

The Struggles of a Young American Buddhist Insights on Karma, Culture and the Pursuit of Happiness

Adam Baraz
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Having found myself a student of meditation practice and the dharma, there is a truth I have begrudgingly come to accept.

Every action creates an energetic ripple. No matter who or what your circumstances are, when one acts in a way that is less than wholesome, sooner or later some form of guilt, regret or pain follows. Simply put, it is impossible to ditch karma!

Having understood the ways that humans create suffering for themselves, the Buddha created 227 codes of conduct he made the monks swear to as a way of protecting them from misdeeds they might have otherwise committed. For the lay people he condensed those rules down to 5 precepts, guidelines for “right living.” The precepts are:

1. To abstain from killing or harming living things
2. To take only that which is freely given
3. To avoid abuse or harm of others through sexuality
4. To avoid all harmful uses of language
5. To avoid intoxication through use of drugs or alcohol

When I first learned all of this, I viewed the precepts as “an interesting theory with a lot of potential.” But after many years of experimentation with the laws of cause and effect, I can now safely say that I will never win the battle of evading my negative karma. As a result of an insight that I had on my first buddhist retreat I have come to see that long-term happiness can only be a by-product of living and being in a way that does not lend itself to guilt or blame. Moreover, it seems that when we begin to live in alignment with this law, we decrease our friction with the cycle of suffering until finally we are spacious enough to experience “the bliss of blamelessness” or rather, serenity of heart and mind.

Though I have found this logic difficult to attack, one thing seems certain. It is one thing to enthusiastically talk philosophy and quite another to put this theory to practical application.

Here is the \$64,000 question: **How does one succeed in finding such unshakable happiness?**

This question is likely to generate a whole host of responses depending on who answers. I suppose a long-term Buddhist practitioner would give me a discourse about the bliss of renunciation, which leads to freedom from desire. This idea is a main cornerstone of the dharma. But I'm a 19 year old "experience junkie" and I'm not entirely convinced that this is the only method that works.

A year or so ago I read the book *Narcissus and Goldmund* by Hermann Hesse. The story follows the lives of two childhood friends—Narcissus, who chooses the path of renunciation as a monk, and Goldmund who seeks out the wild and sensual path of a wandering artesian-romantic. In the end, it was not entirely clear to me who lived a more joyful wholesome existence.

To be perfectly honest, my daydream about the good life does not include much in the way of austerity. It is just hard for me to imagine some life in a remote mountain cave celebrating life's bounty on a diet of bitter roots to be more rewarding than Mediterranean lifestyle filled with say—beaches, girlfriends, pasta, wine and mind-blowing jam sessions on guitar. For in my life I know people, who, for lack of a better term, "Have it made!" and they don't just seem happy on a superficial level, they are genuinely content. But then again when I see a picture of the Dalai Lama, smiling at me with those radiant, serene eyes, I remember all at once—"Holy Crap! This renunciate is happy!" So it is strange for me to encounter happy beings on both sides of the spectrum that are in such stark contrast of each other. First I wonder, "How is this possible?" and then the question that always follows is, "What path will work for me?"

Having to choose between these polarities is difficult. Right now, if I could have it my way, I would choose both. The perks of both pleasure and serenity are simply too much to pass up (aren't I greedy!). Unfortunately, the Buddhist in me intuits that it doesn't work that way. More specifically, it seems impossible to reap the pleasures of comfort while simultaneously seeking the stillness of non-attachment. Are you on or off the bus to sainthood? Choose wisely.

Though I mentioned earlier that the worldly life is more attractive to me for the obvious reasons, this path also appears infinitely more treacherous. It is clear to me that if one were to regularly to surrender to the usual sins, over time the sub-conscious guilt would build up and one would either forced into numbness as a coping mechanism or eventually find themselves face to face with the realities of the choices they have made. If this be so, the payoff would seem to be much greater in the monastery- where the environment is such that

one is less likely to find trouble. Remember, I'm not focusing on the middle ground of mediocrity, the focus here is on the Holy Grail—the highest happiness.

In order to make a worldly existence work, it seems one must be continually swimming upstream against the tide of constant seduction. Ever more does this seem to be the case if you live in a culture of decline such as America. Even in the progressive well-educated city of Berkeley where I grew up, it was still the general sentiment among kids my age that money buys happiness, sex means status, drugs are fun and clothes are fashionable. Though this is perhaps an over-simplistic generalization, these are the messages the media has fed to my generation and it is having its effect on our collective psyche. To be my age, to have had an insight into karma, and to live and interact with the people I know, it seems very unlikely that the cessation of desire is possible in such an environment.

I find my reality painful when my thoughts, words and actions are dissonant with what I know to be true. For example, the other day, my friend and I borrowed a tennis ball from a group of girls. During the short-lived tennis match I cast the ball into a thicket of vines and it was never to be seen again. Doing what I knew to be shameful, we gave the girls an alibi that gave us just enough time to flee the scene.

Now I could sit here and tell you the whole host of specific circumstances which may or may not have been successful in shedding a bit of sympathy to our situation, but the fact remains that what was done, was done. And though the girls had several other tennis balls and probably wouldn't have missed one too much, I since played that event over in my mind several hundred times. This is what I resent about choosing the precepts as my values and wearing the red reminder chord around my anklet; the guilt I used to feel for my "smaller mistakes" now feels ever more intense and slimy.

In taking into consideration such truths about the current state of the world, the life of the monk suddenly doesn't seem so bad. Though a lifestyle in strict adherence to the 227 codes of conduct seems almost unbearable, here at least is freedom from decision making. The rules are clear and there is no "grey area" no margin wide enough for guilt to hideout. It seems that if one is truly able to come to terms with a life of simplicity, in the end, there is the joy of "right living" the light-hearted bliss of blamelessness that remains independent of all other factors.

Am I ready for monkhood? Well, I can't say this for sure. What I do know, is that when I mess up, when I completely smash a precept, I am again stuck with that all-together too familiar bad feeling. The voice

in my mind chides, “And don’t pretend you didn’t know better!” When these moments start to feel truly excruciating, I pity myself and daydream about the peace I could have if I didn’t know better, “How sweet would it be to go back to the bliss of ignorance!” But much farther down in my gut I know the truth. There is only one bliss.

In my clearer moments of reflection I remember that process of waking up and particularly the purification of karmic debts are not easy things to be aware of. But in life, when given the choice between the short-lived pleasures—the Bliss of Ignorance—and the long-term fulfilment—the Bliss of Blamelessness—hopefully I’ll choose the latter.