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Lessons on Happiness from Life Stories in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition

The notion of "finding happiness" is one that has both inspired and plagued humankind for millennia. From self-help books to the U.S. Declaration of Independence, humanity's focus on this seemingly endless "pursuit of happiness" has been a topic of keen interest and fierce debate. In the lives of both modern and ancient literary characters, this underlying theme continues to reveal new insight on the human condition and the nature of our psychological adaptation as a species. In an era where more humans report being unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives in spite of medical innovation, greater resource abundance, and transformative technologies, it seems necessary that we examine the prerequisites for "happiness," both in the present-day and throughout human history, in order to determine what practices may be useful for today's humans. From nuns to sinners to reincarnated Buddhas, the Tibetan literary canon contains a vast array of stories, hagiographies, and didactics that illustrate the methods by which humans can journey towards contentment in even the most challenging of circumstances. Transmitted orally over millennia and more recently saved in print, the stories contain important lessons about the dangers of worldly pleasures and hedonic adaptation. In the Tibetan literary corpus, there is perhaps no more unique a lineage of stories than those of the lives of revered religious figures in Tibetan Buddhism: Siddhartha Gautama, Milarepa, and Orgyan Chokyi each come to terms with great suffering (*dukkha*) in their lives, and in each story, we witness their

journey towards acceptance, their gradual distance from worldly pleasures, and their ultimate discovery of divine contentment. In Tibet, a region known for its arid climate and harsh living conditions, Buddhism and Buddhist literature managed to flourish, despite a geography that makes abundance, urban life, and economies of scale near-impossible. Without the typical factors enabling philosophical inquiry and literary production, Tibetan Buddhism nevertheless has given nuanced and thorough explanations for the root causes of human suffering and methods of alleviation. In this paper, the concepts of pursuing lasting happiness and contentment in the traditional life stories of the Tibetan canon will be re-examined using modern-day, neuroscientific knowledge about the human mind and how it handles pleasure. In the most unlikely of circumstances, Tibetan literary works illustrate the subtle but powerful benefits of temperance, moderation, and detachment from the material world, lessons which can be equally useful in the present. Ultimately, by highlighting the material sources of suffering in human life and the detachment required to find contentment, the life stories of religious figures in Tibetan Buddhism give prescient guidance on how to better seek happiness and avoid the timeless, fickle, and unmistakably human pursuit of fame, wealth, and ephemeral pleasure, findings that are consistent with modern-day research on the subject. By considering these sources of traditional wisdom in conjunction with modern scientific research, we may better be able to address the fundamental questions of how we can find lasting happiness in life.

Perhaps the most well-known literary work in all of Buddhist literature, *The Life of the Buddha* has been preserved in numerous languages and mediums, including as part of the Tibetan literary tradition. Written in the eighteenth century by Tenzin Chögyel, the Tibetan translation of the story tells of the “Twelve Deeds” of Shakyamuni Buddha, narrating his life has he renounces his princely position, embarks on a journey of ascetic ritual, and ultimately teaches

of the "Middle Way" and "Four Noble Truths" as methods of alleviating human suffering. The Bodhisattva, who takes the form as the son of a King and heir apparent, tells of his struggles with materialism and social dynamics even before his renunciation. When encouraged to select a wife while residing in the Kingdom, the young Bodhisattva quips: "Its faults are quite well-known to me, desire, [the] root of suffering, fighting, jealousy…I do not long for objects of desire" (31-32). Even whilst living in the lavish lifestyle of the Kingdom, the Bodhisattva expresses concern about desire and its association with emotions like jealousy and suffering. These claims, though made centuries ago, appear to have a growing basis in scientific fact as greater research in the domains of "happiness psychology" and behavioral economics allow us to analyze these emotional states. According to one such meta-analysis, "Social comparison, or rivalry, puts us on another inherently unsatisfactory treadmill…There is strong empirical evidence that what matters for individual happiness is not so much our own income…but our income or consumption compared with that of others" (Ash, 2007: 206). These findings lend credence to the ideas presented by the Buddha, as they highlight how social comparison (i.e., feeling superior/inferior to others in terms of possessions) is what affects our feelings of happiness. In the case of the Buddha, even these early moments in his life story thus warn of the dangers of desire, as well as the jealousy that can fester if such feelings go unaddressed. But even if happiness may appear to be derived from social comparison, it is natural to ask whether this "type" of happiness is ephemeral or long-lasting, and whether it is potentially beneficial even if it elicits comparison. In a well-noted metaphor involving driftwood, the Buddha comments on the importance of separating desire from our own bodies; like wet driftwood that cannot be ignited, "the body and mind that are doused in desire are unable to reach liberation…only a dry stick is able to catch fire" (47). Evidently, Buddhist scripture seems to heavily favor the idea of ridding oneself of *all*

