

## A BUDDHIST VIEW OF HAPPINESS

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### ABSTRACT

In Buddhism, happiness is achieved when a person can perceive the true nature of reality, unmodified by the mental constructs we superimpose upon it. This authentic happiness comes from having an exceptionally healthy state of mind that underlies and suffuses all emotional states and that embraces all the joys and sorrows that come one's way. The mental states necessary for authentic happiness are not simply found or happened upon. Rather, happiness is achieved through mental training that purges the mind of afflictive emotions, such as hatred and compulsive desire, which literally poison the mind, and above all through the eradication of ignorance. This article discusses the Buddhist conception of happiness and its attainment. In particular, the article addresses the methods and practices that Buddhism employs to train the mind to achieve authentic happiness and the recent developments in contemplative neuroscience that complement and advance these methods.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhism, happiness, contemplative neuroscience, meditation, compassion

### INTRODUCTION

In modern societies, happiness is often equated with a maximization of pleasure, and some imagine that true happiness would consist of an interrupted succession of pleasurable experiences. This sounds more like a recipe for exhaustion than for genuine happiness. In fact, nothing is further from the Buddhist notion of *sukha*, which refers to an optimal way of being, an exceptionally healthy state of mind that underlies and suffuses all emotional states and embraces all the joys and sorrows that come one's way.<sup>1</sup> *Sukha* is therefore a state of lasting well-being that manifests itself when we have freed ourselves of mental blindness and afflictive emotions. It is also the wisdom that allows us to see the world as it is, without veils or distortions. It is, finally, the joy of moving towards inner freedom and the loving-kindness and compassion that radiates towards others.

In Buddhism, the word “reality” connotes the true nature of things, unmodified by the mental constructs we superimpose upon it. Such constructs open up a gap between our perception and that reality, and hence a never-ending conflict with the world. We take for permanent that which is ephemeral and for happiness that which is but a source of suffering, and we imagine there being an independent self in the midst of the aggregates of the body and mind.

Under the influence of habitual tendencies, we perceive the exterior world as a series of distinct, autonomous entities to which we attribute characteristics that we believe belong inherently to them.

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1 Dalai Lama and H. C. Cutler, *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998); Matthieu Ricard, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).

This error, which Buddhism calls ignorance, gives rise to powerful reflexes of attachment and aversion that generally lead to suffering. The world of ignorance and suffering, *samsara*, is not a fundamental condition of existence, but a mental universe based on our mistaken conception of reality.<sup>2</sup>

The world of appearances is created by the coming together of an infinite number of ever-changing causes and conditions. Like a rainbow that forms when the sun shines across a curtain of rain and then vanishes when any factor contributing to its formation disappears, phenomena exist in an essentially interdependent mode and have no autonomous and enduring existence. Everything is relation; nothing exists in and of itself. Once this essential concept is understood and internalized, the erroneous perception of the world gives way to a correct understanding of the nature of things and being, a wisdom that is not a mere philosophical construct but something that emerges gradually, as we shed our mental blindness and the afflictive mental states it produces and, hence, the principal causes of our suffering.

Every being has the potential for authentic happiness and perfection, just as every sesame seed is permeated with oil. Ignorance, in this context, means being unaware of that potential, like the beggar who is unaware of the treasure buried beneath his shack. Actualizing our true nature, coming into possession of that hidden wealth, allows us to live a life full of meaning. It is the surest way to find serenity and to let genuine altruism flourish.<sup>3</sup>

Yet happiness does not come simply because one wishes or prays for it. It is not a gift that chance bestows upon us and that a reversal of fortune takes back. Happiness is a skill that requires effort and time.<sup>4</sup>

A great majority of the European words for “happy” at first meant “lucky” (with the exception of the Welsh word, which first meant “wise”).<sup>5</sup> The happy person is someone who has benefitted from a lucky destiny and from favorable circumstances. In fact, most people instinctively put all their hopes and fear in the outer world.

As influential as external conditions may be, suffering, like well-being, is essentially a state of mind. It is the mind that translates good and bad circumstances into happiness or misery. The search for happiness is not about looking at life through rose-colored glasses or blinding oneself to the pain and imperfections of the world. It is about the purging of mental toxins, such as hatred and compulsive desire, which literally poison the mind, and above all, about the eradication of ignorance.

No one wakes up in the morning thinking: “I wish I could suffer all day, and if possible my whole life.” We all strive, consciously or unconsciously, competently or clumsily, to be happier and to suffer less. Yet we often confuse genuine happiness with merely seeking enjoyable feelings. To imagine happiness as the achievement of all our wishes and passions—and above all, to see it from an exclusively egocentric perspective—is to confuse the legitimate aspiration to inner fulfillment with a utopia that inevitably leads to frustration. The fact is that, without inner peace and

2 Shantarakshita and Jamgön Mipham, *The Adornment of the Middle Way: Shantarakshita's Madhyamakalankara with Commentary by Jamgön Mipham*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2005); A. B. Wallace, *Choosing Reality: A Buddhist View of Physics and the Mind* (1996; repr., Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2003).

3 Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva: A Translation of the Bodhicaryavatara*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group, 2nd ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 2006); Kunzang Pelden, *The Nectar of Manjushri's Speech: A Detailed Commentary on Shantideva's Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2007).

4 Ricard, *Happiness*; Matthieu Ricard, *The Art of Meditation*, trans. Sherab Chödzin Kohn (Paris: NiL Éditions, 2008; London: Atlantic Books, 2010).

