

Maintaining Optimism in the Modern World

asked by Wendy Gist

In light of current events, many would consider a perpetually optimistic person as deranged or living in the world of absurdity. However, leading life as a pessimist does not appear to be a viable option if one intends to gain a deeper, below the surface, understanding of life. Then, the question is, how can one practice authentic optimism in a world that seems so full of despair? David L. Gardiner, Ph.D., associate professor of Religion at Colorado College in Colorado Springs, CO, sheds light on what at first glance appears to be a paradox. Dr. Gardiner's areas of expertise are Buddhism, Japanese culture, and the religions of China and Japan. In a recent interview, Dr. Gardiner had this to say about optimism in the modern world:

Q: In a world that seems full of despair, or as the Buddhist put it, when all life is suffering, is it possible to maintain a healthy and optimistic worldview.



Dr. Gardiner: The question seems to equate the word healthy with optimistic, which is not always a Buddhist view. Additionally, Buddhists do NOT say that all life is suffering. Buddha's teaching was more subtle than this. He said that all life is conjoined with suffering, which is inevitable. To recognize that this concept is healthy because it is a realistic attitude, and it helps one from becoming too despondent when things are "down" because you are supposed to understand that "this is just the way it is, sometimes." Because Buddhists believe in the force of Karma, they tend not to be pessimistic at all. The teachings on Karma say that our actions (of body, speech, and thoughts) have an impact on our lives that cannot be avoided. They teach that much of our present circumstances (our mixture of happiness and suffering) are due to our past choices/decisions/actions. By this, they mean what we've done from childhood until now, as well as what we did in former lives. In part, this teaching is intended to allow a person to develop a sense of responsibility for one's current situation, which in turn can help prevent one from feeling despondently about how unfair and unjust "the world out there is."

At the same time, the teachings on Karma say that our present choices/actions will impact our future very much. So it is not a deterministic or fatalistic view at all. There is great emphasis on the possibility for transformation, for learning from experience what kinds of actions result in what kinds of circumstances. Thus, there is strong emphasis on learning how to be more patient, more mindful, more generous, more compassionate, and so on, because it is understood that these kinds of attitudes/practices are the real source of genuine human contentment (unlike greed and anger, for example). In this sense, Buddhists are rather optimistic because they stress the vast potential for transformation so long as one pays attention to the cause and effect of one's actions in the world.



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Q: How is it possible to maintain an optimistic worldview in the face of reality? (i.e. global warming, inevitability of death, war.)

Dr. Gardiner: Well, I think a Buddhist view is a balanced one. Sadness, and even some constructive anger, might be seen as appropriate considering the devastation of our environment and the terrible destruction of species on our planet that human development has caused. The Buddhist view on Karma and on the potential for learning to alter the patterns of one's behavior holds room for a positive attitude as well. Considering population growth, and in the U.S. an overabundant lifestyle that is truly unnecessary as a source of lasting happiness, we cannot sustain this manner of waste and harm to humanity and the earth. If people can see how awful it is to continue in the manner that "modern" civilization has been in for so long, then they can develop more sensible, gentle, responsible ways of living that will eventually lead to a better world, externally and internally, for all the inhabitants of our planet.

Q: How do you keep a positive outlook during major life setbacks?

Example: A loved one who has been in a major car accident, your honor roll teenager who has taken a turn on the wrong path, a young mother/father dealing with a child in its terrible two's, a person dealing with vindictive in-laws, or one who has been fired from a job with no income to pay the bills?

Dr. Gardiner: The teachings about Karma can help here, but they are not iron-clad. That is, Buddhists say some things that happen may simply be "random" and not the result of Karma (i.e., one's actions in the past). Curiously, both of these teachings—one on responsibility and the other on randomness—suggest that one ought best let go of obsession with "injustice" in some situations because what is happening is just what has to happen. To learn to accept it with humility and love and to move forward, is often the healthiest, and wisest, human response. But this view toward injustice does not extend to urging an attitude that would passively permit harm to come when it is within one's power to prevent it. Here again, Buddhists assert that when one can make things better by acting differently, or by trying to help someone else to act differently (e.g., to persuade someone that their behavior is harmful and so should be stopped), then one should do so.

Q: A skeptic might ask if an eternal optimist is simply delusional. How do you respond?

Dr. Gardiner: Maybe he's right! Who knows for sure? Maybe the skeptic is delusional as well. A true skeptic could not dismiss this possibility either. If he or she denied it, then he or she would no longer be a skeptic. But, again, for a Buddhist, to be "eternally optimistic" is not exactly the recommended view. A balance between hopefulness and sadness seems appropriate. This might be seen as optimistic in some eyes, but Buddhists would say that it is more a matter of being realistic. In addition, a likely Buddhist view is that the real tendencies of humans at times to be greedy and harmful need to be kept in mind, so that blind optimism would be a bit of an extreme attitude.

