

Perceived Happiness in the Context of Buddha Dharma among Undergraduate Students: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract. *Although happiness is a common state of mind, perceptions of happiness vary along social and cultural contexts, especially in the societies influenced by Buddhism, such as Thailand. Until recently, a limited number of empirical studies on individual perception of happiness have been conducted in Thailand. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the conceptual framework of happiness among undergraduate students within the Thai social and cultural context. A qualitative investigation was conducted. Data were collected from 26 undergraduate students from public universities and Rajabhat universities from both metropolitan and suburban areas in Bangkok; an in-depth thematic analysis was used for the interviews. The results revealed five main themes of perceived happiness: (1) life satisfaction, (2) interdependence, (3) faith in the life of integrity, (4) peaceful mind, and (5) wisdom and understanding of the truth of life. Participants also indicated that they derived happiness from responding to meritorious desires—called “virtuous happiness”—by leading a benevolent life, benefiting both themselves and others, as well as having a peaceful mind, wisdom, and understanding of the true nature of life. This happiness leads them to experience life satisfaction and internal well-being. Findings were congruent with Buddhist concepts that teach people to consider the causes of suffering and happiness within themselves through the development of Sīla (precepts), Samādhi (concentration), and Pañña (wisdom). This conceptual framework of happiness serves as a guideline for the development of a happiness assessment inventory, based on Buddhist Dhamma, which would be beneficial for the assessment and feedback provision within the context of therapeutic counseling for personal growth and development.*

Key words: Happiness, students, qualitative study

The literature on happiness has shown sporadic development in both Eastern and Western hemispheres. Due to efforts promoting cultural sharing, in the past decade the study of happiness has increasingly expanded from happiness based on a Western philosophy to happiness based on Eastern perspectives, especially in the context of Buddhist Dhamma. Happiness from the Buddhist point of view is hierarchically more refined and profound; it stems from the happiness associated with acquiring consumed objects without hurting others, achieving internal freedom without developing lustful desires for consumed objects, and acquiring peace while ensuring the absence of stimuli, ultimately achieving the highest level of happiness of enlightenment and liberation from impurities that cause suffering (Buddhadasa Bhikku, 2005, 2008, 2009; Phraphom Khunaphon (P. A. Payutto), 2006, 2009; Ricard, 2008).

Thai society is a predominantly Buddhist society, with more than 94 percent of the Thai population professing to observe Buddhism. As such, Buddhism has been deeply rooted in the lives of most Thai people for a long time. Previous studies on perceived happiness among Thai students revealed that moral living (i.e., constantly observing of the five precepts, meditating on religious days, developing self-perception of religious devotion), spiritual state (i.e., altruism, charity, donation), and self-esteem are influential (Gray, Tantipiwatanaskul & Suwannoppakao, 2010), in addition to maintaining positive feelings, absence of negative feelings, wholesome physical and psychological

health, good intimate relationships, goal achievement, adequate acquisition of life necessities, and a beautiful mind (Namdej, Pongsukchard, Leangpikultong, Cheancham, Muangkaew & Phulom, 2006). These results—particularly the spiritual state—support the finding that happiness of people in the context of Eastern cultures involves interdependence and social harmony (Lu *et al.*, 2001; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009).

College students are considered to be one of the groups most prone to mental and well-being problems. A survey report on the mental health of Thai people found that the Thai population 15 to 24 years old scored lower on mental health measurements than any other groups (National Statistical Office, 2009), which could affect their cognitive efficiency, adjustment, living, and every aspect of their daily lives, in addition to thwarting their attempts to live happily, thereby culminating in a lack of well-being. Thus, studying happiness in this age group can yield more understanding of this issue. The current study aimed to present the conceptual framework of Thai students' happiness based on the social and cultural context of Buddhist Dhamma.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a phenomenology qualitative research design, as detailed in the following sections.

Participants

Participants included 26 undergraduate students ($M = 16$, $F = 10$) from various faculties and academic years in public universities and Rajabhat universities from both metropolitan and suburban areas in Bangkok. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on an assessment conducted by the participants themselves and their well-acquainted instructors to ascertain that they possessed all the characteristics of happiness in the context of Buddhist Dhamma, as listed in the Buddhist happiness checklist:

- Be satisfied with what one is, what one has, and what one is doing
- Live happily in the way of righteous and be valuable to oneself and others
- Be able to face and accept one's own happiness and suffering while understanding the nature of change
- Be able to be happy without having to depend on material possessions
- Be happy to give, volunteer, or produce creative activities
- Be cheerful, calm, relaxed, and mindful

In addition, participants had to volunteer to join the study. Finally, participants had to have the ability to express their experiences.