desires. These findings also seem to be consistent with modern scientific literature on the topic; according to Ash, "if our satisfaction or happiness depends on closing the gap between the income we want and the income we actually have, we find ourselves on a hedonic treadmill, always chasing a moving target…empirical evidence suggests that *changes* in income have a larger effect [than the actual income itself]...However much income they have, income addicts always want more" (ibid). Though the researchers did note benefits to certain types of desire, such as pursuing physical fitness, education, and social interaction, they distinguish between these "healthy" motivations and the more dangerous, unending desires (e.g., wealth, drugs, status). In response to experiencing these desires and witnessing human suffering, the Buddha advocates for a "middle path," which neither involves intense asceticism or gratification, but rather a subtle, equanimous tranquility. In his teachings to followers after achieving enlightenment, the Buddha emphasizes the importance of avoiding extremes and seeking moderation in one's practices; for example, he explains that both "over-indulgence in the pleasures of the senses" and "self-mortification" are both harmful in a person's spiritual journey, and that they should instead "take up a middle path…[this] cause of suffering must be abandoned" (71). This spirit of moderation and avoiding indulgence is critical to not only the story of the Buddha, but the stories of Milarepa and Orgyan Chokyi to be discussed below. Indeed, a central theme of Buddhist philosophy is thus laid out clearly in the words of the Buddha and his advocacy for the "middle way." Although specific, testable research on applications of "the middle path" is not possible due to its subjective interpretation, modern research does suggest that refocusing one's efforts towards more sustainable goals can be helpful in maintaining happiness. For example, according to one research review entitled "Explaining Happiness," economist Richard Easterlin found that "[since] individuals fail to anticipate the

extent to which adaptation and social comparison undermine expected utility in the pecuniary domain, they allocate an excessive amount of time to pecuniary goals, and shortchange non-pecuniary ends such as family life and health, reducing their happiness" (Easterlin, 2003: 1). Ultimately, new research on happiness economics and psychology do support the general principles suggested by the Buddha in the Tibetan translation of his life story. Though researchers do not necessarily critique *all* types of desire, both modern scholars and traditional religious figures of Buddhism share a cautionary view about the role of harmful desires in eliciting suffering and reducing happiness. Nevertheless, though we have explored the story of the Life of the Buddha in Tibetan translation, it is important to also analyze the life stories of other important figures in the Tibetan tradition, as their influence on Tibetan culture and teachings about happiness are equally significant.

One such biography, entitled *The Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, offers a compelling example of human endurance through difficulty and the difficult search for inner contentment. The protagonist, Orgyan Chokyi, is faced with harsh conditions from birth: her parents, who had been hoping for a male child, treat her with contempt and send her to herd goats on the difficult, rural mountain slopes of Dolpo. Lamenting her condition, Orgyan Chokyi writes, "There were other times when I was sad [and miserable] being a goat herder, and there are stories aplenty of my mental anguish" (138). Unlike in *The Life of the Buddha*, Orgyan Chokyi is not born to a family of great wealth or fortune. Indeed, her role as a woman in a religious society that was heavily male dominated offers us a unique view of the struggles and triumphs of an unlikely protagonist. Throughout the story, an emphasis is placed on the female nuns to find solace in their worship and to accept life's suffering; as explained by Orgyan Tenzin in lyrical form, "This fortunate human life is like a daytime star, so work hard now, anis…Let go of this life with your mind and

