

## Being well, well-being, being a well being

**By Michel Clasquin - 6/6/04**

When we ask what "well-being" could mean in a Buddhist context, immediately we see a huge gap opening up within Buddhism. Buddhism was founded as a philosophy and way of life for a handful of heroic men (and later women) who regarded anything short of *nirvana* as non-well-being.

It cannot be emphasised often enough: The Buddha never had any intention of founding a religious mass movement to be called "Buddhism". His teachings were reserved for the monks and nuns who were prepared to ditch everything in a single-minded pursuit of Ultimate Well-being, *nirvana*. Lay followers had their place, which was to support the monks and nuns materially. Even a prominent lay supporter like king Bimbisara was only allowed to hear a sutra recited when he was on his deathbed.

This has left Buddhism without any sort of theology of a lesser kind of well-being. Take Buddhist teachings seriously (and literally), and there is no justification for the sense of well-being that comes with eating a simple, hearty meal, reading a good book, feeling the warm sun on your skin. There is no justification for rejoicing in the love of a good woman (or man), or on hearing the laughter of children. All of those are, at best, *dukkha*, and at worst, hindrances to the attainment of nirvana. A *real* Buddhist drops those things, renounces them, puts them away as childish preoccupations.

Now, we all sort of believe that enlightenment, nirvana, call it what you will, is real and that attaining it is possible. If not, there would be little sense in attaching the label "Buddhist" to ourselves. But most of us are not quite ready to take the plunge, to drop everything and devote our lives entirely to a single-minded search for it. The question is, what constitutes well-being until then? Is there such a thing as "the good life" for the luke-warm Buddhist?

At this stage, up pipes a voice from the peanut gallery: "But isn't Buddhism the Middle Way? The middle between extreme asceticism and extreme indulgence?" Well done, grasshopper, that's what it says in all the textbooks. There's just one problem. Try advocating extreme asceticism today and see how quickly you get locked up in the nearest institution for the criminally feeble-minded. In the context of his time, the Buddha was a moderate. But times have changed and goalposts have shifted. Today, the traditional Buddhist monastic life has itself become an extreme endpoint, and a new middle needs to be found.

One strategy that could be used is to scour the scriptures for passages that seem to support a lesser form of well-being, ignore their historical context and blow them up, exaggerate their prominence way beyond their traditional importance. You see a lot of that in contemporary Buddhism. Who hasn't come across that line where the Buddha says that "having good friends is not half, but the whole of the holy life"? It sounds very nice, but let us not forget that the sangha was set up on strict lines of seniority. We are here not talking about an association of equals (which is what we nowadays think of as friendship) but of a kind of monastic mentorship programme.

Alternatively, we can do what religions have always done. If your philosophy lacks something and someone else's has what you lack, you steal it. Buddhism has been remarkably adept at this. If Buddhism didn't give much advice on everyday life, then one could look for it in the works of Confucius, or the Laws of Manu, or whatever other resource your culture had to offer. Contradictions and incompatibilities between the various systems were simply accepted as a fact of life.

But for the western Buddhism now taking shape before us, this simply won't do. We remain deeply rooted in a Christian culture that insists on there being a single integrated system of thought and belief. Deeper still, we are still trapped in Aristotle's dualistic logic. Black or white, yes or no. Not third and fourth positions. Even if we personally reject the Christian religion that was that culture's most visible manifestation, we are still bound by the deeper cultural restraints. The self-appointed avant-garde among us can talk a great game about postmodernism, the variety of narratives and so on, but if they were really

free from Christianity and Aristotle, why did they feel the need to gather all their narratives, bundle them up into a single system, and call it by the single name "postmodernism"? It is a promising beginning, but cultural roots run deep. Western society, perhaps unique among societies, insists that philosophical reflection must be presented as a clear-cut, unambiguous system, an "ism". Call it the west's true original sin, our "ism-ism"

Therefore, if we are going to look elsewhere for guidance on living the good life as a lay Buddhist, we need to find some sort of well-developed philosophy that deals with it and is, at least on some levels, compatible with Buddhism. Of the major religions, Judaism probably has the best-developed theology of common-everyday well-being, closely followed by Islam. But both receive their philosophies from the basic idea of the distant-but-close personal deity, an idea which cannot be imported into Buddhism without a lot of philosophical dexterity. Hinduism also gives well-being a place in its scheme of things: *kama* (literally, pleasure) is a perfectly acceptable goal, it says, at a certain stage of life. But again, the broader stages-of-life scheme in which this occurs is tied up with so many other Hindu doctrines that it would be difficult (though not impossible) to extract just that one aspect.

