
THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HAPPINESS AND PRACTICE IN BUDDHISM AND ARISTOTELIAN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This explores what happiness means according to the Buddhist and Aristotelian perspectives. Both view happiness as kind of practice which can be cultivated, not a gift that good fortune bestows upon humans. People often neglect this insight of the importance of creating their happiness by their own actions. Practicing morality, knowledge, and wisdom are important for cultivating a happy and well-lived life. This research investigates how the Buddha and Aristotle developed special practices which develop the virtues essential for obtaining happiness.

Keywords: Happiness; Buddhism; Aristotle; Practice

Introduction

Happiness is understood differently across various communities, religions, and social groups. There is often times a temptation to see happiness as a momentary state bestowed by fortune. But there are approaches to happiness that see it as a kind of virtue which is developed through effort. This is what we find in both Buddhism and Aristotelian philosophy. While they differ considerably, they share the idea that happiness is something to be cultivated through practice and action. In

Buddhism, happiness is often understood within the framework of the Four Noble Truths and in terms of the development and practice of mental equanimity.¹ Happiness for Aristotle's is living in accordance with virtue.² An action must be self-sufficient and directed towards an absolute end, "that which is good in itself and never for the sake of anything else." and it must be something attainable by human effort.³ In both Buddhism and Aristotle we see happiness as involving an end which is approached through a kind of practice or action. Comparing Buddhism and Aristotle on happiness is important because we begin to see happiness, not as a momentary state, but as something developed through discipline or the development of virtue.

In its most basic sense Buddhism, happiness is called "*sukha*", which is considered the opposite of suffering, or "*dukkha*". Hence, happiness is a state of mind that involves the reduction of suffering. Yet Buddhism also holds that someone can have their suffering reduced without necessarily becoming happy. There are many kinds of classifications of happiness in Buddhism, ranging from the physical level, which is *kāmasukha* (the happiness arising from sensual pleasures) to the level of wisdom, which is *nirodha samāpattisukha* (the total extinction of suffering). In Buddhism, happiness starts with an understanding of the root causes of suffering.⁴ Happiness is not merely a means to the end of human life, but it is a continual factor in this quest, since when a human is unhappy, they will be affected negatively from their actions. While it is possible to live while being unhappy, it is impossible to develop good habits, and live a better peaceful life for itself and society.⁵ According to Buddhism, happiness denotes the achievement of profound mental equanimity through the active cultivation of knowledge.⁶ The Buddha said that this equanimity could be achieved through belonging to a mental stage of happiness, when man detaches all desires, feelings, wants, and needs of life. One should follow the Eightfold Paths taught by Buddha to pursue "tranquillity" and "insight", resulting in the achievement of "Nirvana."⁷

Aristotle's approach wished to investigate the proper end of the human being and how this end can be achieved. This ultimate goal or end is happiness *eudaimonia*.⁸ Happiness for Aristotle is comprised of different elements of eudaemonic well-being.⁹ Sometimes, Aristotle described happiness in terms of "euphoria", where he stated that if practical activities support the virtue of a person's wellbeing, then that person could perceive happiness based on these actions.¹⁰ Aristotle also stated that practical ethics and wisdom walk hand-in-hand in providing perceptions of pleasure, euphoria, and happiness.¹¹ Aristotle said that happiness can be achieved by developing virtue and living a good life.¹² This involves the practice and cultivation of rational behaviour.¹³ The focus of this paper then is on this method of cultivation through the Noble Eightfold Path and through the development of virtue. How is Happiness connected to activity in Buddhism and Aristotle, and what this comparison teaches us about the practice and cultivation of happiness in today's society?

Virtues and Happiness

Virtue (*sīla*) in Buddhism, is explained in the *Brahmajāla-suttanta* categorized in two ways: as *caritta sīla* and *varitta sīla*. *Caritta sīla* is the fulfilment of the precepts such as the duties of parents, the obligations of a teacher, the obligations of a student. *Varitta sīla* refers to actions that should not be done and one should avoid the criminal acts."¹⁴ Moreover, there are three levels of virtue: minor virtue (*cūla sīla*) for the layman, the middle-length morality (*majjhima sīla*) for the novice and the longer (*mahā sīla*) for monks discussed in the *Patimokha sutta*. Some are suitable for everyone to follow such as the five precepts and the eight factors.¹⁵ Without ethics, one can be selfish; by practicing ethics one can be altruistic. The foundation of moral virtues is intended to bring about the development of the individual, social uplift, harmony, and concord.¹⁶ Virtue has karmic effects; it can create a good life for a human being and prepare us to undertake certain conventions of life, and identify to us who we are.¹⁷ This karmic aspect of virtue is essential to Buddhism. It means that the practice of virtue leads to happiness.

