating wholesome mind states—the greatest of all births—gives accuracy to the term 'birthday.' This conforms to the Buddha's teachings.

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<sup>1</sup> This Dhamma talk was given at the merit-making celebration in honour of Mr. Nam Phoonwathu's 84<sup>th</sup> birthday on 24 July 1994; it was also in honour of the upcoming 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Mrs. Chalerm Phoonwathu on 1 October 1994.

In truth, we are born in every moment, both physiologically and mentally. In terms of the mind, we can say there are both positive and negative births.

Examples of negative births include the birth of anger, depression, delusion, misery, sorrow, etc. These are obviously unwholesome states that should be prevented from arising. Instead, we should strive to give birth to wholesome states.

Today we are celebrating a birthday—an auspicious day. We can use this day as a new dawn, an opportunity to generate the most excellent qualities in the mind. These are the wholesome mind states referred to above, e.g. delight, joy, ease, inner clarity, faith, mindfulness, love, concentration, diligence, wisdom, etc. When these qualities come into existence, they fulfil and garland this auspicious occasion we refer to as a birthday.

The auspiciousness of a birthday is marked by the arising of wholesome states. With the arising of such wholesomeness, our birthday celebrations are genuinely warranted. We should bring about such wholesome states. This accords with the Dhamma teaching recited by the monks: ‘Wholesome states lead to happiness.’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Note that this is not a literal quote from the scriptures, but rather a general principle. This teaching accords with such Pali verses as *dhammo ciṅṇo sukhāvaho* (‘virtue accomplished leads to happiness’; J. V. 123) and *puñṇāni kayirātha sukhāvahāni* (‘perform good deeds leading to happiness’; A. I. 155). At SA. I. 328, it explains: *dhammoti dasakusaladhammo dānasīlādīdhammo* (‘the term “dhamma” refers to the ten wholesome qualities or to those virtues beginning with generosity and moral conduct’). Sometimes, the phrase: “dhamma” is equivalent to the ten wholesome courses of action (*kusala-kammaṭṭhāna*) is used, instead of the phrase: ‘... ten wholesome qualities.’

## Skilful Behaviour Is Permeated by Happiness

Human beings naturally desire happiness. As Buddhists, however, we may be confused when we hear the Buddha's basic teaching summed up by the words 'birth is suffering.'<sup>3</sup> This may lead to the following doubt: 'The Buddha says that birth is suffering. Doesn't the effort to generate happiness thus conflict with the Buddha's words? How then can we be happy?'

When the Buddha said 'birth is suffering,' he was referring to an aspect of nature, to the reality of conditioned phenomena. What this means is that birth is subject to laws of nature.

The natural laws referred to here are the laws of impermanence, *dukkha*, and nonself.<sup>4</sup> All things arise, are sustained, and then pass away. Everything is subject to change, unable to maintain its original state of existence. Everything exists according to causes and conditions. These are all attributes of nature, following a natural order.

The *dukkha* inherent in nature, however, is not identical to the *dukkha* ('suffering') in the hearts of human beings. *Dukkha* as suffering arises, or does not arise, based on whether we relate to the *dukkha* inherent in nature wisely or unwisely. In the context mentioned above, the Buddha was simply describing a phenomenon inherent in nature, a truth of nature.

Conditioned phenomena<sup>5</sup> invariably conform to this teaching on the Three Characteristics, e.g. they are subject to impermanence. No one can validly dispute this. But if we conduct ourselves unwisely, the *dukkha* inherent in nature turns into suffering in our hearts. Suffering arises because people relate to nature imprudently.

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<sup>3</sup> *Jātipi dukkhā*.

<sup>4</sup> See endnote A.

<sup>5</sup> *Saṅkhāra*.

## Perfect Happiness

If we conduct ourselves skilfully, we leave the *dukkha* inherent in nature to its own devices—we leave it be as it naturally is. We do not allow it to create suffering in our hearts. Besides preventing suffering from arising, we are also able to act in ways that generate happiness. The Buddha said that, if we relate to *dukkha* correctly, we will realize true happiness.

The Buddha stated that suffering is something to be understood.<sup>6</sup> We should understand and gain insight into suffering. Gaining such insight, we become free of suffering.

Understanding suffering and being beset by suffering are two different things. The Buddha never said that we should suffer. On the contrary, he said that we should realize happiness. Suffering is only to be understood. He urged us to gain a thorough understanding of suffering in order to be free from suffering.