5 Matthieu Ricard, “A Buddhist View of Happiness,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, ed. Susan David, Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda C. Ayers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 344.

wisdom, we have nothing of what we need to be happy. Happiness is a state of inner fulfillment, not the gratification of inexhaustible desires for outward things. As the Tibetan proverb says, “Seeking happiness outside ourselves is like waiting for sunshine in a cave facing north.”<sup>6</sup> Our desires are boundless and our control over the world is limited, temporary, and, more often than not, illusory. If, conversely, happiness is a state that depends on inner conditions, each of us must recognize and bring those conditions together. Happiness is not given to us, nor misery imposed. At every moment we are at a crossroads and must choose the direction we are to take.

#### OUR OWN HAPPINESS CAN ONLY BE ACHIEVED THROUGH THAT OF OTHERS

Among all the clumsy, blind, and extreme ways in which we go about building happiness, one of the most sterile is egocentrism. The pursuit of selfish happiness is bound to fail. It is a lose-lose situation in which we make ourselves miserable and create misery around us.

“When selfish happiness is the only goal in life, life soon becomes goalless,” wrote Romain Rolland.<sup>7</sup> Even if we display every outward sign of happiness, we can never be truly happy if we dissociate ourselves from the happiness of others. A happiness painstakingly constructed in the kingdom of selfishness is as ephemeral and fragile as a castle built on a frozen lake, ready to sink at the first thaw.

Our own happiness is intimately linked to that of others: most of our difficulties actually arise because we lack concern for others’ well-being. As the Buddhist philosopher Shantideva wrote:

All the joy the world contains  
Has come through wishing happiness for others.  
All the misery the world contains  
Has come through wanting pleasure for oneself.<sup>8</sup>

This in no way requires us to neglect our own happiness. Each individual’s desire for happiness is as legitimate as anyone else’s. We must realize that in the deepest part of ourselves, we fear suffering and aspire to happiness. Then, we should realize that all sentient beings want to avoid suffering just as much as we do. The right not to suffer, though often ignored, is without a doubt the most fundamental right that living beings possess. Finally, we should develop the strong aspiration and readiness to do whatever we can to ease others’ suffering and contribute to their lasting well-being.

The goal here is a deep state of well-being and wisdom at all moments, accompanied by love for every sentient being and not by that individual love that modern society relentlessly drums into us. True happiness arises from the essential goodness that wholeheartedly desires everyone to find meaning in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Happiness and Pleasure*

The most common error is to confuse pleasure for happiness. The fleeting experience of pleasure is dependent on circumstance, on a specific location or moment in time. It is unstable by nature, and

6 Ricard, *Happiness*, 33.

7 Romain Rolland, *Jean-Christophe*, vol. 8, *Les Amies* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1952) (author’s translation).

8 Shantideva, *Way of the Bodhisattva*, 127.

9 Dilgo Khyentse, *The Heart of Compassion: The Thirty-Seven Verses on the Practice of a Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2007).

the sensation it evokes soon becomes neutral, and even unpleasant. Likewise, when repeated it may grow insipid and even lead to disgust; savoring a delicious meal is a source of genuine pleasure, but we are indifferent to it once we have had our fill and would sicken of it if we were to continue eating.

Pleasure is exhausted through usage, like a candle that consumes itself. It is almost always linked to an activity and naturally leads to lassitude by dint of that activity being repeated. Listening to beautiful music requires a focus of attention that, as minimal as it is, cannot be maintained indefinitely. Were we forced to listen to music for days on end, it would become unbearable to us. Furthermore, pleasure can be joined to cruelty, violence, pride, greed, and other mental conditions that are incompatible with true happiness.

Unlike pleasure, genuine happiness may be influenced by circumstance, but it is not dependent on it. It actually gives us the inner resources to deal better with those circumstances. It does not mutate into its opposite, but endures and grows with experience. It imparts a sense of fulfillment that, in time, becomes second nature.

In brief, there is no direct relationship between pleasure and happiness. This distinction in no way suggests that we ought not to seek out pleasurable sensations. There is no reason to deprive ourselves of the enjoyment of a magnificent landscape, of swimming in the sea, or of the scent of a rose, so long as they do not alienate us. Pleasures become obstacles only when they are tainted with grasping and impede inner freedom, giving rise to avidity and dependence.

One may thus understand that even unpleasant experiences, such as sadness in the face of a tragedy, an injustice, or a massacre, are by no means incompatible with compassion, with a sense of direction and meaning in life, or with inner strength and deep confidence in one's resolve to bring about a better world. So even in sadness, one can continue to pursue a most meaningful and constructive life, which characterizes genuine happiness.

### *Suffering*

Just as we distinguished between happiness and pleasure, we must also make the distinction between affliction and suffering. We incur suffering, but we create unhappiness. The Sanskrit word *dukkha*, the opposite of *sukha*, does not simply define an unpleasant sensation, but rather reflects a fundamental vulnerability to suffering and pain that can ultimately lead to world-weariness, the feeling that life is not worth living because there is no way to find meaning in it.

Suffering can be triggered by numerous causes over which we sometimes have some power and sometimes have none. Being born with a handicap, falling ill, losing a loved one, or being caught up in war or in a natural disaster—all are beyond our control. Unhappiness is altogether different, being the way in which we experience our suffering. Unhappiness may indeed be associated with physical or moral pain inflicted by exterior conditions, but it is not essentially linked to it.

Just as it is the mind that translates suffering into unhappiness, it is the mind's responsibility to master its perception thereof. A modification, even a tiny one, in the way in which we manage our thoughts and perceive and interpret the world can significantly change our existence.

Buddhism also speaks of a pervasive form of suffering, which stems from the blindness of our own minds, where it remains so long as we remain in the grip of ignorance and selfishness. Our confusion, born of a lack of judgment and wisdom, blinds us to what we must do and avoid doing in order to ensure that our thoughts, our words, and our acts engender happiness and not suffering.

