

Not an Emotion

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 1 min read

When you say you are happy, what do you mean? However you define happiness, are you referring to a mood or emotion? A mood would be a present disposition and it stays around for a while. It may be caused by some good fortune that has come your way. A distant relative has died and to your surprise has left you quite a bit of money. Or it may be that something you had been striving or hoping for had actually materialised. You had applied for a job and you had succeeded. An emotion is something more transient. To cheer yourself up, you go for a walk in the country towards a pub (for tea, of course!) or local park where they serve teacake and decent coffee. You are feeling good so you visit someone. You want to do something exciting so you take flying lessons. But there is obviously a great flaw in this for it cannot be maintained. It is by nature transient, impermanent and, therefore, unreliable. But worse! For when I say 'I am happy, that is how I am defining myself. So that when I am not happy, I start wondering why. I start blaming myself or others or society for my inability to be happy. I may feel that happiness is how I ought to be, that it's how everyone ought to be. That it's 'natural'. That it's 'unnatural' to be unhappy. Suddenly it's writ large in national declarations and international treaties – the 'pursuit of human happiness'. It's become a 'right'! Unfortunately this just adds more striving with the potential of more frustration. The happier we try to be, the more unhappy we seem to get!" Happy moods and happy emotions are all right in themselves. But will they ever give the sort of substantial happiness that our hearts seek? If we can appreciate these transient experiences and not try to re-create them or better them, then they will stand on their own as delightful times to be delighted in. To be able to say goodbye to a happy mood or emotion is to liberate ourselves from a psychological dependency. When there is no psychological 'need' for such states, we will enjoy them the more. This is the meaning of non-attachment.

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