If we relate to suffering skilfully, we will be happy. Moreover, it is possible to use suffering as a supportive condition<sup>7</sup> for happiness.

Take the example of arahants,<sup>8</sup> who have related to suffering wisely, until they have realized complete freedom from suffering. These individuals realize perfect happiness.

There is thus a special technique to be applied vis-à-vis suffering. The Buddha said we should both understand and relate to suffering correctly. By living our lives discerningly, we gradually experience more genuine and reliable forms of happiness and our suffering diminishes, to the extent of it being dispelled all together: all that remains is happiness.

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<sup>6</sup> *Dukkhaṃ pariññeyyaṃ.*

<sup>7</sup> *Paccaya.*

<sup>8</sup> Trans.: fully awakened beings.

## Unskilful Behaviour Exacerbates Suffering

The Buddha described practical guidelines for how to relate to suffering and happiness. In one passage, he mentions three factors, which when expanded upon according to the scriptural explanations, result in four factors.<sup>9</sup> Here, the Buddha summarizes the criteria for relating to suffering and happiness, as follows:

1. To refrain from creating extra, unnecessary suffering for oneself.
2. To not forsake righteous forms of happiness.
3. To not indulge in any sort of happiness, even righteous happiness.
4. To strive in order to realize higher forms of happiness.

This is a vital teaching. If we are able to accord with these principles, it can be said that we are practising correctly in relation to suffering and happiness.

1. **Refraining from unnecessary suffering.** We live in the world; our lives proceed in line with the nature of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned things are impermanent, subject to stress, and nonself, according to their own nature. We can strive to live a wholesome life. The *dukkha* inherent in nature is what it is. We have no conflict with this. We do not add to it. We do not exacerbate or pile on unnecessary suffering. By refraining in this way, we reach one level of ease and wellbeing.

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<sup>9</sup> Trans.: see: M. II. 226-28.

If we conduct ourselves unwisely, the *dukkha* of nature spills over as suffering in our hearts. We intensify and aggravate suffering. There are many people in the world who misguidedly go off in search of unnecessary suffering, heaping it up in their hearts.

The scriptural passage referred to above occurs in the context of a debate the Buddha was having with members of the Nigaṇṭhā order.<sup>10</sup> In this sutta, we see a clear example of an extreme expression of intensifying or exacerbating suffering.

The Nigaṇṭhā doctrine espoused the undertaking of extreme ascetic practices. The Nigaṇṭhas practised many kinds of ascetic practices and self-mortification.<sup>11</sup> For instance, instead of using a razor to shave their heads, Nigaṇṭhā renunciants would pluck out each hair by the root until they were bald.

In ancient times, there were myriad forms of ascetic practices. For example, in the hot season, ascetics would lie out in the baking sun. And in the cold season, they would immerse themselves in icy waters. When resting, instead of lying on a comfortable, flat surface, they would lie on a bed of nails. These are all means of self-mortification, of intensifying physical suffering.

Why did Nigaṇṭhas practise in this way? They claimed that the source of suffering was in following the whims of the body, which they said was the same as indulging mental defilements. In order to resist this self-indulgence, people must frustrate, torment, and chastise the body. Only by doing so do mental defilements wither away and come to an end.

The Buddha used this behaviour by the Nigaṇṭhas as an example of adding and increasing unnecessary suffering.

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<sup>10</sup> Trans.: the Jains.

<sup>11</sup> Trans.: also known as 'mortification of the flesh.'

## **Good Fortune Is a Support for Virtue Misfortune Is an Opportunity for Growth**

Very frequently, people conduct themselves unwisely in relation to the world around them. Everything in the world exists according to its own natural dynamic. But because people relate to these things unskillfully, harbouring misguided attitudes and views, they unwittingly give rise to suffering.

With clear discernment, we see how these worldly phenomena exist and proceed. But lacking such discernment—lacking a skill in proper insight and examination—suffering arises without delay.

This rule applies also to the vicissitudes of life—turns of good fortune and misfortune. In Pali, these are referred to as ‘worldly conditions.’<sup>12</sup> They are primary sources for people’s joys and sorrows, highs and lows.

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<sup>12</sup> *Loka-dhamma*. [Trans.: also known as ‘worldly winds.’]