Is there any way to put an end to suffering? According to Buddhism, suffering will always exist as a universal phenomenon, but every individual has the potential for liberation from it.

Despite all that, this vision does not lead Buddhism to the view held by certain Western philosophers who believe that suffering is inevitable and happiness out of reach. The reason for this is simple: unhappiness has causes that can be identified and acted on.

The first mistake is to believe that unhappiness is inevitable because it is the result of divine will or some other immutable principle, and that it will therefore be forever out of our control. The second mistake is gratuitously based on the idea that unhappiness has no identifiable cause, that it descends on us randomly and has no relation to us personally. The third mistake draws on a confused fatalism that boils down to the idea that, whatever be the cause, the effect will always be the same.

If unhappiness had immutable causes, we would never be able to escape it. The laws of causality would have no meaning—anything could come from anything else, flowers could grow in the sky and light could create darkness. If there were no cure for suffering, it would be pointless to make it worse by stressing over it. It would be better to accept it fully and to distract oneself so as to feel it less harshly.

But everything that occurs does have a cause. What inferno does not start with a spark, what war without thoughts of hatred, fear, or greed? What inner pain has not grown from the fertile soil of envy, animosity, vanity, or, even more basically, ignorance? Any active cause must itself be a changing one; nothing can exist autonomously and without changing.

Genuine happiness results from creating new causes by cultivating various fundamental qualities such as altruistic love, compassion, inner peace, strength, and freedom. Instead of being, like pleasure, very vulnerable to outer circumstances, genuine happiness gives us the resources to deal with the inevitable ups and downs of life.

We all have the potential to sweep away the veils of ignorance, to purge ourselves of the selfishness and misplaced desires that trigger unhappiness, and to work for the good of others and extract the essence from our human condition. It is not the magnitude of the task that matters; it is the magnitude of our determination.

#### THE FOUR TRUTHS OF SUFFERING

Over 2,500 years ago, seven weeks after attaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha gave his first sermon in the Deer Park outside Varanasi. There, he preached the Four Noble Truths. The first is the truth of suffering. The second is the truth of the causes of suffering—ignorance that engenders craving, malice, pride, and many other thoughts that poison our lives and those of others. Since these mental poisons can be eliminated, an end to suffering—the third truth—is therefore possible. The fourth truth is the path that turns that potential into a reality. The path is the process of using all available means to eliminate the fundamental causes of suffering. In brief, we must: recognize suffering, eliminate its source, and end it by practicing the path.<sup>10</sup>

#### CONTEMPLATING THE NATURE OF THE MIND

The inability to manage our thoughts proves to be one of the principal causes of suffering. Learning to tone down the ceaseless racket of disturbing thoughts is a decisive stage on the road to inner peace.

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<sup>10</sup> Ricard, "Buddhist View of Happiness," 347–48.

We need to take a closer look at mind itself. The first things we notice are the currents of thought that are continuously flowing without our even being aware of them. Like it or not, countless thoughts born of our sensations, our memories, and our imaginations are forever streaming through our minds. But there is a quality of mind that is always present no matter what kind of thoughts we entertain. That quality is the primary consciousness underlying all thought. It is what remains in the rare moment when the mind is at rest, almost motionless, even as it retains its ability to know. That faculty, which we may call “pure consciousness,” can exist in the absence of mental constructs.

When thoughts arise, can we assign them any inherent characteristics? Do they have a particular localization? No. A color? A shape? Neither. All we find is the quality of “knowing,” as thoughts reveal no intrinsic features of their own. In pure consciousness, we experience the mind as empty of inherent existence, which means that the mind is not a separate entity and is found to be devoid of intrinsic characteristics such as location, shape, and color.

When we understand that thoughts emerge from pure consciousness and are then reabsorbed into it, just as waves emerge from the ocean and dissolve into it again, we have taken a great stride towards inner peace. From that moment, our thoughts have lost a great deal of their power to disturb us.

### *Emotions*

If the passions are the mind’s great dramas, the emotions are its actors. Throughout our lives they rush through our minds like an unruly river, determining countless states of happiness and unhappiness. Should we try to tame this river? Is doing so even possible, and if so, how? Some emotions make us flourish, some sap our well-being, some make us wither. Love directed towards the well-being of others, compassion focused on others’ suffering, in thought and deed, are examples of nourishing emotions that help to generate happiness. The hunger of obsessive desire, greed that latches onto the object of its attachment, and hatred are examples of draining emotions. How can we develop the constructive emotions while ridding ourselves of the destructive ones?

Despite its rich terminology for describing a wide range of mental events, the traditional languages of Buddhism have no word for “emotion” as such. That may be because, according to Buddhism, all types of mental activity, including rational thought, are associated with some kind of feeling, be it one of pleasure, pain, or indifference. And most affective states, such as love and hatred, arise together with discursive thought. Rather than distinguishing between emotions and thoughts, Buddhism is concerned with understanding which types of mental activity are conducive to one’s own and others’ well-being, and which types are harmful, especially in the long run.<sup>11</sup> This is actually quite consistent with what cognitive science tells us about the brain and emotion. Every region in the brain that has been identified with some aspect of emotion has also been identified with aspects of cognition. There are no emotion centers in the brain. The neuronal circuits that support emotions are completely intertwined with those that support cognition.<sup>12</sup>

If an emotion strengthens our inner peace and seeks the good of others, it is positive or constructive; if it shatters our serenity, deeply disturbs our mind, and is intended to harm others, it is

11 P. Ekman et al., “Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives on Emotions and Well-Being,” *Current Perspectives in Psychological Science* 14 (2005).

