



A Monk's Guide to Happiness

Robert Hodge

Talk I Introduction, Meditation

Several weeks ago, one of my colleagues, Joe McCormack, a teacher at Show Me Dharma in Missouri, sent me link to A Monk's Guide to Happiness video¹. Joe noted: "In my opinion, it is a dharma talk by Gelong Thubten, and it is a great introduction to meditation that is clear, and it also deals with some of the deeper levels of practice in a way that is quite accessible. The monk also has a book that came out in August titled [A Monk's Guide to Happiness](#).

Frankly, I have a short attention span for watching videos (I'd much rather read) but given Joe's recommendation, I started watching it. After a few minutes, I knew that I was going to watch the whole hour and 27 minutes and take notes. I also read the book and in this series of talks, I want to share some of his teachings on meditation, compassion, and forgiveness. I recommend that you watch the video and read the book for further reflection.



Steve Ullathorne

Gelong Thubten is a Buddhist monk, meditation teacher and author from the UK. Gelong is a title meaning 'senior monk'. Thubten was educated at Oxford University, and then became an actor, in London and New York. At the age of 21, tremendous amounts of stress led him to join a monastery. He ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk in 1993 at Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in Scotland. He has trained there under some of the world's most accomplished teachers of meditation, and has spent six years in intensive meditation retreats, the longest of which was 4 years.²

Meditation

Thubten tells the story of how as a younger person, he was a tormented and driven to an unhealthy lifestyle. He developed stress symptoms and after many medical consultations, he decided to enter the monastery and take the vows. After several long retreats, he returned to civilization and started to notice how unhappy people are. He noted that in this day and age, people are invaded by information which causes more anxiety. There are political movements that invoke fear. In making his contribution to others, Thubten is not interested in converting people to Buddhism but in teaching mindfulness as a path to happiness.

He considers the terms mindfulness and meditation to be nearly identical and he uses often uses them interchangeably: "Is there a difference between meditation and mindfulness? In modern times meditation has in some ways been "rebranded" as mindfulness, to make it more accessible. But from a deeper perspective, they are in fact two important aspects of one system of training.

Meditation is where we sit down to train our minds, using specific techniques. *Mindfulness* is how we bring our minds back from distraction during the meditation session, and it also refers to the integration of meditation into daily life. This is done by practicing moments of awareness as we go about our activities."³

He believes that it is possible to learn how to train in happiness as a skill. And part of that is learning to engage with the part of yourself that you don't like and give compassion to your mind that is so tormented.

Thubten then discusses meditation and its challenges. He notes that impatience becomes a problem in meditation training – We start waiting for something to happen after meditation. People start to look for happiness in the meditation. They get unhappy because they want to be grabbing on to a feeling. We want to have our senses stimulated constantly. We believe that something is only working if we feel something. We go for Instant Feelings.

His experience was like mine when he started meditation. He received very little instruction; just told to sit quietly. He became more unhappy as he began meditating. When he told this to his teacher, his teacher commented that he was meditating like a drug addict. "I've done meditation for 10 minutes, when am I going to get a buzz?" What he learned was that reason that the mind that thinks I want to be happy is the mind that thinks that I am not happy. The more I want happiness, the more I am feeling a lack of happiness.

Advertisers manipulate this perceived lack of happiness by telling us that there is something out there and we will never be truly happy if we don't get it. This reminds me of a display sign in the Galleria shopping mall in Dallas – "Find everything you crave."



What is happiness? It's not about having a great feeling. It's about being less tormented by our thoughts. It's not clearing the mind. It's not blanking out. The more you push away, the more invasive it becomes. It's about changing our relationship with our thoughts. Many describe happiness as inner peace. It is not silence; it is about being at peace with one's thoughts. It means to be less driven by them. It means to step back and observe.

