

Feeling Good

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In the human realm, in which suffering seems to be, if not the main characteristic, then at least one of the predominant ones, it is no wonder that human beings put so much energy into trying to feel good. Sexuality of course is one of the main pursuits of humankind when it comes to pleasure, as we all know; besides all the most common ways— food, drink, sex, music, sports, games, gambling..... – people also look to religion in the quest for feeling good, and here's where things get complicated. If Buddhism promises the cure for suffering, doesn't that mean that, as a result of practicing Buddhism, that one would end up feeling good?

We can't feel good all the time, so what percentage of the time do we want to feel good, just as a way of gauging whether or not an approach to it is working? This may sound ridiculous, and it is. So, the Buddhist approach is not to wish for feeling good; rather, it is to face our suffering straight on. This is diametrically opposite to the normal way of dealing with the problem of suffering, which is to try to make an end run around it somehow. We can blot it out with any one of the hundreds of anesthetics available to us, or we can decide to stop all attempts to avoid it, and just confront it.

I want to feel good just like everyone else. As a young person, since I suffered from depression, without realizing that's what it was, I looked for ways to relieve my suffering. Mainly what worked was running, or some other kind of physical exertion, because the body produces endorphins in response to strenuous activity like running, and that produces a kind of natural high. That natural high, even though it was fairly short-lived, was a thing I lived for as a teen, since it provided a break in my otherwise constant experience of either depression or just generally feeling bad about myself.

As a young adult, I embraced meditation practice, in part because meditating made me feel better. It was worth the effort to train my mind to be aware, to observe, to learn to just experience things as they are, and not try to avoid pain quite so much. Pain, of course, is an inevitable part of being human, given that on occasion we get sick, whack our thumbs with a hammer, stub a toe, or crack our skulls against something immovable like the edge of a table or a car door opening. These things happen, we accept them, the pain is generally temporary, and we accept that.

Pain that is more subtle, dull, and longer in duration is tougher to deal with. We begin to call it suffering, because it is with us for a longer period of time. Depression is like that; it can last weeks or months in response to some difficult turn of events in life, it can spike at times, and it can also be a background, constant experience. In my life, given that the mild but constant form of depression known as dysthymia is always in the background, and given that I turned to Buddhism in part to find a way of dealing with it, I think that there are many people like myself: people who seek for refuge from their suffering – which manifests primarily as depression – in religion. And a good many people seem to be attracted to Buddhism for this reason.

Meditation is awareness of things just as they are. I've learned to be aware of depression just as it is, a skill that was decades in the making. Depression, a good example of suffering that is fairly constant and hard to make go away, is on one level an experience just like any other, i.e. it is a feeling. I am not advocating passivity towards depression, which would partake of resignation towards it, but acceptance combined with a realistic approach to doing something about it is key to getting a grip on it. I did pretty good at controlling the depth and intensity of dysthymia as a result of practicing meditation; however, I did not cure it by deep meditation practice alone. It is the result of some sort of chemical imbalance in my body, a lack of serotonin, perhaps, which my body tends to dispose of too rapidly. After 25 years of meditation, I saw the wisdom in taking a daily dose of an antidepressant, and I've stayed with it ever since, realizing that spiritual practice, on its own, cannot make this particular form of human suffering go away.

The idea that deep religious faith will act as a healing agent for the human body, and has the power to make a disease vanish, as sometimes happens in faith healings, or cases like those recorded in the

Bible, is a noble idea – it is a compelling proposition. Faith healings do happen – I've talked with people who have had otherwise untreatable diseases cured this way – in other words, faith can be and is a powerful healer. For a long time I had the same idea, and assumed that spiritual practice, a deep focus on what is truly good and a total letting go of negativity, would somehow cure me. But this kind of thinking, on the other hand, is idealistic, and idealism can be and is the source of considerable unhappiness on its own, and more often than not this is the case regarding expectations of a magical cure being provided by religious faith. In my own experience, the deepening of my practice showed me that I needed to make use of anything which can relieve human suffering, and if that means taking an antidepressant, then that is a good thing to do. The way I look at it now is that an antidepressant, a product of today's medical wizardry, is nothing short of miraculous in itself. And further, I have witnessed that illness has much to teach people about what is truly important in life, and is a vehicle for the working out of old karmic consequences. In that light, illness is not a bad thing, it is part of the workings of the universe: it has an arising, a time of being, and a passing away. And we also have to accept that sooner or later an illness, like cancer, might just come along and kill us.

As I mentioned, I want to feel good just like everyone else. The question might then arise: if that is so, why in the world did you become a monk, given that monks give up every obvious sort of human pleasure? The problem here lies with how much one wishes to sacrifice in the way of more easily acquired feeling good, as a matter of deferred gratification, so that in the long run it becomes possible to experience a more all-pervasive kind of joy, happiness or peace of body and mind. This is the big gamble, one might say, of monastic life. I have certainly witnessed people who have entered monastic life for a period of time, and then given it up because whatever it was they were looking for didn't manifest.

Yet everyone makes sacrifices in order to achieve hoped-for goals in life. Depending on the goal, we may give up months or years of something that normally would bring happiness for the sake of reaching a goal in life. Monastic life is like that, in a way. We make sacrifices of personal comfort, being wealthy, sexuality, personal ambition, so that we can come to a deeper understanding of life, a deeper experience of its meaning and the deeper, lasting kind of happiness that is available if we can stick with the process. We should not expect the process to be easy, because truly valuable things in life are not easily obtained. It is good and necessary to make sacrifices, and to have a worthwhile goal in mind when we set forth on the path of giving up what we hold on to, and accepting what we push away.

Is there an ultimate state of feeling good? A Nirvana of being good and feeling good that one might arrive at, having been carried by the vehicle of Buddhism? If there is, I'm not aware of it. However, what I can say is achievable is to come to know the true essence of things, the Buddha Nature, that which lives in the human heart, in the center of one's being. This is what I regard as the true goal, the thing worth searching for and finding. If one can find it well and truly as a result of giving up immediate gratification and desirable things, and accepting hardship for what it is and accepting the many things for which one has aversion, one can know true peace of mind and heart. This is not a state of feeling good all the time, however. It is more sublime than that, and it is not a state of unmitigated pleasure.

Ironically, now that I have survived for over a year since being diagnosed with cancer, and having been successfully treated with chemotherapy, I feel a lot better than I did before. I didn't necessarily expect that this would happen; my oncologist kept insisting that as my white blood cell count increased and my immune system re-established itself, I would feel better. I was reluctant to believe her, because I did not want to open myself up to yet another unfulfilled hope in my life that would ultimately result in disappointment. But, in the end, she was right: I do feel better. The fact that I do is thanks both to modern medical wizardry and to a willingness on my part to undertake the cure – both the medical one and the spiritual one. I do not look at the two aspects of curing as being polar opposites on a spectrum of mundane versus sacred; rather, I view them as two aspects of one thing: the cure for suffering. Buddhism is huge and can embrace anything which works. It definitely is the cure for suffering and the entry into a realm of peace and contentment – and, once in a while, feeling good.