When we encounter these worldly winds, if we do not come to terms with them prudently, our happiness turns into sorrow, and any existing distress is exacerbated. Conversely, if we maintain clear discernment and skilful behaviour, our unhappiness turns into joy, and any existing delight is heightened.

These worldly conditions befall human beings in line with the law of impermanence. There are four pairs of such conditions, namely: gain & loss, fame & disrepute, praise & blame, and pleasure & pain.<sup>13</sup>

The Buddha said that these things are inherent in nature. By living in the world, they are inescapable. We all must face these conditions. If, when encountering these things, we maintain an incorrect bearing and behaviour, we instantly inflict suffering on ourselves.

When we obtain something good—some material reward—it is normal to feel delighted. Yet often, when people lose a possession, they grieve, because the object has vanished.

If one responds to this loss unskilfully, by feeling gloomy and depressed, engaging in self-punishment, railing against life, etc., one only aggravates the situation and increases one's misery.

So too with praise and blame. Everyone likes praise. Hearing words of praise, we feel happy and uplifted. But, when receiving blame, many people feel distress. What is the cause of this distress? It occurs because people allow these words of criticism entry into their hearts; having gained access, these words then cause torment and agitation.

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<sup>13</sup> Trans.: *lābha & alābha, yasa & ayasa, pasāṁsā & nindā, sukha & dukkha.*

If we can come to terms with these things we consider: 'This is the way of the world. I see! The Buddha declared that by living in the world there is no escape from these worldly conditions. I have met with these worldly winds. This is an aspect of truth. I will learn from these experiences!'

As soon as we can view these encounters as learning experiences, we have begun to adopt an appropriate attitude.

We can even begin to have fun. We can reflect: 'Ah, so things are this way. I'm beginning to see the truth of how things work in the world.' We thus gain a firm foothold and realize contentment. This is the way of not accumulating unnecessary suffering.

Generally speaking, when people are buffeted by adverse worldly winds, they make a problem out of the situation, because they feel personally affected. If they can alter their perspective, these encounters simply become learning experiences.

Besides coming to terms with these situations, we can also see them as an opportunity for spiritual training. Here, our entire attitudes and perspectives radically shift. We begin to see even those unpleasant and seemingly negative experiences as a test. With this shift in perspective, we gain from every experience. Both good and bad events are seen as a challenge of our character, a test of our skill and intelligence. As a consequence of this training and development, we become constantly stronger. In a sense, everything becomes positive.

If we experience good fortune or encounter advantageous worldly conditions, we feel happy and at ease. We can then use that good fortune, e.g. material gain, prestige, etc., to radiate this happiness outwards. We use it to perform good deeds and to assist others. This way our happiness extends outwards and reaches a large number of people.

If we experience misfortune or encounter adverse worldly conditions, we consider these situations as an opportunity for development. They become valuable life lessons—a means to hone mindfulness, problem solving, wise discernment, etc. This leads to self-improvement.

For this reason, disciples of the Buddha maintain the principle of reflecting on things skilfully. If we possess skilful reflection, everything we encounter—both good and bad—is seen as a valuable and beneficial experience.

Observing this principle is a fundamental spiritual practice. It is related to the first criterion mentioned above, of refraining from creating unnecessary suffering.

## **Vying for Happiness Leads to Shared Misery Sharing Happiness Leads to Shared Delight**

2. To not forsake righteous forms of happiness. ‘Righteous happiness’ refers to happiness that is suitable according to the natural causes and conditions in life. There are many levels and dimensions of righteous happiness. Although one can say that we are entitled to these forms of happiness, they should arise in a legitimate way. For instance, in respect to pleasure derived from material things, the pleasure should not be tied up with causing hardship or affliction for others. Instead, our happiness should be shared with others, bringing about increased joy in the world.

If our happiness is founded on the suffering of others, it is unrighteous happiness. Instead of this, we should aim for righteous happiness, which causes others no grief. Even better, we can share our happiness.

There are many different stages of happiness. One way to describe the different kinds of happiness is by this threefold division:

1. Competitive happiness.
2. Compatible or collective happiness.
3. Independent happiness.

Competitive happiness implies that when others are happy, we are miserable; when we are happy, others are miserable. For the most part, this kind of happiness is linked to material things.