"Meditation is to let the mind, with its thoughts and emotions, be, but also to have awareness. If we develop that, then it doesn't matter what the thoughts are doing. The awareness is not caught up in the mental activity."⁴

A metaphor for meditation is that the mind is the sky and thoughts are clouds which don't affect the sky. Let the clouds go by. Another metaphor: "Meditation is a bit like standing beside a busy road; the road represents our mind and the cars our thoughts and feelings. If we try to stop the cars, they'll pile up and there will be a crash. Instead we could stand at the side of the road and just watch the cars go by. Maybe some of those cars are taxis; if we put our hand out, a taxi stops for us, we get in and go for a drive. That's what we tend to do with our thoughts and feelings: we get into them, just like getting into a taxi, and we go for a long drive around town, without really knowing where we're going, and at the end there's a large bill to pay.

However, we can train ourselves to stand back, simply staying in one spot—which is like using a meditation focus such as the breath, letting those taxis go by."⁵

*You're like a house,
Leave the front door and back door open,
Allow your thoughts to come and go.
Just don't serve them tea. —Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Master⁶*

Key Ingredients for meditation

It is hard to step back and gain perspective. We need an object and breathing is the perfect one. However, when we start to focus on the breath and then get distracted by a thought, memory, or sensation, we feel that we have failed. But is it failure? Thubten doesn't see it as failing. It's not that we see the distraction coming but that we have blanked out (taking that ride in a taxi) and then realize what has happened later. We wake up somewhere else. **The point is that the moment that you realize that you gotten lost is meditation.** You are back with the awareness – **it is a moment of success.** It strengthens us. This is thinning down that mental glue that locks us into the distractions. This builds nonattachment.

In summary, meditation has main three parts

1. Being with the breath
2. Finding awareness, the moment when we realize that we have gotten lost.
3. Coming back to the breath

To put this briefly: breathing, noticing, and returning.

Meditation makes us stronger – like physical exercise building our muscle strength.

Gelong Thubten's simple seven step meditation practice:

1. Sit up straight, feet parallel on the ground, eyes open but not forced, angled downward, eye open but shut off
2. Establish compassion – make a deep wish – “May I do this practice to benefit myself and others”
3. Be Aware of your body – contact on chair, etc., shift focus on hands, contact hand with clothing, abdomen pressure of your waist.
4. Feel how your body moves with your breathing – contract and expand
5. Focus on how the breath enters and leaves your nose. Observe the sensation. Don't push the air, just let it be.
6. Focus on body like you did before in step 3
7. Establish compassion again – dedicate practice – “May I benefit others to the deepest possible way.”

Thubten recommends practicing 10-15 minutes a day at first then then extending it to 30 minutes or so. Note that the body can go into a drowsy mode – this wears off after days of practice.

When to meditate? Regularly and especially when you feel ill or don't want to

Meditation off the cushion

What do you do with meditation off the cushion? How do you bring it into action? Even formal meditation two hours a day is not useful unless you bring it into your life.

Thubten recommends doing what he calls drip feeding. Have micro moments of mindfulness while doing movement tasks such as brushing your teeth, washing the dishes, etc. You bring your attention into the sense mode (what is going on in the body). You will be learning to enjoy the present moment especially

when there is discomfort and/or boredom. Deliberately go into a mindful state when stuck in traffic, etc. Go into a mindful state whenever you feel impatient.

Waiting is something we do a lot and generally don't like. Because the notion of waiting means that you are not living but waiting for things to happen. Then you'll live. That seems to be the story of our lives, waiting for the next thing. Instead see it as plenty of opportunity to practice. If you practice, you are reprogramming yourself on how to be happy against the odds instead of "I need a situation to make me happy." When you are stuck, say to yourself: "Oh I can do that thing. Bring it on."

You will feel a sense of curious enthusiasm around things that wind you up. This is independent happiness – Happiness that doesn't depend on a trigger. Thubten uses the example of his discomfort with public speaking. He practiced getting into a mindful state during the time he was uncomfortable and observed that discomfort going away.

In the next talk, we will explore the role of compassion.