12 R. J. Davidson and W. Irwin, “The Functional Neuroanatomy of Emotion and Affective Style,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 3 (1999); R. J. Davidson, “Cognitive Neuroscience Needs Affective Neuroscience (and Vice Versa),” *Cognition and Emotion* 42 (2000); A. R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error* (New York: Avon Books, 1994).

negative or afflictive. The only criterion is the good or the suffering that we create by our acts, words, and thoughts, for ourselves as well as for others. This is what differentiates, for instance, holy anger—indignation before injustice—from rage born of the desire to hurt someone. The former has freed people from slavery and domination and moved us to march in the streets to change the world; it seeks to end injustice as soon as possible or to make someone aware of the error of his ways. The latter generates nothing but sorrow.

We need to work on our thoughts one by one, analyzing the way in which they emerge and evolve and gradually learning to free them as they arise, defusing the chain reactions that allow thoughts to invade the mind. Furthermore, being able to repeatedly free oneself of such afflictive thoughts as they occur gradually erodes their tendency to form again, until they stop reappearing altogether. Just as our emotions, moods, and tendencies have been shaped by the accumulation of countless instantaneous thoughts, they can be transformed through time by dealing in a mindful way with such thoughts.

#### WHAT WE MEAN BY “NEGATIVE EMOTIONS”

The Tibetan word *nyön-mong* (*klesha* in Sanskrit) refers to a state of mental disturbance, torment, and confusion that “afflicts us from within.”<sup>13</sup> Consider hatred, jealousy, or craving at the moment they form—there is no question that they make us deeply uncomfortable. Moreover, the actions and words they inspire are usually intended to hurt others. Conversely, thoughts of kindness, affection, and tolerance give us joy and courage, open our minds, and free us inside. They also spur us on to benevolence and empathy.

In addition, disturbing emotions tend to distort our perception of reality and to prevent us from seeing it as it really is. Attachment idealizes its object; hatred demonizes it. These emotions make us believe that beauty or ugliness is inherent in people and in things, even though it is the mind that decides whether they are attractive or repulsive. This misapprehension opens a gap between the way things appear and the way they are; it clouds the judgment and makes us think and act as if these qualities were not largely based on how we see them.

On the other hand, positive emotions and mental factors strengthen the clarity of our thinking and the accuracy of our reasoning, since they are based on a more accurate appreciation of reality. Selfless love reflects some understanding of the intimate interdependence of beings, of our happiness and that of others; it is a notion that is attuned to reality, while selfishness opens an ever-wider abyss between us and other people.

Buddhism’s sole objective in treating the emotions is to free us from the fundamental causes of suffering. It starts with the principle that certain mental events are afflictive, regardless of the intensity or context of their formation. This is particularly true for the three mental processes that are considered to be basic mental poisons: desire (in the sense of hunger or tormenting greed), hatred (the wish to harm), and delusion (which distorts our perception of reality). Buddhism usually includes pride and envy as well; together, these are the five major poisons associated with some sixty negative mental states. The texts also refer to “84,000 negative emotions.” These are not all specified in detail, but as a symbolic figure, the number gives a sense of the complexity of the human mind and helps us to understand that our methods of transforming the mind must be

<sup>13</sup> Dalai Lama and Cutler, *The Art of Happiness*, 236.

adapted to the enormous variety of mental dispositions. This is why Buddhism speaks of the “84,000 doors” that lead to inner transformation.<sup>14</sup>

### *Desire*

No one would dispute the fact that it is natural to desire and that desire plays a driving role in our lives. But let us not confuse the deep aspirations of making oneself a better human being, of working for the good of others, or of achieving spiritual awakening, with the desire that is mere hunger and tortures the mind.

As natural as it is, desire degenerates into a mental toxin as soon as it becomes craving, obsession, or unmitigated attachment. As the Buddha Shakyamuni taught: “Prey to desire, like a monkey in the forest you jump from branch to branch without ever finding any fruit, from life to life without ever finding any peace.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Hatred*

Of all the mental poisons, hatred is the most toxic. It is one of the chief causes of unhappiness and the driving force of all violence, all genocide, and countless assaults on human dignity. So long as one person’s hatred generates another’s, the cycle of resentment, reprisal, and suffering will never be broken. “If hatred responds to hatred, hatred will never end,” taught the Buddha Shakyamuni.<sup>16</sup> Eliminating hatred from our mind stream is therefore a critical step in our journey to happiness.

Hatred exaggerates the faults of its object and ignores its good qualities. The mind, steeped in animosity and resentment, encloses itself in illusion and is convinced that the source of its dissatisfaction is entirely exterior to itself. We solidify the evil or disgusting attributes that we see in the object of our hatred as being permanent and intrinsic traits, and we turn away from any reevaluation of the situation. We thus feel justified in expressing animosity and in retaliating; hence discrimination, wholesale condemnation, persecution, genocide, blind retaliation, and the death penalty, the ultimate legal retaliation. Caught up in feelings of hatred, we obscure the basic benevolence that makes us appreciate everyone’s aspiration to avoid suffering and achieve happiness.

Our compassion and love usually depend on the benevolence or aggression of others’ attitudes towards us and our loved ones. This is why it is extremely difficult for us to feel compassionate towards those who harm us. Buddhist compassion, however, is based on the wholehearted desire for all beings, without exception, to be liberated from suffering and its causes, and from hatred in particular. Motivated by altruistic love, one can also go further by wishing that all beings, criminals included, may find the causes of happiness.

The only target of resentment left to us is hatred itself. It is a deceitful, relentless, and unbending enemy that tirelessly disrupts and destroys lives. To be patient, without weakness, with those we consider to be our enemies, is entirely appropriate; however, to be patient with hatred itself is entirely inappropriate, regardless of the circumstances.

## IGNORANCE: CLINGING TO THE NOTION OF SELF UNDERMINES HAPPINESS

According to Buddhism, among the many aspects of our mental confusion and ignorance, the most radically disruptive is the grasping onto the concept of a personal identity: the individual self.