Materials

The happiness checklist and interview guidelines on happiness in the context of Buddha Dhamma were developed by the researcher and reviewed by three experts on Buddha Dhamma for content validity.

Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Subjects, Health Science Group at Chulalongkorn University, the researcher contacted the gatekeepers to recruit the qualified key informants. Appointments with the key informants were then made to provide information about the study and their rights to participate in the study. Those who were willing to participate in the study were asked to sign a consent form and complete the happiness checklist. Students who met all the criteria on the checklist were invited and interviewed once for approximately one hour each.

Data Analysis

After transcribing verbatim the interview tapes, the scripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti 6.2 by coding messages with similar meanings together. Next, those messages with the same themes were grouped into subcategories and categories. Trustworthiness of the validity of analysis on the findings, interpretation, and summary from supportive data were achieved through external auditing, conducted by three experts on Buddha Dhamma and two experts on qualitative research.

Results

Five main themes emerged from the data (See Table 1). These results will be discussed in detail in this section.

Table 1 Themes and Description

Themes	Description
Life satisfaction	The pleasure acquired from doing what one loves, appreciating the outcomes, and performing duties to the fullest capacity.
Interdependence	The ability to live with others with understanding, to gain pleasure from giving and helping others, to have compassion for others, and to appreciate values of relationships with others.
Faith in living with integrity	The possession of principles to hold on to in living, optimism, and control of oneself to behave with integrity.
Peaceful mind	The clear and relaxed mind; the mind that is still, calm, and cool from within.
Wisdom and understanding the truth of life	The understanding of the causes of happiness and suffering, the understanding that everything happens out of causes and conditions, and the acceptance of the causes of everything without attachment or expectation.

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction consists of two subcategories: satisfaction from doing what one loves and appreciating the consequences and satisfaction with what one has, is, or does. Most (23 of 26) participants indicated satisfaction from doing what one loves and appreciating the consequences, which includes the freedom to do what makes one happy without instigating harm to oneself and others, as well as the feeling of happiness from seeing success and benefits after what one did. This is evident in the following participants' responses:

Doing activities I like, I am happy. It's not only about the activities I love. Once I am happy, the happiness continues to impact on other things, like a chain reaction, continuously weaving. If the happiness continues to weave like this, I will be happy. (P22)

I enjoy reading a lot. I read and I memorize. Because I memorize it, I am rewarded and very proud that I get rewarded. It's not reading for exams or scores, but I read as I am happy to read. (P2)

Meanwhile, 19 of the 26 participants indicated satisfaction with what one has, is, or does, which captures the feelings of satisfaction with what one has or is in the way that is appropriate for one's status, without comparing oneself with others or letting social trends influence one to strive beyond one's means. This also includes the effort to make one's life progress with all might and capacity. For example:

I myself think that I can make every day happy. I tell myself every day to do my best, live every day happily. Whatever conditions my home and university are, I'll do my best and make

myself happy. That is to say, I do everything I can and stay with it. The result is such a good feeling and happiness from doing so because I've done my best." (P1)

"Every day I live can be considered happy, though sometimes we all can't be together. My older sibling works far away and hardly sees me. But I think I'm happy, though it's not all perfect. (P21)

Interdependence

Interdependence can be divided into four subcategories: living with others with understanding; being fulfilled from giving; having goodwill toward others; and appreciation of friendship, love, and bonding. The majority (23 of 26) of participants indicated the need to live with others with understanding, which encompasses being open to learning new things, understanding different viewpoints, and making decisions in life without imposing personal thought upon others; in addition, it includes adjusting to live happily with different people in different societies and being ready to forgive others.

After I had seen my friend's behavior, I felt like the feeling I had for him at first radically changed. I thought I shouldn't focus on just one point, one side, but I should consider every side of him. It made me think that to know and have a relationship with a person, we shouldn't view just one side, but everything of that person. (P17)

Another participant stated, "When I feel that my heart is generous, I'll see that I can understand and then see all the differences and diversities, making me accept them finally" (P13).