Talk II Compassion

Next, we can learn how to link acceptance and compassion with meditation. Some of the challenges are that “Our culture has now, however, moved into a phase where the individual is seen as more important than the community—we celebrate self-empowerment. A lot of the inputs we receive through advertising, social media, and even music tell us “it’s all about you.” The focus now is on self-identity, and this seems to have made us rather lonely.”⁷ Also, Thubten notes another challenge, in that stress of one of the most powerful suppressants of our natural kindness and connectivity. When we are stressed, we fall in a trance as Tara Brach has noted and we lock ourselves out of the world and from others.

Practicing self-compassion is leaving our thoughts in their natural place and not trying to do anything about it. **This is unconditional love**; unconditional love in relationship to one’s own mind. There is no need to chase the thought or resist the thought. When we chase, we create additional thoughts to make it more juicy. Let it be. This process leads to self-acceptance. And compassion toward yourself leads to compassion towards others.

Compassion based meditation

Compassion is the essence of the meditation journey. There are two aspects:

- 1 Meditation leads to the general acceptance of our relationship with thoughts. This is self-compassion.
- 2 By committing to the intention of meditating for the benefit of ourselves and others, we acknowledge our connectedness and embrace compassion as a means to act on it. We can use phrases such as “Through this practice, may I benefit others.” We can also repeat this intention at the end of each meditation. This is called framing or bookending the practice.

Compassion starts with gratitude

“Our happiness, survival and very existence thus depend on others, and others depend on us, no matter who we are. If we can tap into, acknowledge, and understand this interconnection, then a positive feeling can arise toward the world at large, and that feeling is gratitude.”⁸ Gratitude helps us generate compassion for others.

Thubten recommends regularly doing a gratitude practice. “This practice is particularly helpful in modern times. As previously mentioned, we live in an era where now more than ever, people tend toward dissatisfaction. There is a focus on what we lack and on the negative. We are conditioned to constantly feel that there is something missing.

You can, however, teach yourself how to feel gratitude and appreciation—these can become a training. You can learn to truly enjoy everything. This wouldn’t cause you to give up trying to achieve things—it simply means feeling fulfilled in the moment and having a more positive mind.

Reflection

In your meditation, bring to mind three things in your life for which you feel grateful. They can be things, people, situations—anything. Slowly think of them one at a time, exploring why you are—or could be—grateful for them. Feel the fullest sense of appreciation and gratitude for those things.

Try to understand that everything depends on everything else. Our very survival depends on so many things around us. In this way, you can generate deep gratitude as you recollect the kindness of the world around you.

The next step is to feel happy for others. Mentally rejoice in the achievements and happiness of others. Think of people you know as well as those you don't know. Cultivate a feeling of happiness for them, a sense of delight in their success. We usually feel that way when it comes to our loved ones, but here you are extending it to strangers as well—we are all interconnected, and we can share happiness. There is enough to go around.

Finally, repeat the compassionate intention with which you began the session—remind yourself that you are practicing meditation for the benefit of all. As your practice begins to yield benefit, your ability to share peace and happiness with others will increase.

As with every meditation, it is helpful to practice this exercise regularly, and each time it is good to think of three new things you feel grateful for, building up a sense of gratitude and appreciation toward everything in your life.”⁹

Empathy as a starting point to compassion

“Empathy is an emotional reaction; we see someone suffering and we are triggered. This is of course a good thing—it means that we have a heart, we are open to others—but simply feeling something is neither stable nor particularly useful. A feeling comes and goes; it is dependent on the right triggers and when those are absent, the feeling is not present, and so the empathy is not sustainable. Also, this emotional component of empathy can simply mean that we too are now suffering, which is not really helpful to anyone.”¹⁰

There are other side effects. With the empathetic reaction, we can try to help others, but we may develop expectations that we should be recognized or repaid with gratitude for our efforts. We may limit our efforts to those whom we feel a close connection and withhold our help from those we dislike. The major shortcoming of trying to apply an empathic approach is a sense of helplessness or frustration which can lead to empathic distress where we suffer by being consumed with emotion, anger, or shut down.

