

A Buddhist Perspective of Well-being

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General Statements and Questions

Because of the depth of the Buddha’s teachings and the vastness of Buddhist methods, it is a challenge to introduce the “Buddhist perspective” on pretty much anything. Often, Buddhist teachings use paradoxical language, and thus provide seemingly contrasting answers to different situations. As such, it can seem as though Buddhist teachings and methods often raise more questions than answers.

Broadly speaking, it would be fair to describe Buddhism as a path of healing. In fact, the Buddha is often referred to as a doctor (སྐྱེན་པ་). The teachings themselves are sometimes referred to as antidotes (གཉེན་པོ་འདོམས་). One could say that practitioners of the Buddha’s teachings are inculcated with an attitude of being a patient. All this is to say that Buddhism is indeed a path of well-being.

Thus I am faced with the challenge of providing a Buddhist perspective on “well-being”. How does a Buddhist define well-being? And what does Buddhist wisdom have to offer about how we approach well-being? Some might think that it would make sense to discuss Buddhist teachings in conjunction with mental health. Given that Buddhist teachings heavily emphasise the importance of the mind, one could assume that Buddhism has a lot to contribute to “mental health”¹ and psychology.

Yet, the very term “mental health” could be interpreted to mean that mental well-being might be separate from physical well-being.² To a Buddhist, one does not distinguish the mind and body as being fundamentally different. Even though Buddhists talk about body, speech, and mind as though they are separate entities, Buddhist teachings repeatedly emphasise the inseparability of all three.

¹ Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health>

² The fact that body and mind are treated separately in medical fields practically and even philosophically is arguably the influence of cartesian dualism - where mind and body are treated as though they are fundamentally different phenomenon.

People that recognise this might then say that Buddhist practices are “holistic”.³ We may have no choice but to say that Buddhist teachings and methods are holistic, at least in a provisional sense. As the mind is considered to be of utmost importance,⁴ the Buddhist perspective on what ails us, as well as how to overcome these ailments, has a lot to do with the mind (and, by extension, the body and speech as well).

Also, while it might be common knowledge that Vajrayana methods include yogic practices and traditional medicines that claim to pacify physical ailments (and of course, mental afflictions as well), I would argue that these are esoteric for reasons that are beyond the scope of this article. Tidbits of information regarding “chakras” and yogic methods are easily accessible on any Internet search engine. However, without a proper introduction and context, such information could be misleading. If any readers are interested in such practices, I would suggest that they first take some time and effort to try and understand Buddhist principles.

For example, Buddhist teachings emphasise that the mind is the most important thing to be concerned about. Why might that be? And how does one deal with the mind? These are probably questions that are important to think about. However, since I am attempting to present a Buddhist perspective on well-being, I believe that it is important to address suffering itself on a very basic level. After all, it doesn't make sense to talk about healing and well-being without thinking about what it is that makes us suffer.

A Summarised Buddhist Perspective: Getting to the Root of Suffering

To go into the many Buddhist methods and medicines or even interdisciplinary dialogue is beyond my capabilities and, again, beyond the scope of this article.⁵ Instead, it might be more fruitful to discuss a much more

³ And I believe that this is quite a fair way to describe the Buddhist approach in passing. However, Buddhist teachings eventually do not even acknowledge that there is such thing as a “whole.” As a Buddhist, we are cautioned not to say that everything is “one,” because to believe that there is “one” thing that truly exists can be a source of suffering. This is actually a very subtle and profound view that Buddhist logicians spend a lot of time thinking about.

⁴ Everything is mind, according to Buddhist thought.

⁵ For readers interested in meditation techniques and their benefits, or even in interdisciplinary dialogue, a lot of information is easily accessible online. For example, there is an ongoing dialogue between Buddhism and neuroscience that looks at how Buddhist meditation can affect the brain. Similarly, there seems to be an ongoing dialogue between Buddhist teachings and psychology.

basic approach. In fact, if I were pressed to describe the Buddhist attitude (on pretty much anything) in one word, it would be “fundamental”. Despite the many different methods and teachings, I would like to emphasise that the Buddhist approach has always been extremely fundamental.

What does this mean? The Buddhist approach is to first invest in trying to understand suffering - both the extent of our afflictions as well as their causes. Headaches... disease... war... famine... No matter what one’s belief system might be, all of us experience suffering to various degrees and understand that, unfortunately, suffering is a fact of life. But how many of us actually make the effort to identify the causes of suffering itself?

Many of us typically do not like to talk about suffering, much less the causes of it. Also, when we discuss suffering. Our conversations are usually limited to physical ailments, war, and famine etc; talking openly about mental health and depression is a somewhat recent (and encouraging) development.

Yet, the fact that there are so many medications for “anxiety” and “depression” indicates that many of us only deal with some of the symptoms of suffering, whether it is some form of mental unrest or physical discomfort. For example, when we have headaches many of us eat paracetamol and, as long as it does the trick, all is well. But can we delve deeper? A medical professional might go as far as to identify the origin of a cough to be in the lungs. But what about the very existence of lungs? Or even the very existence of oneself?