Pleasure connected to material things involves obtaining or possessing something. By obtaining something, one is happy; but this often implies that someone else goes without or fails to acquire something and is unhappy as a result. Similarly, when someone else obtains something, it means that we cannot have this thing and may be disappointed and unhappy as a result. This happiness is thus mutually incompatible; it leads to conflict and contention.

Such conduct also has wider repercussions in society. When people primarily seek happiness by acquiring material possessions, they often begin to exploit each other, creating unrest and disturbance in society. Suffering and affliction then spreads. Because everyone is vying for pleasure, everyone ends up in turmoil. No-one experiences true happiness. For this reason, there must be an evolution to higher forms of happiness.

The second stage is compatible happiness, whereby one promotes the happiness of others. When we are happy, others share in this happiness. This form of happiness is the fruit of mind development, in particular the development of true love.

## Perfect Happiness

True love is equivalent to the wish for others to be happy. One must beware here, however, because the word ‘love’ is somewhat ambiguous.

There is true love and there is false love. True love is a favourable kind of love. In Pali, this love is referred to specifically as *mettā*: the desire for others’ happiness.

The opposite kind of love—false love—is the desire for others to pander to our own personal pleasure. This kind of love, whereby one expects others to make one happy and one feels the need to control others, is classified as part of ‘competitive happiness,’ and is based on obtaining or possessing things, as described above.

A clear example of true love is the love parents have for their children. Out of love, parents want their children to be happy. They will do whatever they can to make their children happy. When they witness the happiness of their children, they too experience happiness.

The desire for their children's happiness is linked to effort—the effort to bring about this happiness. At first, children require material things, e.g. food, toys, school supplies, etc. Parents thus endeavour to find these things for their children.

To provide for their children, a certain degree of relinquishment is required from the parents. Usually, relinquishment causes discomfort and distress for people, because they must lose something. But, when parents relinquish things for their children, they do not feel unhappy. On the contrary, they feel joy. Why? Because they want to help make their children happy. When they relinquish their money and give things to their children, and witness their children's happiness, they share in this happiness. Giving or relinquishing can thus be a form of happiness.

Usually, people feel they must acquire things to be happy. If they have to part with something or give it away, they feel unhappy. But when people are established in true love, in lovingkindness, giving things to others becomes a source of joy.

Through an act of generosity, we feel immediate happiness. Witnessing the happiness of others, we experience satisfaction and joy. The happiness of both parties is thus mutually dependent. This is why it is called compatible, collective, or shared happiness. It stands in direct contrast to competitive happiness.

### **Shared Happiness Leads to Global Peace and Contentment**

If we can cultivate our hearts in this way, radiating our love and kindness outwards, our happiness will increase and other people will partake in this happiness. This is a happiness that is grounded in righteousness and truth.

## Perfect Happiness

If this kind of happiness becomes pervasive, it will lead to world peace. It begins in small communities and families. For instance, parents, wishing for the wellbeing of their children, relinquish things on their behalf and then share in their joy.

If children love their parents as much as the parents love them, they will reciprocate the love by acting in a similar way, i.e. they will try to make their parents happy. They will do whatever they can, e.g. by being of service around the house, to make their parents happy. When the children recognize their parents' happiness, they too experience joy. The children's happiness is linked to the parents' happiness. This sort of situation is imbued with peace and delight. Family life will be joyous.

Extending outwards, the same principle applies to the wider family and to groups of friends. If relatives or friends share things with one another or perform mutual deeds of assistance, with the wish for others to experience happiness, once this happiness is fulfilled, everyone partakes of it.

When this collective happiness is widespread, the world is peaceful. People live together with mutual assistance and cooperation. Material belongings simply become a means for supporting one another. This is a righteous form of happiness.

As mentioned earlier, there are many levels of happiness; moreover, happiness is something to be developed.

Another quality connected to generosity is faith. Many laypeople have faith in Buddhism, firm confidence in the Triple Gem, and a trust in goodness. When they perform meritorious deeds they feel a deep sense of satisfaction. For someone imbued with faith, making donations or renouncing things causes no distress. When one gives with faith, that giving becomes a source of joy.

At the beginning stages of spiritual maturity, people obtain pleasure by obtaining and consuming things, giving rise to competitiveness and rivalry. But when they advance to this second stage, they are endowed with such virtues as lovingkindness, goodwill, and trust. Giving thus becomes a source of happiness, the happiness derived by sharing with others. People evolve from competitive happiness to a collective, mutually supportive happiness.