In addition, 19 participants indicated being fulfilled from giving, which entails the good feelings that occur when one has an opportunity to be a giver and sharer of something good to others. This also includes creating good things for society and being a model of living a good life for others. For example, one participant stated, "When I give or volunteer, my heart is elated. Any activities that I feel I do for the sake of the society makes me whole" (P18). Another explained:

My happiness is when I can do something for the society and something good for others. If we only think of doing good things for ourselves, we can only be happy temporarily and then crave something more. But when we do something good for others and sit down to see how those benefit others, it's like this can endlessly be beneficial for others and it makes us happier and happier than aiming only to make ourselves happy. (P5)

Similarly, 19 participants indicated the need to have goodwill towards others, referring to the feeling of happiness that arises when seeing others happy, having compassion and goodwill to help others from their suffering, and being satisfied to see the others having good things in life, growing, progressing or achieving.

If I can teach others that I have ever failed like that, this can help them walk farther than I did. This is one thing that makes me happy. If I hadn't failed that time, now I would be a national representative and other things. If I can help a child or a student reaches that point from my suggestion or what he learns from me, it's like I'm watching his success. (P5)

Another participant explained, "Only seeing my little siblings happy, seeing their smiles, only they are together, I am happy. I have had that experience. When I look back and see them together, I am already happy" (P1).

Finally, most (23 of 26) participants also indicated an appreciation of friendship, love, and bonding, which means heartwarming feelings from friendship, love, and goodwill in relation to one's significant others. It also includes self-esteem and understanding of the meaning of relationships with

others, as well as the intimate bonds with people and the environment. As one participant stated, “My classmates love one another. They said we entered together, so we will graduate together. I feel that my friends won’t desert me, and neither will I. We’ll help one another all along. I’m very happy” (P20). Another explained:

Happiness in life...must start with father and mother. I feel that every time I talk with, call, or visit them home. Before when I was in high school, we hardly hug, but when I return home during my first, second, third year, we hug and play together. I feel this is sort of great happiness. My parents give me everything until I feel enough. (P3)

Faith in Living with Integrity

Faith in living with integrity consists of three subcategories: having principles in living, being optimistic, and refraining from vices. Twenty-one of 26 participants indicated the need to have principles in living, which can be described as the possession of principles or models to live up to, as well as having good mentors to direct one to a good path of living that benefits both oneself and others. The following two examples explain this subcategory:

I apply the Four Sublime States of Mind to whomever I deal with. First, I must have loving kindness, wishing everyone happiness, and my life will progress normally. When someone asks me to help, such as a junior asking for my advice, that’s when I have compassion toward her. When her problem gets solved, I have sympathetic joy for her, to congratulate her. But at certain point I can’t do anything to help, I have to let it go on. (P15)

As a child, I followed my brother to the temple, feeling happy to go out. Upon arriving at the temple, I was asked by my brother to meditate. I did as I was told, not thinking much. The more I did, I felt good. Meditating made me feel happy. Normally I was reticent, not involved much with others, but I preferred being by myself. When I meditate, I felt comfortable and so, so calm. As I continued to meditate, I stopped thinking much about my troubles all day. Like one day, I had a great suffering as I experienced something. I was so tensed up. Then I went to the temple to meditate. Once I meditated until my mind calmed down, I felt light and began to be happy from meditation. (P2)

Being optimistic (indicated by 20 of 26 participants) refers to the consideration of oneself as having a good and happy life, as well as recognizing the bright side of life, others, and everything in the surrounding context. One participant stated, “I choose to view the positive side and find benefits from it, and I will finally find that everything is fine and enjoyable” (P10). Another explained:

I view everything positively first, and my mind will improve. Although my positive thinking will turn out in the opposite way, that doesn’t matter. The situation will not become that bad. But if I think negatively, the already negative situation will worsen, from a trivial matter to something dead wrong. (P2)

Just over half (14 of 26) of participants mentioned refraining from vices, which can be explained as the awareness of mind, speech and action, while abstaining from any harmful vices, making merit and charity, and observing Dhamma, so as to develop a pure mind and lessen selfishness. For example:

When my grandma passed away, I burst into tears, but after a while, I realized there were things I had to do for her, to prepare her funeral. I stopped for a moment, composing myself, and went to do what I was supposed to. This way, my grandma would have been prouder if she had still been living. (P9)

My happiness is when I observe the precepts. Once I observed eight precepts for as many as seven days. Oh, I felt so clean, so pure. Observing precepts together with meditation, I felt that observing precepts yielded happiness, the pure kind with oneself, but not limiting only to oneself, but it was kind of giving to others as well. (P18)

Having a Peaceful Mind

Having a peaceful mind consists of two subcategories: feeling light and relaxed and feeling calm and empty. Fewer than one third of the participants (7 of 26) indicated feeling light and relaxed, which means that the mind has no disturbances, worries, or anxiety.