<sup>14</sup> Ricard, *Happiness*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Ricard, “Buddhist View of Happiness,” 350.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



The concept of personal identity has three aspects: the “I,” the “person,” and the “self.” These three aspects are not fundamentally different from each other, but they reflect the different ways in which we cling to our perception of personal identity.

The “I” lives in the present; it is the “I” that thinks, “I’m hungry,” or, “I exist.” It is the locus of consciousness, thoughts, judgment, and will. It is the experience of our current state.

The notion of the “person” is broader, a dynamic continuum of our experience and history extending through time and incorporating various aspects of our corporeal, mental, and social existence. Its boundaries are more fluid.<sup>17</sup>

But there is also a conceptual “self” shaped by the force of habit. We attribute various qualities to it and posit it as the core of our being, as autonomous and enduring.

At every moment between birth and death, the body is engaged in a ceaseless process of transformation, and the mind is the theater of countless emotional and conceptual experiences. And yet we assign qualities of permanence, uniqueness, and autonomy to the self. Furthermore, as we begin to feel that this self is highly vulnerable and must be protected and satisfied, aversion and attraction come into play—aversion for anything that threatens the self, attraction to all that pleases it, comforts it, boosts its confidence, or puts it at ease. These two basic feelings, attraction and repulsion, are the fonts for a whole sea of conflicting emotions.

We imagine that by retreating into the bubble of ego, we will be protected. We create the illusion that we are separate from the world and hope thereby to avert suffering. In fact, what happens is just the opposite, since ego grasping and disproportionate self-cherishing are powerful magnets for suffering.

Each of us is indeed a unique person, and it is fine to recognize and appreciate who we are and to aspire to happiness. But in reinforcing the separate identity of the self, we fall out of sync with reality. The truth is, we are fundamentally interdependent with other people and our environment.

Our experience is simply the content of the mental flow, the continuum of consciousness, and there is no justification for seeing the self as an entirely distinct entity within that flow. We are so accustomed to affixing the “I” label to that mental flow, however, that we come to identify with it and to fear its disappearance. There follows a powerful attachment to the self and thus to the notion of “mine”—my body, my name, my mind, my possessions, my friends, and so on—which leads either to the desire to possess or to the feeling of repulsion for the “other.”

This erroneous sense of self forms the basis of all mental affliction, be it hatred, clinging, desire, envy, pride, or confusion. From that point on, we see the world through the distorting mirror of our illusions, which inevitably leads to frustration and suffering.

Let us consider what it is that we suppose contributes to our identity. Our body? An assemblage of bones and flesh. Our consciousness? A continuous stream of instants. Our history? The memory of what is no more. Our name? We attach all sorts of concepts to it—our heritage, our reputation, and our social status—but ultimately, it is nothing more than a grouping of letters.<sup>18</sup>

When we explore the body, the speech, and the mind, we come to see that this self is nothing but a word, a label, a convention, a designation. To unmask the ego’s deception, we have to pursue our inquiry to the very end. If we suspect the presence of a thief in our house, we have to inspect every room, every corner, every potential hiding place, just to make sure that no one is really there. Only then can we rest easy.

17 D. Galin, “The Concepts of ‘Self,’ ‘Person,’ and ‘I,’ in Western Psychology and in Buddhism,” in *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, ed. B. Alan Wallace (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

18 Dilgo Khyentse, *The Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones: The Practice of View, Meditation, and Action*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 1992).

Rigorous analysis leads us to conclude that the self does not reside outside the body or in any part of the body; nor is the self some diffuse entity that permeates the entire body. We willingly believe that the self is associated with consciousness, but consciousness, too, is just a flow or experience: the past moment of consciousness is dead (only its impact remains), the future is yet to arrive, and the present does not last. How could a distinct self exist, suspended between something that no longer exists and something that does not yet exist?

Thus, the self cannot be detected in either the body or the mind; it is neither a distinct entity in a combination of the two, nor an entity lying outside them. No serious analysis or direct introspective experience can lead to a reasonable conviction that we possess a self. Buddhism therefore concludes that the self is just a convention, a name we give to a continuum, just as we name a river the Ganges or the Mississippi.

When the self ceases to be the most important thing in the world, we find it easier to focus our concern on others. The sight of others' suffering bolsters our courage and resolve to work on their behalf, instead of crippling us with our own emotional distress.

#### IS IT POSSIBLE TO FREE OURSELVES OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS?

We might think that ignorance and negative emotions are inherent to the flow of consciousness, and that trying to rid ourselves of them is like fighting against a part of ourselves. But the most fundamental aspect of consciousness, the pure faculty of knowing—what we have called the “luminous” quality of the mind—contains no hatred or desire at its core. A mirror, for instance, will reflect both angry faces and smiling ones. The very quality of the mirror allows countless images to appear, yet none of them belong to the mirror. In fact, if the angry face were intrinsic to the mirror, the face could be seen at all times and would prevent other images from arising. Similarly, the most fundamental quality of cognition, the “luminous” quality of the mind, is what permits the arising of thoughts and underlies all of them. Yet none of these thoughts belong intrinsically to the fundamental nature of the mind. The experience of introspection shows, on the contrary, that the negative emotions are transitory mental events that can be obliterated by their opposites, the positive emotions, which act as antidotes.

We have to gradually familiarize ourselves with each antidote—loving-kindness as the antidote to hatred, for instance—until the absence of hatred becomes second nature. The Tibetan word *gom* is usually translated as “meditation,” but it more precisely denotes “familiarization,” while the Sanskrit word *bhavana*, also translated as “meditation,” means “cultivation.” It is about familiarizing oneself with a new vision of things, a new way of managing one's thoughts, perceiving people, and experiencing the world.

