

Abby Dallas

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Philosophy of Happiness

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***The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga* by Marvin Levine**

“Happiness does not depend on what you have or who you are; it solely relies on what you think.” – Buddha

First of all, this book is full of information and many detailed concepts from Buddhism, Yoga, and Western psychology. First Buddhism is thoroughly introduced using stories of its origin, Hindu contexts, and explorations of core teachings. Yoga is described in relation to Buddhist and Western concepts, as well as the author’s personal discoveries and a description of the Yogic theory and state. Western psychology is discussed as a relation between Buddhism, Yoga and contemporary studies using examples for applications of eastern methods in a western context. This addition also had a section on handling anger by including methods from all three methods.

The section on Buddhism opens with the legend of King Ashoka.

As legend has it, when King Ashoka heard of a heretic resistant to torture, he ordered the prisoner’s release. Upon his release, the King asked the heretic “What is your secret?”, and the heretic replied with the story of Buddha and the teachings that released him from all suffering. King Ashoka immediately converted to Buddhism, making it the national religion of his lands. The Buddhist story changed a conqueror into a beneficent ruler!

The author goes on to explain important histories of Buddhism in order to bring in historical evidence and information to aid in the understanding of terms and ideas. He writes about the Hindu-philosophical view of *Atman* (the universal spirit), *Dukkha* (suffering), and *Karma* (the causal principle- loosely similar to determinism). The Four Noble Truths are described as the core teachings of Buddhism. The first Noble Truth is of *Dukkha*- as humans we are vulnerable to suffering, characterizing a world where there is unhappiness ranging from intense pain to mild discomforts. The Truth of *Tanha* (desire) is that humans are vulnerable to suffering because human nature is a bundle of urges, placing the ultimate cause of *Dukkha* within the individual. The third Noble Truth is the Truth of *Nirvana*, or liberation. By changing and reducing our cravings and attachments we can attain freedom from suffering. The Truth of *Magga* (The Path) is simply follow the Eight Fold Path:

1. Right Views- strive to see the truth of human circumstance
2. Right Thoughts- avoid thoughts of ill will and self-pity
3. Right Speech- be trustworthy and avoid problem causing
4. Right Action- attain *ahimsa*, or harmlessness
5. Right Livelihood- maintain a positive look on work and concern for others' livelihood
6. Right Effort- direct energies towards self-transformation
7. Right Mindfulness- become more aware of the inner processes and become "the participant observer"
8. Right Meditation- characterized by focusing, developing mindfulness, desensitizing, and seeking understanding

Yoga also follows the Buddhist and Hindu principle that our task in life is to purify ourselves. Centered on the concept of self-transformation, Yoga involves Eight *Angas*, or limbs, divided into two categories of practices and experiences:

1. Five *Yamas*- attitudes toward the world
2. Four *Niyamas*- attitudes toward oneself
3. *Asanas*- postures or movements
4. *Prana*- breath
5. *Dharana*- the transition
6. *Pratyhara*- nondistractedness
7. *Dhyana*- immersion
8. *Samadhi*- oneness

One specific *asana* mentioned in the book is *savasana*, the corpse pose. It is a posture based in relaxation, meant to make you feel refreshed and clearheaded while being completely immersed in the process. The Yogic state is the intense focus and immersion, exclusively on breathing, moving, and relaxing as well as perform without judgmental thoughts. A well-known quote from Gandhi describes the Yogic state well, “Hate the sin, not the sinner.” The main goal of achieving this state of mind is to erase judgment of others and yourself, replacing it with assessment. Yogic theory deals with the idea of an anterior self, using terms such as *drastr* (mind’s eye), *cit* (reflection), and *purusha*. *Purusha* is a complex concept describing the force that guides, observes, contemplates, and alters the mind’s processes. You do not have to believe in an essence beyond your body, but can still believe in the psychological process that can observe, reflect, and reshape the processes of the mind. Yogic problem solving is much like Buddhist methods,

change begins at the root of the problem and with a calm, nonjudgmental approach one can fix the issue without anger.

All three categories of thought discussed in the book focus on alleviating suffering, humanistic and naturalistic methods, teaching compassion and unconditional positive regard, and acknowledging that the mind functions superficially and at a deeper level. The author mentions many psychotherapy methods, such as psychoanalysis (having the client talk about feelings and memories), with examples, and relates them to Buddhism and Yoga. Problem solving therapy and empathetic assertiveness teach patients to treat social situations as problems to solve by reducing passions and acting with diminished fear and anger, core teachings of Buddhism and Yoga. He gives specific recommendations for use of Right Speech and Right Action as taught in contemporary psychology. Reducing anger can be attained if you want to change, adopt the idea that whenever you are pissed it is your fault, reduce attachments, appreciate the Yogic state, and change your reaction habits. Levine goes into more specific methods and examples, explaining how one should properly handle the issues by changing one's own attitudes and holding the right views of others.

The primary thesis of the book was that Buddhism and Yoga theories provide answers to attain mature and serene life conditions. Buddhism and Yoga are really applied psychologies based on observations and experiences. I found it most interesting how the author could find relationships between Yogic, Buddhist, and Western ideas, while keeping the language simple enough for a person of nonscientific or nonspiritual background to fully understand. I recommend the book for a great learning experience, not necessarily as a self-help book. The

author does advocate for the use of Buddhist and Yogic ideas in life, but as additive tools to a “regular” life. It opened my eyes to certain details and new perceptions about the human mind.