Being happy is like when my mind is feeling like nothing much to think of that day. I don't have to worry. Nothing causes me to frown, cry, or feel tense. When I am happy, my mind is clear. I feel light and comfortable from the inside. (P13)

Meanwhile, another participant explained, "An easy way is meditation, no need to sweat up; just sitting down is all right. Happiness is with ourselves...as we stop thinking, we don't get stressed, and it's nicer" (P6).

Even fewer participants (5 of 26) mentioned feeling calm and empty, which refers to the state of mind that is pure and calm from within, thereby enabling an accurate perception and view of reality. For example, one participant said, "Sometimes meditation can be practiced in many forms. The final goal is the real emptiness, but not meaningless emptiness. It is a sense of being fully aware" (P18). In addition,

Once I meditate, it's pure like it was at a different gradient of refinement, clear, clean, and pure. My mind has nothing to worry about so it becomes purer, stable, and can remain still within. When the mind stays still, it's like precipitation of impurities leaving water clearer and calmer. Meditating is pure happiness, the purest form of happiness. (P18)

Having Wisdom and Understanding the Truth of Life

The final category, having wisdom and understanding the truth of life, can be further divided into two subcategories: understanding the truth of life and accepting the truth of life. All 26 participants mentioned understanding the truth of life, which means the understanding that one's being does not depend entirely upon oneself; it also depends on facilitating conditions, awareness of happiness and suffering in the mind due to thoughts and misery from attachment to people or external objects, realization of boredom underlying the quest for new things to feed the endless desires, and the ability to view objects as the means to respond to basic needs without comparing with others.

My suffering is caused by nothing but my mind. Like I put my mind into something, but it doesn't turn out as expected, and I myself suffer. Sometimes we just put ourselves under pressure, like we must perform well and have good grades, must have something to do. That's why we are under stress. When the result doesn't comply with our desires, we simply suffer. (P14)

Seeing things, we must understand their courses that they are impermanent, unstable. Some people think things must remain forever the same, or they must have, must be, like this or that. Because nothing belongs to us for sure, one day it's gone or decayed. If it really belonged to us, it would return to us; if not, it can't be retrieved no matter how hard we try to find it. (P10)

Most participants (22 of 26) mentioned accepting the truth of life, which is the acceptance that there is a cause for everything without attaching to it or expecting it to turn out as wished; the ability to have a free mind, with attachment to restrictions or regulations for oneself and others; awareness of the reality that happens; and the ability to be prone to problem solving instead of taking everything to heart. As one participant indicated:

Understanding whatever happens, at last it's nothing at all. When we understand and accept the way it is, we'll be happy. Once I left my clothes bag in a room, no one was there, and my bag was gone. Everyone was worried about it, but I was just strolling around until a junior asked me why I wasn't worried at all despite the loss of my bag. I thought when it had gone, it was gone. If not, it must have been there. The lost belonging was unlikely to return, for I didn't know where to look for it, so worry didn't help. Instead, it was better to stay calm. (P10)

Another explained, “Don’t be attached to other things, like wanting them this way or that way, and we will be happy. No attachment makes us happy” (P14).

Discussion

Perceived happiness among undergraduate students can be considered a state of mind (e.g., satisfied, content, complacent, peaceful) based on the inner quality of a person derived from the way that person leads a life of integrity, beneficial to oneself and others, a mind that is calm and content from the inside, and the wisdom and understanding of the truth of life. The conceptual framework from this study was based on the combination of Western perspectives of studies on happiness, including hedonics or subjective well-being (Argyle, 1987; Diener, 1984; Seligman, cited in Wallis, 2005), satisfaction in life (Argyle, 1987; Veenhoven, 2006), and eudaimonics or psychological well-being (Ekman, Davidson, Ricard, & Wallace, 2005; Ryff, 1989, 1995; Seligman, cited in Wallis, 2005). It is also in accordance with the Buddhist perspective of happiness, that it is both a consequence and a state that leads to real happiness.