Q: Can you recommend positive thinking exercises to guard one from pessimists and negative thoughts. When negative influences do nothing but make people doubt their inner strengths, what can you do?

Dr. Gardiner: There are many of these in the Buddhist traditions, and some are really just simple meditations with powerful effects. One such exercise is to reflect on the powerful forces of cause and effect in one's life. This entails a logical look at how certain outcomes, such as wealth or lack of it, health or lack of it, and so on, are the result either of choices one has made or circumstances in which one has inevitably found oneself, such as being born to such-and-such parents, in such-and-such city, or to have gotten bound in a complex relationship with such-and-such person or employer. When one begins to see how situations come to be dependent upon specific causes and conditions, one tends to become a bit softer and less prone to generating debilitating, negative attitudes toward these situations.



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Another exercise is to find a way to rest the mind in a happy state, which can definitely be done with practice. The assumption is that the mind tends to get “stuck” in certain patterns of thinking simply by the force of habit; negative thoughts are very much of this sort at times. So what we need to do is to (1) try to break the habit by cultivating an opposing habit; this is like learning to walk a mile instead of eating a piece of cake if one really wants to lose weight. (2) Just allow a moment of positive mindfulness to “rest” the mind and give it a break from its grind of negative habits. Examples to focus on are things for which one is grateful or proud about from the past or the present, and to hold those things in mind for a while along with a sense of gratitude and appreciation, in order to let that good feeling of “loving kindness” that wishes for the well-being and happiness of another or of oneself. This is actually a detailed practice, but it can be learned easily. Like the previous exercise, when practiced, it definitely brings to our lives a genuine sense of contentment, of ease and of happiness.

It is very interesting, and I think significant, that we seem to find great comfort in caring for one another. To develop this habit more strongly (and how do we develop any habits except by practice?) is one key Buddhist approach. In response to the hypothetical critique that such exercises are only in the imagination, so what impact can they have, Buddhist would simply remind us that most all of life is lived in our mind, in our thoughts, in our images of the past and of the future. If it is habitual ways of indulging in negative thoughts, or imaginings that we want to counter, what better way than to cultivate via an intentional practice of the opposite habits of mind? The fact is, these practices really do work.

Q: How do people stay positive in a society that is increasingly superficial?

Dr. Gardiner: In general, the best way is to keep in mind the potential for transformation. It is very helpful for this to work by having models in one’s life or mind. This might mean trying hard to keep around some people whom one truly respects for their good qualities of depth: their generosity, honesty, compassion and so on. One can learn to be more determined to associate with such people because of the positive effect they have. In addition, whether one can be very successful at having such friends or not, one can also take an example of a person from the past, or from the present but who is not a friend, and reflect on their goodness and lack of superficiality. For example, one might have a picture of Mother Theresa, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jesus, or the Dalai Lama around to remind one of the tremendous capacities that human beings have for manifesting remarkable qualities of depth and goodness. This might be a practice that entails “faith,” yet it is reasonable faith based on certain know-

edge that such goodness really is possible for humans. To recall this on a regular basis can be very uplifting and is a source of strength and hope.

Q: Depression characterizes, and is often the result of, a chemical imbalance. Couldn’t a habitually optimistic outlook be viewed within the same biochemical framework? If so, what are the implications?

Dr. Gardiner: Yes, it does seem that chemicals in the brain might be deeply interconnected with many of our mental and emotional states. This is clear just in terms of how we know that certain drugs, whether alcohol or anti-depressants, clearly affect our mental states. However, this fact alone does not prove that all mental states are only the result of chemical processes. In other words, it does not establish a simple relationship of causality. It only demonstrates some causality in some cases and might best be seen as revealing correlations. Since it is also clearly the case that merely through strong determination, through encouragement, and through effort, one can definitely transform one’s ways of thinking and acting for the better. It is very important that we hold out for the view that mind matters, also. If we do not, and if we then just buy into a kind of scientific materialism that asserts that everything—whether good or bad—is merely the result of chemicals, what have we left for our humanity? Where is our responsibility? Where is our joy?

So, I think that the scientific materialism that undergirds much of modern neuroscience is not only bad science because its assertions are actually only hypotheses and not fully established, but this scientific materialism ultimately defeats itself by pulling the rug out from any possible sense of purpose or meaning, even its own purpose or meaning. Chemicals cannot have purpose or meaning. Only beings with minds can have that. Therefore, if such forms of science want to assert a purpose, then they also have to allow that minds are at work in the process.

Q: Does optimism usually tie into a religion or philosophy or is it simply a personal attitude?

Dr. Gardiner: Both! In the Buddhist tradition, it is taught that one key goal is to practice the cultivation of attitudes that genuinely lead to well being, so that they become habitual. This is what is meant by “building character.” I think most religions urge very similar modes of working on life.

Wendy Gist, MS is a Southwest-based freelance writer. She contributes articles to several leading publications such as Alternative Medicine, Herbs for Health, Her Sports and Fitness, Island Gourmet and Well-Being Journal.