Ancient Greek philosophy developed an idea of virtues in human beings, related to human nature, the good life, and the idea of wellbeing. Aristotle asked the question what is a happy life? His answer was that it involved not only virtue, but also the ability to meet needs and wants. Aristotle said that the virtues of justice, charity, and generosity are dispositions to act in ways that benefit both the person possessing them and that person's society. For Aristotle, for those people whose principles will enable them to achieve happiness *eudaemonia* and those people who lack principles would have frustrated in their striving toward a happy life. But the morals are not just functional means to an end. Aristotle says that without good judgment, knowledge, and wisdom, one cannot be morally perfect, without practical moral virtues, one cannot have perfect wisdom. The primary purpose of Aristotle in his ethics of virtue is to provide guides for the achievement of the happiness to which the performance of virtue gives rise.¹⁸ Virtue is a kind of practice not merely a kind of knowing.¹⁹ This idea is similar Buddhism.

For Buddhism happiness is created by the mind, independent of the forces that oppose it. The cleansed mind is the very origin that creates happiness, not the unclean mind. An origin of happiness is the repetition of performing good actions with a clean mind. If a person does well, let him do it more than once and let him take pleasure in it; happiness is produced by the accumulation of good.²⁰ Referring to how unhappiness is causally conditioned, the Buddha said that unhappiness is the reliance on our desires, reliance on our pursuits, reliance on our judgments, and reliance on our infatuations. It follows then that happiness is obtained by putting this in the opposite order, for it is from complete elimination, complete eradication, and total absence of desire that happiness is achieved. Through no other manner can one achieve true happiness; it is not the following of some external authority, but by fully understanding truth and nature.²¹ These ideas are the same as Aristotle.

Final Goals

The final goal of the Buddha is *nirvana*, the final goal of Aristotle is happiness. So there is a clear difference in the purpose of their ethics. In the teaching of the Buddha, there are two transcendental effects, initially, to achieve happiness connected to enlightenment in the present life, and secondly, to aim at the greater manifestation of the better life after death. But, the main focus of the Buddha is the enlightened person, their following the Four Noble Truths and the noble eightfold path. The primary purpose of Aristotle in his ethics of virtue is to provide guides for the achievement of the happiness *eudaimonia* to which a good life of the practice of virtue gives rise.²² That is happiness is the end of this life. In Buddhism it is easy to consider the possibility that someone meditating in a forest could gain happiness more easily compared to a person working in a city.²³ For Aristotle, the practice of virtue should be for human beings in general. Buddhism's ideology of happiness indicates that happiness is a significant part of life that aids in ending humanity's eternal reincarnation cycle. On the contrary, Aristotelianism influences aid in describing that every item or being must be accounted for within a limited frame of life.²⁴ Both Buddha and Aristotle see happiness in relation to purpose. However, the end that is achieved is different.²⁵

Aristotle believed that education can develop an individual's virtue so that they can achieve true happiness. He said that if happiness does not come from a higher power, then it must be a consequence of goodness accomplished through the effort of learning.

Conclusion

The similarity between Buddha and Aristotle is that happiness *eudaimonia* is the product of a certain kind of practice. For the Buddha, this discipline which leads to happiness involves the liberation from suffering, obtained through the practise of the Noble Eightfold Path. The ultimate end is nirvana For Aristotle the ultimate end itself is happiness and to live a decent life. This allows him to accept a certain measure of material wealth, good health, and good friendship, as appropriate for

such an aim. For Aristotle, the wellbeing of a human depends on their virtuous acts being performed for the sake of other people. In addition, the person acts ethically on behalf other human beings by creating a situation under which they can flourish. Moral virtues aim to modify better life and being a good human. Thus, it is one of the most essential elements of Aristotelian happiness. The purpose of the Buddha in his ethics is concerned with what is good for individuals and community and is also described as pragmatic: it is to root out the ‘defilements’ and modify the ego through the understanding of selflessness and the principles of spiritual mindfulness practice such as the four noble truths. The difference is the focus on the particular aim of the monk who is seeking enlightenment and nirvana. The Buddha’s main goal is to provide his followers to achieve the peaceful states of nirvana or salvation, the period when someone becomes absolutely enlightened achieves a state of ‘absolute truth,’ and is liberated from the pain of karmic rebirth. While for Aristotle, moral virtue is for humans in general.

ENDNOTES

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⁵ Keown, D. “Keynote One.” *Presentation at Contemporary Perspectives on Buddhist Ethics*, Columbia University Press, New York, (2011), p.124.

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¹¹ Aristotle. *Nichomachean Ethics*. David Ross and Lesley Brown (ed.) Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, (2009), no. 1107a8-12. I.7 1097b28.

¹² *Ibid*, 1097b28. EN I.7 1098a16-18

¹³ *Ibid*, 1097a32-b8). I.7 1098a15-16.

¹⁴ Nanamoli and Bodhi. *Majjhima Nikaya*. Colombo, Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Tripitaka Project, 1995, p.18.

¹⁵ Nanatusita, Bhikkhu. *The Bhikkhu Patimokkha. A Word-by-Word Translation* Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka, Kandy: (2014), p.15.

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¹⁷ Morgan, J. William. *Ethics in Sport. Market stress*, Champaign, United states of America. Human Kinetics Publications, (1996), p. 63.

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