However, this study emphasized the psychological state of happiness arising from a response to constructive or meritorious desire called “virtuous happiness” (Phraphom Khunaphon (P. A. Payutto), 2006). A criterion for judging actions in the Buddhist concept is goodwill, including the meritorious state of mind (Boonpinon, 2001; Phramaha Niyom Esiwongso, 2002), satisfaction from performing rightful duties (Buddhadasa Bhikku, 2007), and satisfaction from what one has, is, and does. Phra Paisal Visalo (2010, preface) explained that by “learning to appreciate the good things we have [...] happiness is never out of reach. If only one’s satisfied with what one has, delighted with what one gains, and proud of what one is” then one will achieve contentment — the same contentment as in Buddhism, which refers to three types of satisfaction: satisfaction with what has acquired, one’s capacity, and one’s status.

In addition, the findings suggested that students’ happiness depended on satisfaction from doing what they loved, supporting interdependence with others, and having faith in right living. This result is supported by the studies of Gray *et al.* (2010) and Namdej *et al.* (2006), who found that happy students were those who led a life of integrity (i.e., regular observing of five precepts, meditation on religious days), had a meritorious mind (i.e., considering others before oneself, feeling delighted when helping others, doing charity), engaged in their favorite activities, and had good relationships with significant others. This result is also congruent with Ekman *et al.*’s (2005) concept that happiness in Buddhism is profound well-being comprising loving kindness, abstinence from craving for external objects, and the maintenance of interdependence with others and all beings. Indeed, Ricard (2008, p. 75) states that “we can’t be truly happy if we isolate our happiness from others.”

Finally, the results imply that students’ happiness depends on psychological well-being stemming from living a life of integrity that benefits both oneself and others. This includes a state of mind that is light, relaxed, empty, and tranquil, as well as the wisdom and understanding of the truth of life that enables them to live with the awareness of present reality and a mind that accepts and understands impermanence without attachment or expectation. This finding is consistent with happiness in the context of Buddha Dhamma, which can be classified into various types and levels according to the hierarchical states of mind; the lowest is still attached to both consumed objects and internal peace, while the enlightened highest transcends the boundary of impurities and the causes of suffering (Buddhadasa Bhikku, 2003, 2008, 2009; Phraphom Khunaphon (P. A. Payutto), 2006, 2009). It also concurs with the viewpoint of Ekman *et al.* (2005) that “*sukha*” (happiness) is a state of pure mind arising when the mind is balanced, formless, and true to reality. It also supports the findings of the study on happiness in the context of Buddha Dhamma, which indicated that, besides the basic level of happiness from acquisition in response to need, the Buddha Dhamma’s happiness covers a peaceful and content mind and wisdom to see through the reality of all beings that enable the human mind to transcend good-evil and happiness-suffering, leading to the real happiness, which is the true final goal of Buddhism (Boonpinon, 2001; Phramaha Jarun Kamphiro, 2004; Phramaha Niyom Esiwongso, 2002; Tanakulparat, 2004).

Conclusion

The conceptual framework of happiness in the context of Buddha Dhamma is not limited to only a positive psychological state, life satisfaction as held by individuals or societies, or particular internal characteristics. Rather, it is the state of meritorious mind consisting of wisdom and understanding of the truth of life and faith to the right living that enables a person to live happily and compassionately with others, leading to life satisfaction. Based on the findings of this study, happiness should be promoted among students by creating education programs or activities that encourage the wisdom development process, so that students reflect on their lives and duties in their lives, learning to respond to their needs reasonably without attaching to other people or external objects. This can also help them to cope with physical suffering without instigating unnecessary psychological suffering, see the values and meaning of their compassionate interdependence with people and environments, and develop a contented, calm mind from the inside. All these purposes support the Buddhist concept that teaches man to turn back to consider the causes of suffering and happiness inside oneself through the process of precepts, concentration, and wisdom development. Moreover, a valid and reliable happiness scale in the context of Buddhist Dhamma should be developed for use in assessment and providing feedback during the counseling process for students who are on the path of personal growth and development. The finding from this study may not explain all Thai undergraduate students' perceived happiness due to the limited number of participants. However, the conceptual framework of perceived happiness in the context of the Buddha Dharma acquired from this study may be used for further study.

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