As human beings, we can mature the quality of our happiness. Not only can we increase in happiness ourselves, we can also create a happier world. The essential point is that we must try to generate happiness skilfully. The resulting happiness will thus be true and genuine.

### **Righteous Happiness Related to Incorrectly Becomes Impure**

3. To not indulge in any sort of happiness. The Buddha said that we are entitled to enjoy legitimate happiness. We do not have to forsake it. But he encouraged us not to stop here, for if we relate to this happiness incorrectly, we may be led astray.

Although people are entitled to this kind of happiness, they may get tripped up by revelling and indulging in it. With such indulgence and intoxication, the happiness can become a cause for suffering. If this happens, it is a form of degradation. For this reason, it is important to establish a clear understanding of all forms of happiness.

## Perfect Happiness

Happiness is a worldly condition.<sup>14</sup> It arises, is sustained, and then passes away. It is inconstant and impermanent.

If we discern this truth, then when happiness arises, we enjoy it appropriately. We do not become infatuated with it. With this understanding and heedfulness, it does not become a condition for suffering.

If people become enchanted by happiness, it gives rise to suffering. At the very least, they get hooked on it. They become captivated, leading to indulgence, idleness, and neglect.

The Buddha gave a warning to those people who think: 'I've achieved happiness! I've met with success! I am accomplished! I am great!' He warned that this way of thinking leads to heedlessness, based on complacency and self-satisfaction. These people tend to rest on their laurels and indulge in their delight. They neglect their duties and fail to pursue those endeavours which lead to higher accomplishments. They fail to attend to those things needing supervision and improvement. Instead, they revel in their happiness. This conduct leads to carelessness and decline.

The Buddha said that even some awakened beings (e.g. stream-enterers) can be subject to heedlessness. This happens because they harbour a sense of self-satisfaction; they feel gratified that they have attained this superior stage of realization.

With such satisfaction and complacency, neglect sets in. They do not strive to develop themselves and realize higher stages of realization. This is a form of decline.

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<sup>14</sup> *Loka-dhamma*. [Trans.: the exception here is Nibbāna, which is described as the supreme happiness—*parama-sukha*. See the material on 'perfect happiness' below.]

The Buddha taught that in respect to the deepening and development of wholesome qualities, we should not let up and falter. We should make continual effort to improve.

The Buddha said: ‘I do not praise standing still in wholesome qualities, not to mention falling away from them. I praise only growth and development in wholesome qualities.’<sup>15</sup>

This means that we should strive to develop and cultivate wholesome qualities, until we reach the cessation of suffering and the end of all mental impurity—the perfection of mindfulness and wisdom.

If people become attached to pleasure and delight, they stop making effort. They interrupt their spiritual endeavours. This is a pathway to decline. For this reason, if one indulges in it, happiness can become defective and blemished.

It therefore behooves us to experience happiness with clear understanding—with wisdom. This wisdom prevents happiness from causing any danger and harm; it prevents misfortune, calamity, and all forms of spiritual decline and degradation.

This is the way to enjoy happiness: with care and vigilance.

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<sup>15</sup> A. V. 96.

## Perfect Happiness is Independent Happiness

4. To strive in order to realize higher forms of happiness. Another reason to avoid heedlessly indulging in pleasure and happiness is that there are higher forms of happiness that we should experience and realize. This pertains to the fourth factor, namely to persevere in accessing more refined and sublime forms of happiness.

As mentioned earlier, there are many levels of happiness. To begin with, we derive pleasure from consuming material things, that is, the pleasure we obtain from pleasing sense objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangibles) providing gratification to the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. This is a fundamental form of happiness dependent on sense contact.

As we mature and develop spiritual virtues, we access new kinds of happiness. Whereas before, our pleasure may have been entirely dependent on acquiring material things, now we go beyond this rudimentary and limited form of happiness. As mentioned above, when we generate wholesome mind states, even giving things away can become a form of joy.

When people are endowed with faith, they derive happiness from performing good deeds. Whenever they remember the meritorious deeds they have done, they feel delight and fulfilment. They are happy that they have benefited other people and helped society.

If we are vigilant—not content with rudimentary forms of pleasure—we will be able to develop and generate many superior forms of happiness. We will pass beyond even the happiness derived from doing good deeds, and realize a happiness grounded in wisdom.