stay together, Practice the Dharma and maintain good friends. If you act like this you'll be happy in this life and the next" (41). Orgyan Tenzin's suggestions to Orgyan Chokyi and her fellow nuns are unique in that it not only emphasizes the individual's spiritual journey and contemplative practice, but also the role of community and cooperation in the development of happiness. This emphasis on finding a community to immerse oneself in is increasingly supported as a key factor in achieving happiness; according to Ash, "Social relationships have a more lasting impact on happiness than does income" (Ash, 2007: 207). Not only do interpersonal relations and communities often positively impact happiness, but they also have been shown to positively impact mood and mental well-being, as noted by the researchers. Nevertheless, Orgyan Chokyi's struggles between seeking solitude and being a member of a community, a conflict that acts as a central theme throughout the story. Though she submits to a religious life, trains in religious scholarship, and undergoes pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, Orgyan Chokyi still grows dissatisfied, explaining that "it is good and virtuous work…[b]ut my mind suffered of its own accord…Many people dying…my own death uncertain…my mind is so sad" (157-158). Clearly, Orgyan Chokyi finds herself unable to cope with the responsibilities and hassle of life in the monastery and is unhappy with the realities of life (e.g., death, suffering) that surround her. These setbacks fall in line with recent research in psychology on expectations satisfaction; according to a review of the available literature, "By focusing on one particular desire or feeling we give it excessive salience. We identify with the desire…This process is repeated moment-to-moment and endlessly as long as ignorance persists…and self-deception remain[s] unrecognized and unchallenged" (Ash, 2007: 210). Even for Orgyan Chokyi, her expectations for her work in the monastery and the reality differed, causing her anguish. Ultimately, Orgyan Chokyi doesn't find satisfaction through other people, material pleasures, or even location or place. For her,

satisfaction is derived solely through solitude: “The pain of working the barley, wood, and water I am free to do for myself. Self-serving and self-empowered, I have escaped people. I have attained autonomy. I do not need to heed the opinions of bad friends…***I have found happiness***” (170). This profound message near the story’s end both supports and contradicts the latest research on practices that improve well-being. On one hand, Orgyan Chokyi’s full abandonment of the material lifestyle she was previously forced to engage, if extreme, still seems to agree with research on materialism more generally. According to the analysis of Ash, “the concept of neuroplasticity [suggests that] the brain physically responds to experience and in particular to training, so that a sustainable positive change in happiness is possible…it is well established that there is also a positive correlation between altruism and happiness” (Ash, 2007: 213). For Orgyan Chokyi, this “training” comes in the form of focused tasks and labor done in near isolation as a recluse. For a contemporary lifestyle, this may imply that sustained contemplative practice may be beneficial for long-term happiness, as noted in the research on neuroplasticity. Conversely, Orgyan Chokyi’s emphasis on the importance of isolation is at odds with the consensus that social isolation is negatively associated with happiness. Evidently, one’s personal experiences with happiness are difficult to generalize to all humans but nevertheless offer intriguing insights into the nature of suffering and happiness. From a difficult life in the harsh climate of Dolpo to her spiritual contentment found in the isolation of nature, Orgyan Chokyi’s life story serves as yet another example of the rich depth of the Tibetan literary corpus and its connections with modern scientific research on the mind.