Compassion goes deeper

“Empathy, despite its limitations, is a starting point and then compassion goes far deeper. Compassion means to understand others' pain, to cultivate the deep intention to help them, and then to translate that into action. It is like learning to swim so that we can rescue the drowning person, but it is also about helping others in a deeper, more sustainable way, not just through short-term relief. Compassion has selfless, unconditional, and limitless qualities. Where empathy is bound up with expectations and requirements, unconditional compassion implies “no matter what”; it leads us to connect with others not “because” or “when,” but to love them just as they are. Compassion is something we can develop through working on our minds. It expands our empathy beyond its limitations.”¹¹

Compassion is a training of the heart

We can develop a commitment to help others learn how to create the causes for future happiness and how to be free from the causes for future suffering.

The important point here is to consider why we are meditating. If our meditation practice is driven by the demands of our ego, we simply get caught up in the cycle of grasping, where we crave and run after feelings of well-being.

All suffering, without exception, is born from a mind which seeks happiness for oneself, whereas perfect, enduring happiness arises through a mind which seeks to benefit others. —Buddhist proverb¹²

Training in Compassion

Our focus is to develop and use the skills of compassion for the rest of our lives.

Thubten notes three stages of compassion in our development:

1. Viewing everybody as equal.

This stage puts our ego in perspective, acknowledging that no one is more important than anyone else. Everybody in the world wants the same thing – happiness and freedom from suffering.

2. Seeing the needs of others as a major concern.

While we acknowledge that we all are equal, we put a priority on maintaining our awareness of the needs of others rather than just focusing on what we want and think we need.

3. We willingly take the burden of others upon ourselves.

This is a deep commitment to care for others and respond appropriately. Our meditation will naturally translate into action. We don't need to worry about figuring out what to do; it will come with contemplation.

A view from Tara Brach: "An aboriginal woman from Australia speaks from this sense of relatedness in a powerful way: "If you have come to help me, then you are wasting your time.

But if you have come because your destiny is bound up with mine, then let us work together.""¹³

"Within meditation practice, however, we are learning a total acceptance of everything that arises in our minds, not judging things as good or bad, but simply letting it all be and returning to the meditation focus. This non-judgmental attitude is the foundation for having compassion toward oneself and others. It is the only way to find genuine, lasting happiness. In this way, even a simple practice such as mindful breathing can be the key that unlocks compassion."¹⁴

Reflections on Compassion

Below are 10 questions that Thubten asks us to reflect on in order to explore the role of compassion for ourselves and others:

1. When I am selfish, very wrapped up in myself, how does that feel? Does my mind feel big or small? Relaxed or tight? Is there perhaps a sense of worry, a need to run after, protect, and hold on to things?

2. How do my problems feel when I am being selfish? Do they feel bigger or smaller? Am I putting my problems and concerns under a microscope and do they now seem more intense; do I lose perspective?
3. What effect does a selfish mind have on the environment around me. First look globally to see its effect on the planet, communities, and families. Then look to see how it affects relationships.
4. What feedback do I get as a result of my selfish thinking and behavior?
5. As a result of my selfishness, how do I end up feeling about myself? Do I fall into a sense of loneliness?

These next questions are similar to the first five but are reflections in the context of a compassionate mind which has less self interest, more openness to others, a greater sense of generosity, and a wish to help people.

6. How does that type of mind feel?
7. How do my problems feel when I am in a compassionate mind state?
8. What is the effect on the environment, society, and relationships?
9. What sort of feedback would I get from others?
10. How does that make me feel about myself?¹⁵

In summary, adding acceptance and compassion to your lifelong meditation practice will reap many benefits for yourself and others.

Talk III Forgiveness

Practicing compassion is harder when we hold ill-will, resentment and anger with others, especially whom we consider to be enemies. We might ask ourselves, **“Who is the real enemy? Is it the person or my reaction to them?”** Thubten notes that dealing with resentment can benefit our training in compassion. As his teacher, Akong Tulku Rinpoche, noted: “The fastest path to enlightenment is for people to insult you.” If we view resentment as a training opportunity, we can actually feel grateful toward our so-called enemy. Thubten notes, “If we are really committed to the path of developing compassion, then we do need people in our lives who will test that. Perhaps, then, our enemies are our best friends.”¹⁶ Our enemies can teach us more than our friends who usually don’t test us and get us to work on ourselves.

