

# HANKERING FOR A HIGHER QUALITY OF LIFE

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## Opening Reading

from Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Belief*

The word “Satan” in Hebrew means “to oppose, to plot against.” In the book of Job, Satan is spoken of as the “adversary.” The meaning of the Greek *diabolos* (translated into English as “devil”) is “one who throws something across one’s path....

In both the Abrahamic and Buddhist traditions, the path serves as a metaphor of freedom, while the devil stands for whatever inhibits that freedom....

The path is a cipher of meaning and purpose. One’s own “path in life” is a convenient way of saying what one’s existence is *for*. It sums up all that we value and aspire to. It lets us envision our remaining years as a trajectory stretching ahead on which to realize our hopes. It enables us to stay focused on priorities. Whereas to have “lost one’s way” is to have lost a guiding vision.... A path is a space where nothing gets in the way....

Progress along the Buddhist path to awakening is said to be “obstructed” by the devil of compulsions. A compulsion is any mental or emotional state that...disturbs, distracts or captivates us.... Compulsions obstruct the path by monopolizing consciousness. The hypnotic fascination they exert prevents us from attending to anything else.... Compulsions make us lose sight of our goal and they also inwardly paralyze us. To escape their grip... allows the boundless diversity of phenomena to pour into our lives in creative profusion and abundance.

**\*\* SERMON – PART ONE \*\***

How do people in today's world typically envision the good life? Open your internet browser and punch in those two words – good life -- and note the images that appear: photos of people lolling by the seashore, drinking champagne, driving expensive sports cars, being pampered by masseurs, skiing or skydiving. The depictions include big bouquets of long-stemmed roses, diamond necklaces, wads of cash, impeccably furnished penthouses – all representations of over-the-top luxury and once-in-a-lifetime vacations. If this is the principle way in which we conceive of the good life, is it any wonder that so many people feel deprived, cheated and dissatisfied?

Even in a country as materially blessed as the United States, depression, apathy, interpersonal violence, divorce, vocational dissatisfaction, restlessness, and anxiety have reached epidemic proportions. According to University of North Carolina psychologist **Barbara Frederickson**, only 20% of Americans are currently flourishing, according to recent data. To “flourish” a person must both express satisfaction with their life and be functioning well within it. Most Americans do not meet those criteria.

Moreover, studies of mental health in 14 developed nations reveal the highest level of depression right here in the U.S. Ironically, **Peter Gomes** remarks, our distress may be more closely tied to the “unsatisfying nature of our system’s success” than to any discernable failure. For many years our social and economic systems have done precisely what it was designed to do but that has not made us happy campers.

Needing, as all human beings do, a sense of meaning and purpose we have “lost our way,” our path to better living blocked by what **Stephen Batchelor** calls the “devil of our compulsions.”

Although the symptoms are perhaps more obvious and better documented today, the malady is hardly a new one. More than a century and a half ago, that astute visitor from

France, **Alexis de Tocqueville**, anticipated this development when he reflected on the “strange melancholy which often haunts the inhabitants of democratic countries in the very midst of their abundance.” So are we ready to wise up, or will we remain stuck in patterns of behavior that ultimately are inimical to human happiness? We desperately need a civilization that provides an opportunity for its members not only to survive materially, but to thrive emotionally and spiritually – in other words, to experience life’s redemptive possibilities.

Buddhist teachings describe perpetually dissatisfied, grasping, overanxious people as “hungry ghosts.” As much as they long for happiness and the experience of true contentment, these sad individuals are unenlightened about how an abiding sense of well-being might be secured. Moreover, they haven’t acquired the tools or the self-discipline to tap into these wellsprings of nourishment. The “hungry ghost” subsists, therefore, on the deceptively thin fare its culture provides – easily appropriated pleasures that dull the cravings but do not satisfy them. The habit of happiness, beauty that is more than skin-deep, and trustworthy relationships all lie beyond the ghost’s reach and are usually beyond its ken.