Happiness born of wisdom refers to an insight into conditioned phenomena, a true understanding of human life and the world, and a realization of the three characteristics: impermanence, the state of *dukkha*, and the truth of nonself.<sup>16</sup>

The various forms of happiness referred to up till now, i.e. the pleasure from consuming material things, the delight in living close to nature, and even the happiness obtained by doing good deeds, are all still dependent on external conditions. These forms of happiness are all dependent on other people or things.

When people's happiness is dependent on external things, they are entrusting their happiness to these things. Whenever they are deprived of these things, they are deprived of that happiness.

Often people are persuaded that by possessing these things they will be happy. Yet they can get lost in this belief. Their happiness then truly becomes reliant on these things. If they cannot obtain them, they are deprived of happiness, or even worse, they suffer and grieve. They actually become less happy than before.

The Buddha encouraged people to be cautious in this regard, lest they lose their independence. What measures can we take to maintain a pristine state of mind whereby we can preserve a state of happiness irregardless of whether we acquire or encounter desirable external conditions? When we have these things, we are happy; when we do not have them, we are still happy. If we can accomplish this, it shows that we have a firm foothold and that we remain free.

When people endowed with faith, kindness, self-sacrifice, etc. perform good deeds or make merit, the ensuing happiness is legitimate. But this happiness is still conditional, i.e. it is still dependent on the memory of having performed such meritorious actions.

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<sup>16</sup> *Anicca, dukkha & anattā*. [Trans.: in Thai, the grammatical form '*aniccam, dukkham & anattā*' is used.]

## Perfect Happiness

Conditional happiness is still a form of external happiness. It is not innate and deep-rooted. We are not yet free. How can we access a happiness that is independent of other things?

Happiness dependent on other things is changeable and unreliable, because these things are subject to laws of nature, namely, the laws of impermanence, *dukkha*, and nonself. If we are not careful, these things will turn around and bite us.

The external things upon which we are dependent are not indwelling, inherent parts of us; we do not really own these things. If we entrust our happiness to them and something happens whereby they are adversely affected, we suffer.

Goodness also falls into this category. If we are happy because we identify with our own goodness, when other people do not recognize or admire it, we are prone to getting sullen or upset. This kind of happiness is still a dependent happiness.

For this reason, we need to progress. We need to develop insight into the true nature of things. All conditioned things—material or immaterial, bodily or mental, good or bad, etc.—are without exception impermanent, subject to stress, and nonself.

With an insight and penetration into this truth, we have a realization into the flow of nature—the flow of causality. With this realization, we gain acceptance and equanimity; we feel unburdened and at ease. We are simply aware of the truth that in this moment, things are this way: they exist and proceed in accord with their own causes and conditions.

This is the final stage of spiritual practice. Endowed with thorough understanding, conditioned phenomena can no longer harm us. Our minds are free. We understand that all conditioned things are *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. According to their inherent nature, things are subject to stress (*dukkha*). We see things as they truly are. As a consequence, our hearts do not become entangled and no suffering (*dukkha*) arises.

### **Perfect Happiness Amongst the Constraints of the World**

Conditioned phenomena—things that are impermanent, subject to stress, and nonself—naturally undergo alteration and dissolution. They are subject to laws of nature. No-one can alter this reality.

Problems arise because, when these things undergo alteration, they afflict people's minds. This is due to the fact that people allow themselves to become deluded by the power and influence of this natural process of change. Whichever direction these things shift and veer, people's hearts follow. When things take a turn for the worse, people suffer accordingly.

When we gain discernment into reality, we see that the laws of nature are absolute. Everything in nature follows natural laws. Why should we allow ourselves to be oppressed by these laws? We should come to terms with them and fully accept them. The stress and pressure inherent in nature is simply part of nature. We are not obliged to have it transform into suffering in our hearts and minds.

This is what is referred to as a liberated mind. Here, even the stress inherent in nature finds no access—it is unable to cause distress in our hearts. This is *vimutti*: true liberation.

When we have reached this stage of cultivation, we are able to see the distinction between our relationship to external conditions, on the one hand, and our inner, spiritual life on the other. In terms of external things, we rely on wisdom to engage with natural causal dynamics in an optimal way. In terms of our inner life, we simply abide in freedom, imbued with joy.

The happiness of liberation, accompanied by wisdom, is of vital significance to our lives. When we have reached this stage of happiness, we no longer need to depend on anyone or anything—either material or immaterial. This happiness is inherently fulfilling, and is constant—accessible in every moment.