I would like to propose another candidate: Epicurus of Samos, the Greek philosopher. Epicureanism has received a bad press over the centuries, mostly from late Hellenistic and early Christian writers who were going through an ascetic phase of their own at the time. But Epicurus (whose name means "the good advisor") was never an advocate of unbridled consumerism, nor the advocate of wild orgies of excess. He did teach that pleasure was the basis of all human action:

"I do not know how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, withdraw the pleasures of love, withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused by the sight of a beautiful form"

But what he had in mind were simple, easily attainable, everyday pleasures. To eat some goat's cheese and drink spring water while sitting in the winter sunshine, at ease with the world, that was the Epicurean ideal. One needs food to survive, and eating is pleasurable. But while one should not spurn extravagant dishes if those are what is available, neither should one become dependent on them and refuse to eat simpler, but still nutritious food. Epicurus allowed marriage and sex as a civic duty, but regarded sex as one of the lesser pleasures since it was not required for individual survival. It could be avoided with no adverse effects (It seems he was not entirely consistent in this: not only did he raise a family, but he also had a relationship with the courtesan Leontis. We may never know the details of this relationship).

Beyond physical pleasure, there was mental pleasure derived from the company of like-minded people and above all from giving up all fear of divine retribution and of death. Pleasure was not a mere physical sensation, but is tied up with wisdom, honour and justice in a complicated causal web of relations not unlike that put forward by the Buddha:

"It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life."

Mental pleasure at the highest level was *ataraxis*, freedom from mental disturbance. Wait a minute, doesn't that start to sound familiar? Can we not imagine the Greek philosopher meeting the Indian *arahant* and exchanging a few knowing nods and smiles?

Actually, we know very little about Epicurus. According to Diogenes Laertius, he wrote three hundred books. But only about 70 to 80 pages of these have survived. Even so, from these and from the writings of his followers, we can reconstruct his philosophy. He followed the atomic theory of Democritus, but introduced an element of free will into it. Like Buddhism, Epicureanism is a finely balanced mixture of freedom and predetermination. Epicurus believed that gods might well exist, but if they did, their perfection lay in their complete ignorance of and non-involvement with mere earthlings. Therefore, to fear the gods and try to appease them was superstitious and useless. Serious people should rather turn

towards the enjoyment of a sober, but not severe, lifestyle and the attainment of a serene mind. Once again, we see Buddhism and Epicureanism moving in parallel. The difference lies in what one regards as a sober (ie middle way) lifestyle. In the Buddha's India and the Greece of Epicurus, the extreme of indulgence was much the same in both places. But the extreme of asceticism in India was far more developed, far more extreme, than in Greece. Diogenes the Cynic was probably as near as any Greek ever came to the ideal of the Indian *sannyasin*, but even his lifestyle would be called lax by Indian standards (Diogenes did not avoid sex, for example - he scandalised Athenian society by performing it in public).

So, what we can see from this is that the concept of a middle way is a social construct that depends on the extremes between which it is placed. These extremes vary from one era to another (admittedly, the extreme of indulgence seems to be depressingly the same everywhere, but even that can vary. Epicurus freed some of his slaves in his will, but he seems to have had no scruples about owning them in the first place). A middle way is a living, evolving conceptualisation, which needs to be constantly created and recreated as circumstances change. It is not something that was laid down once and for all in Iron Age India.

The Buddha seemed to have recognised this: on his deathbed he gave his monks permission to alter or abolish the minor regulations. Unfortunately, nobody had the presence of mind to ask which regulations were minor, and it was later on decided that they had better hang on to all of them! An unfortunate failure of nerve on the part of the arahants, it seems. When the Mahayana arose several centuries later and felt it necessary to make changes that would lead to greater lay involvement, the result was a schism that remains with us to this day.

Like the Buddha some 200 years earlier, Epicurus seems to have died of food poisoning, a common enough cause of death in those days, when he was already suffering from kidney stones. But physical pain did not lead to mental suffering. On his deathbed, he wrote in a letter to his friend Idomeneus:

"We have written this letter to you on a happy day to us, which is also the last day of our life. For strangury has attacked me, and also a dysentery, so violent that nothing can be added to the violence of my sufferings. But the cheerfulness of my mind, which arises from the collection of all my philosophical contemplation, counterbalances all these afflictions."

We should not push the parallels too far. Epicurus apparently believed that death meant annihilation, a view that the Buddha specifically rejected. But still . . . Over the centuries, as we saw above, Buddhists have adopted insights from other philosophies, and that included the adoption of personalities. Tibetan demons were tamed and re-appointed as Protectors of the Dharma. Chinese demi-gods were reinterpreted as manifestations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Perhaps in the distant future, our descendants will light incense to the memory of the bodhisattva Epicurus, who, out of his infinite compassion, taught the dharma of everyday well-being.

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