Science may have taught us that we can break things down into atoms and molecules. The smallest known particles, or subatomic particles (referred to as quarks) are believed to be indivisible, according to the U.S Department of Energy.⁶ A quick google search tells me that quarks, or whatever, are the building blocks of the world, of reality. Even if this were true, so what? Not only does such information do nothing to alleviate our immediate suffering, it does not tell us much about what causes our suffering. In fact, a seminal Buddhist thinker in 600 CE named Candrakīrti (ལྷོ་བ་ཤར་གསལ་པ་) already pointed out some of the logical fallacies of the idea that “indivisible particles” might exist truly and substantially.

⁶ <https://www.energy.gov/science/doe-explainsquarks-and-gluons#:~:text=Quarks%20and%20gluons%20are%20the,broken%20down%20into%20smaller%20components>.

Thus, for Buddhist scholars and thinkers, this effectively disproved the possibility that there are indivisible particles that are somehow the building blocks of reality. This is recorded in his well-known work, *Madhyamakāvātāra* (དབུ་མ་འཇུག་པ་), which is studied by monks throughout the Himalayas.

So if there is no ground for reality, there is no actual ground for suffering.⁷ Based on this truth, Buddhist texts often refers to experience using terms such as dreamlike (མིལམ་ལྟ་བུ) and illusory (སྐྱུ་མ་ལྟ་བུ). Perhaps the greatest discovery that the Buddha made seems to be that our suffering is not real. As a Buddhist, I find it both frustrating and relieving to know that we suffer needlessly.

All this deconstruction might seem a bit too convoluted and philosophical for an article about well-being and mental health. What is the point of this kind of analysis? I would argue that such an analytical approach - just like all Buddhist methods - is part of a very simple approach. Again, the Buddhist attitude towards healing is to first understand suffering - the extent and causes of it.

I would like to draw attention to the great irony that is uncovered through the type of analysis I tried to demonstrate. Call it a fundamental paradox that is possibly the basis of all Buddhist practices: on the one hand, since there is no ground for suffering there is no such thing as suffering. On the other hand, we still experience suffering. What is the deal with that?

As theoretical and impractical as it may seem, recognising this irony in our existence could be a source of tremendous relief to Buddhists. Even if such information might not seem practical, at least not in an immediate sense, I would argue that understanding paradox is a fundamental basis for healing.

No matter what one is afflicted by, knowing that ultimately there is no truly substantial suffering is a source of great encouragement - if not the driving force - for Buddhist practice. The real healing lies in the fact that there was never any real ailment to begin with. This is a very unique message about the possibility of freedom. It implies that there is no original sin to blame for our suffering or some kind of eternal heaven to look forward to.

⁷ The traditional terminology for this truth is **emptiness** (སྤོངས་ཉིད). Most Himalayan monks spend years studying the meaning of “emptiness” to establish some kind of intellectual basis that could help with their practice.

Suffering and healing are basically in our own hands. To really contemplate on our suffering could lead us to see the irony of our situations, and I personally cannot think of anything more therapeutic.

To phrase the paradox as a question: if there is ultimately no truly substantial suffering, then why do we suffer? To sum up the fundamental problem, it is ignorance.⁸ Not knowing the truth/reality as it is, is what causes our very existence, and according to traditional teachings, existence is marked by suffering.⁹ Enlightenment, liberation or “ultimate healing” in this case is, in a sense, being free from ignorance.¹⁰ In other words, all our ailments begin and end in the mind.

The traditional teachings repeatedly emphasise this paradox in many ways. For example, Buddhist doctrine often mentions the union of wisdom and compassion (སྣོད་ཉིད་སྣོད་རྗེ་རྒྱུད་འཇུག་པ་).¹¹ All Buddhist methods are based on this fundamental paradox.

Thus practices such as sitting meditation are not about “clearing your thoughts” or learning how to focus, but rather to look directly at one’s mind and go beyond the causes of all ailments altogether. Similarly, compassion is not mere empathy or simply about “being good” and “doing the right thing”, but also to help others (whether it is on an aspirational level or

⁸ The traditional teaching on how fundamental ignorance unfolds and creates the cycle of existence and suffering, the traditional teaching is called the **Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination** (རྟོན་འབྲེལ་ཡན་ལག་བརྒྱུག་ཉམས་). A lot of information is available about this teaching online, so I will not cite any particular source or elaborate too much on this. However, suffice it to say that whether one is interested in mental health or physical health, the teaching on the Twelve Links is the traditional Buddhist presentation of how both mind and body comes about, along with all the senses, and how suffering arises during this process. In essence, the whole presentation tells us that suffering is part and parcel of existence.

⁹ Foundational Buddhist doctrines such as the **Four Seals** (སྣོད་བཞི) and the **Three Characteristics** (ཚུགས་གྲུ་གསུམ་) tell us that suffering goes hand in hand with existence. It is important to note that the Buddhist understanding of what it means to suffer is very broad: Physical pain and other such forms of obvious suffering is traditionally referred to as the suffering of suffering (སྤྲུག་བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་སྤྲུག་བསྐྱེད་པ་). However, the Buddhist understanding of suffering digs a bit deeper. The suffering of change (ལྷུང་བའི་སྤྲུག་བསྐྱེད་པ་) and the “all-pervasive suffering” (འཇུག་པ་འདུ་བྱེད་ཀྱི་སྤྲུག་བསྐྱེད་པ་) that Buddhists talk about suggests that that even “happiness” is suffering. This may seem like quite a radical statement. However, it is not a claim that Buddhists simply take for granted. Buddhist practitioners are encouraged to spend much time contemplating on suffering and impermanence.