Buddhism teaches various ways of making this “familiarization” work. One method consists of applying a specific antidote to each negative emotion. Another method allows us to unravel, or liberate, the emotion by looking straight at it and letting it dissolve as it arises. The choice of one method over another depends on the moment, the circumstances, and the capacities of the person using them. All methods share a common aspect and the same goal: to help us to stop being victims of conflicting emotions.

#### *The Use of Antidotes*

The first method consists of neutralizing afflictive emotions with a specific antidote, just as we neutralize the destructive effects of poison with antivenom, or of an acid with an alkali. One fundamental point emphasized by Buddhism is that two diametrically opposed mental processes cannot form

simultaneously. We may fluctuate rapidly between love and hatred, but we cannot feel, in the same instant of consciousness, the desire to hurt someone and to do him good. The two impulses are as opposed to each other as water and fire.

In the same way, by habituating our minds to altruistic love, we gradually eliminate hatred, because the two states of mind can alternate but cannot coexist at the same time. So, the more we cultivate loving-kindness, the less space there will be for hatred in our mental landscape. It is therefore important to begin by learning the antidotes that correspond to each negative emotion, and to then cultivate them.

Since altruistic love acts as a direct antidote to hatred, the more we develop it, the more the desire to cause harm will wither and finally disappear. It is a question not of suppressing hatred, but of turning the mind to something diametrically opposed to it: love and compassion.

It is equally impossible for greed or desire-passion, which has a strong binding aspect, to coexist with inner freedom, which allows us to taste mental peace and to rest in the cool shade of serenity. Desire can fully develop only when it is allowed to run rampant to the point where it monopolizes the mind.

As for anger, it will be neutralized by patience. This requires us not to remain passive but to steer clear of being overwhelmed by destructive emotions. As the Dalai Lama explains: “Patience safeguards our peace of mind in the face of adversity. . . . It is a deliberate response (as opposed to an unreasoned reaction) to the strong negative thoughts and emotions that tend to arise when we encounter harm.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Freeing the Emotions*

The second method consists of asking ourselves whether we might apply a single antidote that acts at a basic level on all our mental afflictions, rather than try to stem with a different antidote each emotion that afflicts us. It is neither possible nor desirable to trammel the mind’s natural activities, and it would be futile and unhealthy to try to block its thoughts. On the other hand, when we examine the emotions, we find that they are merely dynamic flows without any inherent substance of their own—what Buddhism calls the thoughts’ “emptiness” of real existence. What would happen if, instead of counteracting a disturbing emotion with its opposite—anger with patience, for instance—we were simply to contemplate the nature of the emotion itself?

You are overwhelmed by a sudden tide of anger. You feel as if there is no choice but to let it sweep you away. But look closely. It is nothing more than a thought. When you see a great black cloud in a stormy sky, it seems so solid that you could sit on it. But when you approach it, there’s nothing to grab on to. Instead of feeling one with the anger you experience, dissociate yourself as a person and experience anger as a transient phenomenon. The more you look at anger in this manner, the more it evaporates under your gaze, like white frost under the sun’s rays.

If we come to see that anger has no substance of its own, it rapidly loses all power. This is what Buddhism calls liberation from anger at the moment it arises by recognizing its emptiness, its lack of its own existence.

### *Ethics as the Science of Happiness*

What criteria allow us to qualify an act as good or bad? Buddhist ethics are not just ways of acting, but ways of being. A human being endowed with loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom will

<sup>19</sup> Dalai Lama, *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World: Ethics for the New Millennium* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1999), 106, 109.

spontaneously act in an ethical way, because he or she is wise and good at heart. In Buddhism, an act is essentially unethical if it is meant to cause suffering and ethical if it is meant to bring genuine well-being to others. It is the motivation, altruistic or malicious, that colors the act as good or bad, just as a crystal acquires the color of the cloth on which it rests. Ethics also affect our own well-being, because in making others suffer we cause suffering for ourselves, either immediately or in the long term; bringing happiness to others is ultimately the best way to guarantee our own. Through the interplay of the laws of cause and effect—the laws governing the consequences of our actions, which Buddhism calls *karma*—ethics are therefore intimately linked to well-being.

In Buddhism, as the Dalai Lama explains, “A meaningful ethical system divorced from the question of an individual’s experience of suffering and happiness is hard to envisage.”<sup>20</sup> A dehumanized ethic built on abstract foundations has little utility. Rather, one needs mindfulness, wisdom, and a basic altruistic disposition that, according to Buddhism, is deeply embedded in our minds but needs to be cultivated throughout life. This has little to do with applying rules and principles; rather, it has to do with being of a compassionate nature. One aspect of compassion is a spontaneous readiness to act for the benefit of others, and from which altruistic deeds naturally flow.

The two decisive factors are motivation and the consequences of our acts. Even if we try our best to predict them, we have little control over the unfolding of external events. But we can always adopt an altruistic motivation, and we therefore need to check our motivation again and again. As the Dalai Lama explains:

[We must keep] asking ourselves whether we are being broad-minded or narrow-minded. Have we taken into account the overall situation or are we considering only specifics? Is our view short-term or long-term? Are we being short-sighted or clear-eyed? Is our motive genuinely compassionate when considered in relation to the totality of all beings? Or is our compassion limited just to our families, our friends and those we identify with closely? Just as in the practice of discovering the true nature of our thoughts and emotions, we need to think, think, think.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, our state of mind is the very core of ethics. The form that an action assumes is merely superficial. If we relied solely on a deed’s outward manifestation, it would be impossible to distinguish, for instance, between a white lie and a malicious one. If a killer asks where the person he is chasing is hiding, this is obviously not the moment to tell the truth. The same holds true for violence. If a mother violently shoves her child across a street to prevent her from being hit by a car, the act is violent only in appearance, for the mother has saved the child’s life. Conversely, if someone approaches with a big smile and showers us with compliments only so as to rip us off, his conduct is nonviolent in appearance only, for his intentions are actually malevolent.