In the Chinese language, the two words *pin* and *tan* look very similar on the printed page. The first means “greed,” and the other stands for “poverty.” This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma of the hungry ghost: greedy for experiences and possessions to fill its emptiness; yet for all the effort the ghost expends, it still feels impoverished. The hungry ghost may compensate for its emptiness through the compulsive quest for pleasure and prestige, but it is unlikely to find in such pursuits any antidote for its chronic discontent. **Emile Henry Gauvreau** captures the spirit of this Buddhist metaphor when he writes,

I was part of that strange race of people aptly described as spending their lives doing things they detest to make money they don’t want to buy things they don’t need to

impress people they don't like.

The promising road maps offered by our hard-won consumerist culture have too often led us down blind alleys and into cul-de-sacs. Novelty, excitement, sensory stimulation, and satiation are supplied in abundance, but in terms of what human beings truly want and need, the systems we have devised have proved less than salutary.

Many studies have confirmed that beyond a certain modest level of attainment the correlation between material prosperity and happiness doesn't get any stronger. In fact, the extraordinarily wealthy person's subjective sense of well-being differs little from that of a solidly middle-class citizen. What seems to bump the happiness quotient up are factors only marginally related to money: good health, dependable relationships, personal integrity, altruistic service, feelings of belonging, a sense of calling, and the ability to savor the moment without regret or anxiety.

From a historical standpoint, our contemporary, consumer-oriented culture's conception of the good life is probably the exception rather than the rule. As cultural geographer **Yi Fu Tuan's** studies indicate, physical comfort "is without doubt a component of the good life," but by itself is hardly sufficient. Moreover, only a modicum of comfort is required for human beings to experience a sense of physical well-being.

**Yi Fu Tuan** cites the example of a traditional Mongolian family, the day's chores accomplished, enjoying the evening meal together in the snug confines of their yurt. They play music, sing, tell stories, and are grateful for protection from the outside elements. By contrast, many of the royal and very rich have been disappointed to find their grand mansions and castles bereft of comfort and less emotionally satisfying than a modest craftsman bungalow.

Cultural conceptions of the good life do vary, but certain features remain fairly consistent. Physical vitality is an unalloyed blessing. Intimacy – physical, emotional, or intellectual – makes a big difference. Remember the last time you had a deep and meaningful conversation with someone and how satisfying that felt? “A meeting of minds can be as...intoxicating as a meeting of bodies,” **Yi Fu Tuan** writes.

Rendering service, enhancing the well-being of others, also contributes to our sense of life’s goodness. Self-aggrandizing behavior, on the other hand, may actually diminish rather than increase a person’s happiness. **Yi Fu Tuan** offers the example of a repairman who was called to fix a television for a family with several young children. Normally, the repairman said, I just get paid for what I do, but my job satisfaction was magnified by the children’s open expression of gratitude. Knowing that he had made them happy made him happy.

**Yi Fu Tuan** also mentions “having a home base” – an attachment not just to people but to place – as something most previous generations associated with the good life. Engaging in productive labor that serves a valid purpose can be very enriching – particularly when performed in the company of others who are also invested in the enterprise.

The ancient Greek lawmaker **Solon** once described the happy person as one who “is moderately furnished with externals, but has done noble acts and acted temperately” – a statement that aptly summarizes the forgoing observations. Please join me now in singing our Hymn of Affirmation, # 89.

## Second Reading

From David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*

In the autumn of 1985, a strong hurricane ripped across suburban Long Island, where I was then living as a student. For several days afterward much of the populace was without electricity; power lines were down, telephone lines were broken, and the roads were strewn with toppled trees. People had to walk to their jobs and whatever shops were still open. We began encountering each other on the streets “in person” instead of by telephone.

In the absence of automobiles and their loud engines, the rhythms of the crickets and birdsong became clearly audible. Flocks were migrating south for the winter, and many of us found ourselves simply listening, with new and childlike curiosity, to the ripples of song in the still-standing trees and the fields.

And at night the sky was studded with stars! Many children, their eyes no longer blocked by the glare of houselights and street-lamps, saw the Milky Way for the first time, and were astonished. For those few days and nights our town became a community aware of its place in an encompassing cosmos. Even our noses seemed to come awake, the fresh smells from the ocean somehow more vibrant and salty.

The breakdown of our technologies had forced a return to our senses, and hence to the natural landscape in which those senses are so profoundly embedded. We suddenly found ourselves inhabiting a sensuous world that had been waiting, for years, at the very fringe of our awareness – an intimate terrain infused by birdsong, salt spray and the light of the distant stars.