¹⁰ In fact, one particular word used to describe this state of “enlightenment” is rigpa (རིག་པ་) which means awareness or knowing. This is in direct contrast with ignorance (མ་རིག་པ་), the traditional word for which more literally translates to “not knowing.”

¹¹ Though commonly translated as wisdom, the Classical language is more literally translated as “the union between emptiness and compassion.” This suggests that even simple acts of compassion are not to be separated from the wisdom of emptiness.

taking action) be free from the causes of their suffering. All Buddhist methods are practiced in order for ultimate healing¹² to happen.

Not much needs to be said about physical illness. So much research and innovation throughout history has been geared towards creating the conditions for physical comfort and treating bodily ailments. In this day and age where so many of us are dealing with anxiety and depression, it seems pertinent now more than ever for us to really take a look inward and contemplate on our experience of suffering.

In the meantime, how does this help us? When you stub your toe, the pain is very real. Before exams and presentations, your anxiety is very real. To lose a loved one is extremely painful. On a practical level, merely understanding the theory that your suffering is not real probably will not cure cancer. However, if one really wishes to go beyond all the ailments that affect our bodies and minds, then it seems important to invest in understanding the nature of our suffering.

All this discussion on suffering might seem repetitive and depressing, but I wish to get the point across that the Buddhist message of suffering tells us that healing is very much possible. I have already alluded to the fact that contemplation is important. However, without proper guidelines, it can be difficult to contemplate on our existence in a purposeful way.

Steps Towards Healing: Hearing, Contemplation and Meditation

It is not really as though we are lacking in how much we reflect on ourselves. In all likelihood we think a lot about ourselves – what we want, where we would like to go, where our society is headed, and so forth.

Additionally, many of us are prone to overthinking and tunnel-vision. Perhaps this is why there is a growing interest in “mindfulness” and meditative techniques. I have heard many people say that meditation is difficult because they “just can’t focus” or because they cannot “clear their thoughts”.

I have also heard from a few people about how helpful meditation apps are. Having tried out a few of these meditation apps myself I feel as though

¹² I've chosen to use the word healing instead of the traditional word “liberation” (ཐར་ལཱ་).

the instructions they provide are generally geared towards cultivating “calmness” and “focus”.

Often these apps seem to tout messages about self-help and boosting one’s self esteem. Some even advertise that their meditations will help improve one’s sleep. These approaches to meditation are reasonable and relatable - somewhat endearing even. At the end of the day, many of us are so stressed and anxious and just want to feel okay.

In this technologically advanced age, we are privy to infinite distractions. We are exposed to so much unnecessary drama and gossip it often seems virtually impossible to distinguish between news and misinformation. We are constantly updated with real time images of war and conflict. Seeing so much unfairness and discrimination all over the world can take a toll on one’s mental stability. How does one make sense of all of this? In addition to Internet controversies, we have our day-to-day problems within families and among people. Life with the Internet can be quite suffocating. I guess the most natural response is to try and block or, at least, filter out some of the noise. It is little wonder that mindfulness and meditation are gaining popularity.

However, I argue that meditation is not simply a method to avoid stress or to stop overthinking. As a Buddhist I also feel concerned when meditation is mentioned in conjunction with “good vibes” and boosting one’s self-esteem. Having a healthy self-esteem and a positive attitude are all well and good but can these really pacify our suffering? Or are these simply affirmations that cover up our feelings of anxiety and inadequacy?

Meditation is actually a tried and tested practice that deals with our ailments directly, fundamentally. Buddhist meditative techniques are part of a systematic technique to confront our suffering and to learn how to recognise our own innate nature¹³ which is, according to Buddhist teachings, already free from all ailments. This declaration about our true nature is extraordinarily empowering. At the very least, the Buddhist message seems to be that all our baggage, our self doubt and anxiety, are not such a big deal. Understood in this way, I imagine that self-love and self-esteem would unfold naturally.

¹³ Traditionally our innate nature is referred to as “Buddha Nature” (བདེ་གཤེགས་སྣོང་པོ་). As implied by the English translation, we are all Buddhas by nature. All Buddhist methods are practiced to uncover this true nature, including using rosaries and lighting butter lamps.

So where does one begin? The traditional structure for how to practice is to combine hearing, contemplation, and meditation (མོས་བསམ་སྒོམ་གསུམ). Essentially this means that, in addition to practicing meditation, one should actively seek out Buddhist teachings and think deeply about them. The Buddha himself encouraged his students to not take his teachings for granted. An often-quoted piece of advice from the Buddha is to examine his words like a goldsmith discerning real from false gold. For those that are interested in a deeper level of healing, this might be a good way to move forward.