The happiness aspired to by most people is future happiness; it is a state of happiness wished for in the future. Moreover, it is dependent on other things. Yet when people develop a wise discernment into the truth, an innate and constant form of happiness arises—a happiness existing at all times, which is accessible in every moment. It lies at the heart of our being, pervading our entire life.

Here, one need not pursue any other kind of happiness. If other forms of happiness or pleasure present themselves, they are seen as a bonus, and one has the option to partake of them or not, without anxiety, in whatever way one pleases. There are no complications. And when these supplementary forms of happiness are absent, it has no effect on one's wellbeing. One already abides in a state of constant happiness.

At this stage, nothing remains to be done for oneself personally—one has fulfilled one's personal responsibilities. One then dedicates all one's remaining energy to benefit and improve the world.

This is perfect happiness and is equivalent to an ideal life.

## **Cultivating Virtue – Cultivating Happiness**

I have cited some passages here from the book titled 'An Ideal Life,'<sup>17</sup> which has been published for today's celebration. Although the subject matter of that book is not identical to today's Dhamma talk on happiness, there is an intimate connection.

Having discussed the present topic, the upshot is that these two topics merge, that is, perfect happiness corresponds to an ideal life.

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<sup>17</sup> ชีวิตที่สมบูรณ์.

## Perfect Happiness

No matter what aspect of the Buddha's teachings one focuses on, in the end, all the teachings merge into a unified whole. This is because the Dhamma mirrors the truth of nature.<sup>18</sup> All facets of this truth of nature are interconnected; they interact with one another. Hence, all the Buddha's teachings combine into an integrated unity.

To sum up, the Buddha mentioned four principles on how to relate to happiness:

1. To refrain from creating extra, unnecessary suffering for oneself.
2. To not forsake righteous forms of happiness.
3. To not indulge in any sort of happiness, even righteous happiness.
4. To strive in order to realize higher forms of happiness, thus bringing happiness to perfection.

If you can maintain and practise these principles, your life will flourish and you will realize secure, constant happiness, a happiness that is grounded on a steady basis of wholesome mental qualities, e.g. lovingkindness and faith. These qualities bring about a sense of inner wellbeing, and they spur people on to engage in wholesome deeds. By recollecting on the good they have done, people feel satisfied and delighted. This satisfaction enhances their sustained, secure sense of ease and wellbeing, and it goes hand in hand with the vital quality of wisdom.

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<sup>18</sup> Trans.: the word 'Dhamma' can be used to represent both the Buddha's teachings and the truth of nature; in a sense, these are one and the same.

Wisdom safeguards the heart, preventing it from being dominated and overwhelmed by the rough currents of nature, and it facilitates the realization of liberation—freedom of the heart.

The development of wholesome qualities, including kindness, confidence, wisdom, etc., leads to the arising of genuine auspiciousness.<sup>19</sup> The birth of wholesome mind states is thus an excellent birth.

Today we are celebrating a birthday. May this day symbolize the birth of wholesome qualities. By generating wholesome qualities, blessings arise immediately.

Everyone here has generated wholesome qualities by maintaining and expressing a feeling of love and goodwill towards the host of today's celebration.

Love and friendliness are forms of well-wishing—they represent the desire for someone's else's happiness. A heart filled with love is itself endowed with the blessing of happiness. For this reason, it can be said that all of you today have already been generating wholesome mind states.

Now you have the opportunity to increase these wholesome qualities. Besides meeting together in the spirit of friendship and goodwill, you express your love and kindness through speech and physical actions. You collectively provide active assistance and engage in meritorious deeds within the context of the Buddhist tradition, for instance by offering gifts to the monastic sangha. These offerings provide the monks with the strength to perform their religious duties, thus enabling Buddhism to flourish and grow. You have thus also helped to support and extend the life of the Buddhist religion.

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<sup>19</sup> *Maṅgala*.

When Buddhism prospers, wellbeing and happiness are shared amongst the people. When the Buddha's teachings are widely accessible, people grow in virtuous conduct and society is more firmly established in peace. So, we can say that today you have also generated more happiness for society as a whole. Here, your wholesome qualities extend in all directions. If you can reflect on this, it is possible that you will feel ever greater bliss and contentment.