Thubten notes that “The things which normally bring up resistance in us are the very things that make us stronger—just as when we go to a gym, we need to lift weights in order to build muscle.”¹⁷

What we are talking about is knowing that the skill of forgiveness is a high form of compassion. Forgiveness is letting go of the resentment, anger and ill-will in ourselves. We are confronting the real enemy – our reactions. Reactions occur; we can’t control that. What we can do is to deal with them skillfully.

There are three areas of resentment that Thubten discusses: resentment towards others, ourselves and life. Forgiveness is the process of letting go of the resentment.

Resentment towards others

The three steps of forgiveness

Thubten notes three steps of forgiveness.

The **first step** in forgiving others (letting go of our resentment towards them)” is to recognize the resentment. This is similar to the first step in RAIN: Recognition.

The **second step** is to feel gratitude for having the opportunity to train and to cease our ill-will.

The **third step** is to gain a deeper understanding of the other by investigating. When we experience situations such as when someone says something that causes us to feel harmed, we mainly suffer because we assume (believe) that it was deliberate, that they “meant it.” Thubten notes that nothing is deliberate as the other person is not fully in control of themselves. They are out of balance, driven by negative impulses and they are coming from a place of stress and misery. They are in a trance.

We say that they should “know better” but they are simply in the moment, knowing what they know. If we can recognize this aspect of the human condition, it can be incredibly liberating, as the burden of rage and indignation will start to drop away.

Take the example of when we learn that something horribly happened to them; we immediately drop our anger because we can now understand why. We don’t need to wait to be given the information before letting go of our ill-will.

This will not turn us into a doormat. We need to take appropriate action if needed, but revenge is not one of them. If we fear that we are “letting them get away with it,” the truth is that they did get away with it if we do not cease our ill-will and live perpetually in pain. If we train in forgiveness, that which has hurt us will become the greatest aids to our meditation (mindfulness).

Thubten notes: “True forgiveness is developed through learning to accept whatever is happening in the mind. This is a deep form of unconditional love, and it is the key to forgiving ourselves and others.

In meditation, all we need to do is notice that our minds have wandered, and then return our attention to the object of meditation—such as the breath. Training in this way makes us stronger. To learn that, we need to have somewhere to return from, and so the wandering mind has in fact helped us—the thoughts are aids to the meditation, not enemies. This attitude—a nonjudgmental acceptance toward our thoughts and emotions, resolving our internal mental conflict—becomes the foundation for the development of forgiveness. If we can forgive our thoughts, we can forgive ourselves, and forgive our enemies.”¹⁸

Resentment towards yourself: Self-forgiveness

When we feel ill-will towards ourselves for what we have done or for our shortcomings, we can practice self-forgiveness.

As with forgiveness of the other, the steps to train in self-forgiveness are recognition, gratitude, and understanding. Thubten notes, “Recognition means to calmly acknowledge our mistakes or our negativity; we can do this without falling into guilt. It is good to tap into the knowledge that deep down we are ultimately happy, good, and pure. Our negativity is simply like dust—it can be cleaned away through meditation training.

Gratitude means to appreciate that we have seen something in ourselves that we can work on, and so there is an opportunity. Once we can see that our problems provide a chance for training in resilience, our attitude to them can become one of gratitude.

Understanding means to see our shortcomings as part of the human condition. There is nothing wrong with us, we simply have minds that haven’t yet been trained, and so of course we are liable to make mistakes. If we can see ourselves as “a work in progress,” that will help us develop self-forgiveness.”¹⁹

Resentment towards life: Forgiving life’s challenges

A third area is to cease ill-will towards what life throws at us.

