

Short & Long Term Practice Perspectives On Emotions

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We are emotional beings. Our feelings of pleasure or pain provoke different emotions, and our emotions motivate us to act. Some of our emotions are afflictive and unrealistic; others are more realistic and beneficial.

As a result, some of our actions bring more pain, while others bring happiness. Learning to differentiate destructive from constructive emotions so we can subdue the former and nourish the latter is a worthy endeavor on a personal as well as a societal level.

While both Buddhism and psychology seek to help people have more happiness and fulfillment, and decrease their unhappiness and misery, they differ somewhat in what they consider positive and negative emotions.

Some psychologists and scientists I have spoken with say that a negative emotion is one that feels bad and makes the person unhappy at the time it is manifest in the mind. A positive emotion makes the person feel happy at the time it is manifest.

In Buddhism, what differentiates positive and negative emotions is not our immediate feeling of happiness or discomfort but the happiness or suffering that is the long-term result of those emotions. That is because the long-term effects of our actions are considered more important than their short-term effects, which tend to be fleeting in comparison. If, in the long term, an emotion produces unpleasant experiences, it is considered negative; if it brings happiness in the long term, it is positive.

Buddhism explains that virtuous (positive, constructive, wholesome) emotions lead to happiness in the long term, while nonvirtuous (negative, destructive, unwholesome) emotions lead to suffering.