Besides performing outward meritorious deeds, it is also essential that we cultivate wise and skilful reflection.<sup>20</sup> With wise reflection, our wholesome qualities are amplified.

This is evident today. You have come to make offerings to the monastic community, have been practising generosity, and are developing wholesome qualities. By reflecting wisely, you recognize: 'Oh yes, these offerings are requisites for the sangha, enabling the monks to fulfil their religious responsibilities.'

You can then expand your perspective, seeing the benefits accrued for Buddhism as a whole: 'The monks will be able to study the Buddha's formal teachings, and they will be able to practise these teachings and engage in both tranquillity and insight meditation. Afterwards, they will share the Buddha's teachings with the wider society. People will find peace and wellbeing. Wow! The meritorious actions performed today have such a broad and extensive significance.'

The broader our perspective, the greater our joy. This is the fruit of wise reflection.

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<sup>20</sup> *Yoniso-manasikāra*.

People's wholesome actions have benefits spanning three periods of time:

1. Past: before acting, people are established in skilful and virtuous intention, accompanied by faith and kindness.
2. Present: while acting, the mind is pure, accompanied by commitment and enthusiasm.
3. Future: after acting, whenever one recollects these deeds, one feels satisfaction. Joy and delight<sup>21</sup> nourish the heart, bringing about ease and contentment.<sup>22</sup> Delight is a 'food for the heart,'<sup>23</sup> leading to true fulfilment. Sometimes, one feels so content and satisfied that one feels no need to eat. Contentment is a profound form of happiness.

If people make merit correctly, goodness will arise continually in their lives, lasting long into the future. This goodness will be a refuge and a great source of happiness.

In sum, all of you today have generated wholesome qualities, which illustrate and embody the supreme meaning of a birthday.

May I express my appreciation for your efforts. May your virtuous qualities increase and develop. May they be a source of blessings leading to true wellbeing and prosperity, and culminating in an ideal life and perfect happiness.

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<sup>21</sup> *Pīti.*

<sup>22</sup> *Sukha.*

<sup>23</sup> *Bhakkha.*

## Perfect Happiness

On this auspicious day, the sangha has gathered to chant a blessing and to express its gratitude. The laypeople have performed meritorious acts and have given their best wishes out of a spirit of friendship and goodwill. All of these actions are wholesome and virtuous.

Based on the power of the Triple Gem, may this goodness bring about true fulfilment, i.e. may it generate the fourfold victorious blessing<sup>24</sup> to the two lay-supporters for whom we dedicate this celebration, along with all their family, relatives and friends.

*Buddhānubhāvena dhammānubhāvena saṅghānubhāvena*

May the power of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, together with wholesome qualities—including faith and kindness—cultivated by the two honoured lay-supporters along with their family and friends, bring about the four blessings, along with success, prosperity, and good fortune.

May all of you live in peace and wellbeing, sheltered by the Dhamma of the Perfectly Enlightened Buddha, long into the future.

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<sup>24</sup> Trans.: fourfold blessing (*catubbidha-vara*): long-life (*āyu*), radiance (*vaṇṇa*; bright complexion); happiness (*sukha*); and good health (*bala*; strength).

# Endnote

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A *Anicca, dukkha & anattā.*

[Trans.: in Thai, the grammatical form ‘*aniccaṃ, dukkhaṃ & anattā*’ is used. Collectively, these three qualities are referred to as the Three Characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*).

The word *dukkha* is used in three main contexts:

1. On feeling/sensation (*vedanā*), i.e. painful feeling (*dukkha*).
2. In the Three Characteristics: impermanent (*anicca*), subject to stress (*dukkha*), and nonself (*anattā*). Note that these characteristics apply to all things: animate and inanimate.
3. In the Four Noble Truths: suffering (*dukkha*), origin of suffering (*samudaya*), cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and the Path leading to the end of suffering (*magga*).

Here, the author is referring to *dukkha* in contexts 2 & 3. The Thai language has assimilated this Pali term (‘took’—*ทุกข์*), so there is not the same debate on how to translate this term, e.g.: ‘suffering,’ ‘unsatisfactoriness,’ ‘stress,’ ‘subject to pressure’ etc. My own opinion is that there is no single English word that properly encompasses all nuances of this term. Note also that there is a considerable overlap between the *dukkha* in these three contexts. For instance, the injunction to thoroughly understand *dukkha* implies an understanding of it in all its facets.]

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November 7, 2009



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