Written in the fifteenth century by author Tsangnyön Heruka of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, *The Life of Milarepa* tells the story of a sinner turned saint: Milarepa, who takes revenge upon his family members for their betrayal of his father’s trust, practices

repentance for his wrongdoings for the remainder of the story before becoming a saintly figure himself. One of the most popular hagiographies in Tibetan literature, the story gives lessons to readers on handling regret, curbing temptation, the dangers of violence, and the importance of forgiveness. Milarepa faces a life of suffering, first borne by the theft of family wealth by his aunt and uncle, and later by the intense regret he feels for his murderous actions he takes in response. As Milarepa seeks religious atonement as a Buddhist disciple, he laments on "people invested in things of life's round…They act and they act and stir up from their depths so much torment," reflecting on how attachments to the material world can often ruin people" (122). While seemingly improbable, closer inspection of these lessons can in fact be corroborated with present-day research, which suggests that unchallenged patterns of desire may create a cycle of self-deception and physiological suffering: according to one such study, "a negative relationship was found, in that those individuals who were high in materialism were less satisfied with their 'life as a whole' [and had] poorer 'health and physical condition' than those who were low in materialism" (Ryan, et al., 2001: 193). Milarepa, who seeks retreat in an isolated cave and lives in extremely modest circumstances, shares similar wisdom about the risks of worldly possessions. For Milarepa, worldly concerns are of little relevance. Instead, Milarepa preaches impermanence, and encourages his followers to see the dangers of being "chained" to material wealth. Sung to his aunt at Drakar Taso, Milarepa proclaims that "your hoard of food and wealth, the chattels of men — whatever you own is your enemy's supply" (132). Milarepa's language in this moment is important to note: by describing men as "chattels" alongside their possessions, it elicits the notion that humans are, in some sense, enslaved by the possessions they have. This is consistent with both Buddhist rhetoric regarding desire and impermanence, as well as modern scientific discourse on materialism and possessions. In fact, according to a meta-analysis on the

materialism, research found that, “on the whole, materialists are less happy than non-materialists…since materialists want more than what they have and focus on the discrepancy between the two, they should feel less life satisfaction than non-materialists” (Oishi, et al., 2014: 8). It is interesting to note the parallels of this research and story to the discussion previously regarding the Life of the Buddha; in particular, both figures emphasize a sense of detachment from worldly pleasures and gratification. Though difficult, they both encourage a sense of understanding and acceptance regarding the impairment of both objects and lives. In a message to his followers while dealing with illness near the end of his life, Milarepa explains that “It is certain that you will experience the miseries of what is called life’s round: everything accumulated is exhausted, everything constructed is destroyed…everything born dies.” In response to these facts, Milarepa advises: “If you fear misery and desire happiness…you must renounce such activity from the very beginning” (189). This emphasis on renunciation is profoundly inspiring, yet nevertheless difficult and effortful. Though these types of contemplative practices tend to be difficult to research, as they require subjective testimonials regarding their purported benefits, emerging research in therapy and psychology suggest that they may be useful in some patients. According to one study reviewed as part of a meta-analysis, “the core skill to be learned is how to exit (step out of) and stay out of…an additional benefit of mindfulness meditation is an improvement in the immune system” (Ash, 2007: 212). These recent findings give new light to the discussion on mindfulness, and ultimately serve as examples for how sustained happiness and contentment can be achieved in day-to-day life. The examples of The Buddha, Orgyan Chokyi, and Milarepa may be derived from ancient oral traditions, yet they each give prescient advice about how we may best find happiness in our own lives.

Through careful reading of the life stories of traditional Tibetan religious figures, as well as exploration into the modern-day research and techniques in the fields of behavioral economics, psychology, and neuroscience, we are better able to not only see similarities between lives of ancient and modern times, but we may also be better able to identify and cultivate happiness in our own lives. Though the examples found in Tibetan hagiographies can often be extreme or fantastical, the practical advice offered in these stories remains remarkably relevant in light of new developments in these varying fields. Though it is difficult to generalize how every human can find happiness, the examples of the Tibetan literary corpus combined with new knowledge on the science of happiness allow us to make better decisions about our well-being. Regardless of faith, age, background, or education, the principles of avoiding desire, engaging in community, partaking in contemplative practice, and recognizing impermanence can be powerful tools in our individual journey towards contentment and inner peace.

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