It is only at the price of constant cultivation of wisdom and compassion that we can really become the guardians and inheritors of happiness.

## WHERE THE PATH LEADS

Everybody (or almost everybody) is interested in happiness. But who is interested in enlightenment? The very word seems exotic, vague, and distant. And yet, ultimate well-being comes from fully

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 151–52.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 154.

eliminating delusions and mental toxins and, thus, suffering. Enlightenment is what Buddhism calls the state of ultimate freedom that comes with a perfect knowledge of the nature of mind and of the world of phenomena. The sage has come to see that the individual self and the appearances of the world of phenomena have no intrinsic reality. The sage understands that all beings have the power to free themselves from ignorance and unhappiness, but that they do not know it. How, then, could the sage fail to feel infinite and spontaneous compassion for all those who, spellbound by ignorance, wander lost in the torments of *samsara*?

While such a state may seem very far removed from our daily concerns, it is certainly not beyond reach. But enlightenment does not happen by itself. Milk is the source of butter, but it will not make any if we simply leave it to its own devices; we have to churn it. The qualities of enlightenment are revealed through transformation at the far end of the spiritual path. Each stage is a step towards fulfillment and profound satisfaction. The spiritual journey is like traveling from one valley to another—each pass reveals a landscape more magnificent than the one before it.

In the bosom of enlightenment, beyond hope and doubt, conceptual shadows dissolve in the light of the dawn of non-duality. From the point of view of absolute truth, neither happiness nor suffering has any real existence. They belong to the relative truth perceived by the mind so long as it remains in the grip of confusion. One who has come to understand the true nature of things is like a navigator landing on an island made entirely of pure gold; even if looking for ordinary pebbles, he will not find any.

#### CULTIVATING HAPPINESS AND THE DAWN OF CONTEMPLATIVE NEUROSCIENCES

In 2000, a remarkable meeting took place in Dharamsala, India. Some of the leading specialists on human emotions—psychologists, neuroscientists, and philosophers—spent an entire week in discussion with the Dalai Lama in the privacy of his home in the foothills of the Himalayas. It was the first time that I had been able to participate in the fascinating meetings held by the Mind and Life Institute, which was founded in 1987 by Francisco Varela, a renowned neuroscientist, and Adam Engle, an American businessman. The dialogues focused on destructive emotions and how to handle them.<sup>22</sup>

One morning, during the meeting, the Dalai Lama remarked: “All of these discussions are very interesting, but what can we really contribute to society?”<sup>23</sup> During the lunch break, the participants engaged in animated discussions that resulted in a proposal to launch a research program on the short- and long-term effects of mind training, generally known as meditation. That afternoon, in the presence of the Dalai Lama, the project was enthusiastically adopted. It marked the start of an exciting research program—that of *contemplative neuroscience*.

Several studies were launched, notably in the laboratories of the late Francisco Varela in France; of Richard Davidson and Antoine Lutz in Madison, Wisconsin; of Paul Ekman and Robert Levenson in San Francisco and Berkeley; of Jonathan Cohen and Brent Field in Princeton, New Jersey; and of Tania Singer in Zurich.

Following an initial exploratory phase, about twenty experienced meditators were tested; they included monks and laypeople, men and women, easterners and westerners. All of them had devoted between ten thousand and fifty thousand hours to meditation—to developing compassion,

22 For more on these meetings, see Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions* (New York: Bantam, 2003).

23 Matthieu Ricard, “Neuroscience and Meditation,” *View: The Rigpa Journal* (August 2009), <http://www.viewmagazine.org/index.php/articles/science/102-neuroscience-and-meditation.html>.

altruism, mindfulness, and awareness. The studies led to the publication of several articles in prestigious scientific journals,<sup>24</sup> thus establishing the credibility of research on meditation and on achieving emotional balance, areas that had not been taken seriously until then. Richard Davidson described the research to a journalist, saying: “It demonstrates . . . that the brain is capable of being trained and physically modified in ways few people can imagine.”<sup>25</sup>

### *A Global Benefit*

Experienced meditators have the ability to generate mental states that are precise, focused, powerful, and lasting. In particular, experiments have shown that the region of the brain associated with emotions such as compassion is considerably more active in those with long-term meditative experience. Such discoveries indicate that basic human qualities can be deliberately cultivated through mental training.<sup>26</sup>

Other scientific investigations have shown that one does not have to be a highly trained meditator to benefit from the effects of meditation, and that twenty minutes of daily meditative practice can help significantly to reduce anxiety and stress, the tendency to become angry (the harmful effects of anger on health are well established), and the risk of relapse in cases of severe depression. Thirty minutes a day of mindfulness meditation (of the mindfulness-based, stress-reduction type) over the course of eight weeks can result in a considerable strengthening of the immune system and of one’s capacity for concentration, as well as in a reduction in arterial tension in subjects suffering from hypertension, and in a faster healing of psoriasis.<sup>27</sup> When it comes to practice, what is essential is not to meditate for long periods of time, but to meditate regularly. In general, if one engages regularly in a new activity or trains in a new skill (sport, music, etc.), modifications in the neuronal system of the brain can be observed within about a month. The study of the influence of mental states on health, once considered fanciful, is now increasingly part of the scientific research agenda.<sup>28</sup>

Without dramatizing the point, it is important to underline the degree to which meditation and mind training can change our lives. We tend to underestimate the power that lies in transforming our own minds and the effect that this inner revolution, which is profound and peaceful, can have on our quality of life.