## **\*\* SERMON – PART 2 \*\***

When I think of “the good life” and what needs to come into play in order to create and sustain it, four basic precepts or behavioral principles come to mind: Paying Attention,

Staying Put, Exercising Patience and Practicing Prudence.

The willingness and ability to “*pay attention*” is indispensable. Regrettably, among the mental skills Western culture typically encourages, attentiveness is given short shrift. Little, if any, effort is made to inculcate the skill in school, yet it is the cornerstone of any truly successful undertaking.

In his famous essay *All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, **Robert Fulghum** draws our attention to the word “LOOK” that figured so prominently in those old Dick and Jane elementary readers. It is indisputably the biggest word of all, Fulghum argues, because “everything you need to know is in there somewhere: the Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation, ecology and politics, and sane living.” That being the case, what could be more important than teaching young people to attend?

Human beings pay a stiff penalty when they lack this skill. In fact, we betray our own bodies. **Will Johnson**, directs the Institute for Embodiment Training in British Columbia, and his research with human subjects has convinced him that the average person is aware of only 5 to 15 percent of his or her bodily sensations. Most of what the physical self is sensing and experiencing doesn’t register; we are to a startling degree “numb.” The source of the problem, Johnson maintains, lies “upstairs”: we spend so much time ruminating, daydreaming, worrying, problem solving, speculating, that we render ourselves oblivious to the body’s complaints and its pleasures.

On the one hand, we gradually become inured to the life-enhancing overtures of the surrounding sentient world. More gravely, perhaps, physical numbness and insensitivity prevent us from noticing the onset of illness and increase the likelihood of serious accident.

Another word for attention is “mindfulness,” which ancient Chinese sages contrasted with its opposite – inattentiveness and distraction. When we are not fully present, everything that

lends savor to existence is cut off – we are literally “killing life” the sages cautioned. Each instant offers a singular encounter with an environment that is constantly changing, continually generating new surprises, creating fresh impressions. One who has learned truly to attend will never be bored, never be jaded, and never feel cheated by life.

“Empty your faculties and listen with your whole being,” Chuang Tzu recommends, and notice the difference in your powers of observation, your relationships and your enterprises.

A second key to successful, sustainable living is the willingness to “***Stay Put.***” The celebrated novelist Wallace Stegner once complained that almost since its inception American culture has encouraged its citizens to “get up and get out.” The promise of greener pastures or greater adventure seduces us into leaving our ancestral homes. But, as **Stegner** wrote:

Neither the country nor the society we build out of it can be healthy if we don’t stop raiding and running. We must learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership, but of belonging.

The average American pulls up stakes and heads for a new home, neighborhood or community every seven years. This ever-increasing transiency is one of the major reasons our families, communities and ecologies have become unsustainable. Rather than create viable livelihoods and livable communities where they already are, Americans have always hankered for a more perfect environment. “The promised land has always been over the next ridge, or at the end of the trail, never under our feet,” **Scott Russell Sanders** writes.

There are legitimate reasons for “getting up and out” including loss of local employment, the pursuit of higher education and environmentally-related health concerns. Nevertheless, much of our movement appears to be based on personal preference rather than necessity.

Most communities owe their health and beauty to what **Stegner** calls “stickers” -- people who’ve been around long enough to know that their community actually has a character. Over the years they have learned something of the forces that shaped it, are aware of its unique and irreplaceable qualities, have grown to appreciate its long-standing traditions and know what’s required to preserve its important cultural assets. It is only by knowing a place, its past and its present, that we grow to treasure it and are motivated to care for it.

Even a peripatetic globe-trotter like travel writer **Pico Iyer** – a man who once proudly declared himself a citizen of the world equally at home in a Bangkok airport and a Los Angeles McDonald’s – has ruefully conceded that “The unhappiest people I know are often the ones in motion, encouraged to search for a utopia outside themselves.” **Pico Iyer** appears to have reached the same conclusion as **Simon Weil** who once wrote that “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”

“Staying put” also implies **perseverance**, a virtue that we also tend to underestimate but from which we can derive considerable life satisfaction. Take, for example, the ability to read a score and play an instrument. Many of us were required to study music as children; and if you were like me, you hated the imposed discipline, were disinclined to practice, and abandoned the enterprise at the earliest opportunity.