Thubten notes: “We are often engaged in some form of argument with reality, where we are wishing for a different moment. However, even if we’re sick or in pain, we can learn to remove the filter of resistance; we are moving past those distracting thoughts of “I don’t like this,” and we are going directly to what is actually happening—embracing the moment without judgment. This is how to live a life with no filters. It doesn’t mean that we would never take medicines or seek to improve things; it simply means to joyfully accept what cannot be changed. If we realize that this moment, however it may be, is beautiful just the way it is, then we are truly choosing happiness.”²⁰

Again, the three steps are recognition, gratitude and understanding.

Everything is beautiful

Thubten recalls once walking with his teacher, Akong Rinpoche, in London. “We were visiting our monastery’s branch there and we had a break from the teaching sessions. We took a stroll along the Thames’s South Bank. It was an exceptionally beautiful sunny day, and I was in heaven, walking in the sunshine with my favorite person. When we were alone like this we would simply hang out and be casual with each other—there was no formality. I turned to Rinpoche and said, “It’s really beautiful, isn’t it?” Somehow right at the moment I finished speaking those words, we entered a dark tunnel with graffiti all over the walls and the smell of urine; I think there was even a pool of vomit on the ground, it was just hideous. Rinpoche simply said, “For me everything is beautiful.” I imagine that for somebody whose mind contains no habits of resistance or fear, everything must look and feel great. That is true happiness, and such a person is invincible.”²¹

Meditation Reflections

These meditation reflections can help to generate the state of forgiveness (absence of ill-will).

Thubten makes two points regarding meditation:

1. By meditating regularly, you create a powerful effect that eases the torment and anger. When your mind is locked into the hurt and wound, meditation loosens up that locked state. Thubten doesn’t like the phrase, let go. He prefers “leave it alone and don’t be bothered by it. Allow it to be.”
2. Another form of meditation is called reflection or analytical meditation (investigation). The topic of attention, for example, can be the person who winds you up. It’s about starting to understand the human condition from deeper perspective. As noted previously, the human being is over controlled by one’s thoughts and emotions and this is how we are and how everyone else is. That person is not out to get us even though it seems like it. They are suffering from their own stress. They are out of control because they are driven by their negative impulses.

Forgiving Others

Reflect on the three steps for forgiveness. Bring to mind someone for whom you feel ill-will because of something they have done to you.

1. Recognize that it is your anger, pain, or irritation that are the true enemies here. It is those feelings that are making you suffer right now in this moment. Don’t condemn those feelings; the point of this part of the exercise is to see that the enemy is within and the way that you deal with your emotions is something you can change.
2. Gratitude - Reflect upon the fact that the person who has hurt you, or whom you dislike, is giving you an opportunity to learn forgiveness. They are a catalyst for your path. You could feel a kind of gratitude toward them. Thinking like this helps to reframe the situation as something helpful rather than harmful.
3. Understanding - Think about the other person’s suffering or confusion, and how that negativity controls them from within, making them do or say things which cause problems.

To take this understanding to a deeper level, spend a few minutes imagining that you are that person— imagine yourself in their skin, walking in their shoes. Try to mentally inhabit their reality and appreciate how it might feel to be driven by such negativity and confusion. Sit for a while simply breathing as that person, imagining how they might feel.”²²

In summary, this series explores three important areas, how to meditate, how to train for compassion, and how to cease our resentment toward others, ourselves, and life. Thubten’s book includes more beneficial information and I recommend that you read it.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1gY7RWE48U>

² <https://www.gelongthubten.com/>

³ Thubten, Gelong. A Monk's Guide to Happiness (MGH) (p. 42). St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁴ MGH p. 46

⁵ MGH p. 48

⁶ MGH p. 47

⁷ MGH p. 132

⁸ MGH p. 135

⁹ MGH pp. 154-155

¹⁰ MGH p. 160

¹¹ MGH p. 164

¹² MGH p. 167

¹³ Brach, Tara Radical Acceptance p. 241

¹⁴ MGH p. 177

¹⁵ MGH p. 177

¹⁶ MGH p. 189

¹⁷ MGH p. 190

¹⁸ MGH p. 196

¹⁹ MGH p. 199

²⁰ MGH p. 201

²¹ MGH p. 202

²² MGH p. 205