### *Change Can Come at Any Age*

The Dalai Lama often describes Buddhism as being, above all, a science of the mind. That is not surprising, because the Buddhist texts put particular emphasis on the fact that all spiritual

24 See, in particular, A. Lutz et al., “Long-term Meditators Self-induce High-amplitude Gamma Synchrony During Mental Practice,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 101, no. 46 (2004).

25 Marc Kaufman, “Meditation Gives Brain a Charge, Study Finds,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 2005, A05.

26 Ricard, “Neuroscience and Meditation.”

27 The most important references concerning these studies, especially those of Linda Carlson (Calgary University), and of John Teasdale (Cambridge) and Zindel Segal (Toronto University), are quoted in Matthieu Ricard, *L’Art de la Méditation*, (Paris: NiL Éditions, 2008). In MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), an individual or group focuses on neutral awareness, identifying thoughts as “just thoughts,” rather than trying to label thoughts. This approach focuses on observation and can be practiced as a discipline for dealing with general psychological well-being, rather than with specific problems. See Jon Kabat-Zinn et al., “Effectiveness of a Meditation-Based Stress Reduction Program in the Treatment of Anxiety Disorders,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 149, no. 7 (1992): 942.

28 A. Lutz, J. D. Dunne, and R. J. Davidson, “Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*, eds. Philip David Zelazo et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

practices—mental, physical, and oral—are directly or indirectly intended to transform the mind. Nevertheless, as Mingyur Rinpoche writes: “Unfortunately, one of the main obstacles we face when we try to examine the mind is a deep-seated and often unconscious conviction that ‘we’re born the way we are and nothing we can do can change that.’”<sup>29</sup> The truth is that the state we generally consider to be normal is just a starting point, not the goal that we ought to be setting for ourselves. Our lives are too valuable to accept that. Little by little we can arrive at an optimal way of being.

To what extent can we train our mind to work in a constructive manner, to replace obsession with contentment, agitation with calmness, hatred with kindness? Twenty years ago, it was almost universally accepted by neuroscientists that the brain contained all its neurons at birth, and that their number did not change with experience. We now know that new neurons are produced up until the moment of death, and we speak of “neuroplasticity,” a term which takes into account the fact that the brain evolves continuously in relation to our experience, and that a particular form of training, such as learning a musical instrument or a sport, can bring about profound change. Mindfulness, altruism, and other basic human qualities can be cultivated in the same way, and we can acquire the know-how to enable us to do this.<sup>30</sup>

One of the great tragedies of our time is that we significantly underestimate our capacity for change. Our character traits continue so long as we do nothing to improve them, and so long as we tolerate and reinforce our habits and patterns thought after thought, day after day, year after year.

Studies asserting that 40–60 percent of our character traits are determined by genetics are contested by neuroscientists working in the fields of neuroplasticity as well as by specialists in epigenetics, the study of gene expression, an area of research that is growing rapidly. Genes are a bit like a blueprint that may or may not be put into action—there is nothing absolute about it. Even in adulthood, our environment can have a considerable influence on the expression of genes.<sup>31</sup>

### *Unlocking Our True Potential*

We do not consider it strange to devote years to learning to walk, read, and write, or to training for a profession. We spend hours exercising to stay in good physical shape, pedaling away on exercise bikes that go nowhere. In order to embark on any task, we need to have at least a small level of interest or enthusiasm, and that comes from being aware of the benefits. So why on earth should the mind be exempted from the same logic? Why should it be able to transform itself without the slightest effort, simply because we want it to? Such an assumption makes about as much sense as hoping to be able to play a Mozart concerto simply by tapping on the piano keys from time to time.

We are all a mixture of light and shadow, strength and weakness. Our mind can be our best friend and our worst enemy. But this state of affairs is neither optimal nor inevitable. Each of us has the potential to free ourselves from mental states that cause suffering for ourselves and for others, to find inner peace and to contribute to the well-being of others. But just wishing for this to happen is not enough. We need to train our minds.<sup>32</sup>

We devote a lot of effort to improving the material conditions of our existence, but in the end, it is always our mind that experiences the world and translates this experience into well-being or

29 Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, *The Joy of Living* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 32.

30 Matthieu Ricard, *Why Meditate?*, trans. Sherab Chödzin Kohn (Carlsbad: Hay House, 2010), 14.

31 Ricard, “Neuroscience and Meditation.”

32 See further Ricard, *L’Art de la Méditation*.

suffering. By transforming the way in which we perceive things, we transform the quality of our lives, and such a change can come from training the mind through meditation.

In Buddhism, “to meditate” means “to get used to” or “to cultivate.” Meditation consists of getting used to a new way of being, of perceiving the world and mastering our thoughts.

To accomplish this, Buddhist meditation uses two methods, one analytical and the other contemplative. Analysis consists of examining the nature of reality, which is essentially interdependent and impermanent, and honestly evaluating the causes and results of our own sufferings and those that we inflict on others. The contemplative approach consists of turning our mind inward and observing, behind the veil of thoughts and concepts, the nature of pure awareness that underlies all thoughts and allows them to arise. This fundamental “knowing” exists even in the absence of thoughts and concepts.

These recent scientific discoveries have changed our understanding of the way in which the brain evolves during the course of a lifetime. We are moving towards an acceptance that this evolution is not fantasy, and that we are getting to the heart of neuroscience and of neuroplasticity, an area that is itself relatively new. At the same time, increasingly powerful Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) techniques and increasingly sophisticated electroencephalograms (EEG), combined with the participation of experienced contemplatives, have led us towards a golden age of contemplative neuroscience. It is a fascinating prospect, and there is yet so much to discover.