An unwise decision, for you see, few activities provide as much sustained pleasure as playing a musical instrument. Whatever dissatisfaction one might feel toward a job or relationship, music always offers a reliable and satisfying diversion. It is a great redeemer, as the slaves who composed America’s great spirituals knew quite well. Throughout life, music

can serve as a source of private pleasure and as a social lubricant as we find opportunities to play with others at parties or at family gatherings.

The good news is, practically anyone can learn to play, but relatively few are persistent enough to develop real musical competence. We are plagued with restlessness, which the Buddha identified as one of the five most potent hindrances to human happiness over 2000 years ago.

To “stay put” requires more than a modicum of *patience*, the third of our behavioral principles. Impatience is epidemic these days and is most noticeable on America’s streets and highways. People’s respect for one other all but disappears the minute they merge into the flow of traffic. No matter how cordial and considerate folks might be within the charmed circle of family and friends, on the streets they act more like stock-car jockeys at Talladega. Impatience is antithetical to safety, civility and seriously jeopardizes our sense of community.

People who are continually in a hurry lose the capacity to reflect meaningfully on their own actions, and thus they find it difficult to maintain their core values in challenging circumstances. The **Dalai Lama** has likened patience to a muscle, and like any muscle it can be significantly strengthened through exercise. If your ambition is to acquire tranquility and calmness, an enhanced ability to face adversity, and greater tolerance and acceptance of others, “Put the practice of patience at the heart of your daily life,” the **Dalai Lama** urges.

At no time is this more important than when we’ve experienced a heavy loss. In former times a lengthy period was sanctioned for recovery from the death of a loved one. Today, however, people are often made to feel guilty if they mourn and mope for more than a few months. “Get over it and get on with life” is the not-so-subtle message our impatient civilization sends the bereaved.

This is a dangerous trend, for studies have shown that foreshortened mourning has an adverse affect on the survivor's mental and emotional well-being. "Integrating loss into the depths of one's soul does not take place in sound bites," the noted grief counselor **Alan Wolfelt** warns. Individuals should be allowed to do this demanding work in their own way and without feeling pressured.

Unfortunately, contemporary managed care, with its emphasis on rapid treatment and recovery, seeks to curtail the grief process. "Blessed are those who mourn quickly and efficiently in response to abbreviated counseling techniques, for they shall meet our criteria for successful treatment," is how **Wolfelt** rephrases the Beatitudes. In this area and a few others less efficiency and more patience would seem to be in order.

Patience implies and helps support *prudence*, the fourth key to a higher quality of life. It's a rather quaint sounding term and is often equated with "economy", "thrift" or "husbandry." The prudent individual or collective keeps track of resources and resists the temptation, as the *Tao Te Ching* puts it, to "overreach, overuse, overspend." Planning intelligently for the future is one of the hallmarks of prudence. This doesn't mean fretting constantly about what tomorrow holds in store, obsessing over the possibility of losing our assets. It means sizing up the future and setting meaningful priorities.

Again, it is not a skill many Americans possess. With regard to family economics, **Bill McKibben** observes,

...only 20% of Americans are currently "planners" that save toward a quantitative goal. The rest – "strugglers," "impulsives," and "deniers" – leave their future more or less to fate....

Prudence is not as bland or lacking in feeling-tone as that unadorned term might suggest. The genuinely prudent individual is just as concerned with what makes the heart sing as with careful planning and proper management of the purse strings. It's about discernment – making decisions whereby the whole person and the whole planet are well served and their futures ensured.

What is it that gives men and women their greatest sense of inner satisfaction and overall well-being? Do our objectives make sense, and are we putting sufficient thought and energy into areas that matter the most? Perhaps the good life eludes us because we lack proper regard for the basics: we eat too much of the wrong things, aren't very conscientious about exercise, work too long and hard and take our loved ones for granted. Prudence tells us that in order to thrive, these are the areas in which we ought to be making a greater investment. This is what will keep the “hungry ghost” at bay and open up the true wellsprings of human health and happiness.

Paying attention, staying put, exercising patience, practicing prudence – four keys to acquiring the good life and making it last. They've worked for me, and I would wager they can work for you.