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English Review of Dissertation

The initial motivation for writing my dissertation stems from the concept of happiness. Happiness appears to be a timeless pursuit of humanity, and its significance in life is rarely denied by anyone. In fact, humans may possess an innate instinct to chase after happiness. Over 2,400 years ago, Aristotle pointed out that the pursuit of true happiness is the highest goal of human life. Similarly, Śākyamuni Buddha acknowledged that all sentient beings inherently desire peace and joy, emphasising that happiness is of critical importance to their existence.

Selection of the Topic

Positive psychology, as a major branch of modern psychology, has gradually become a focal point in academic and societal discussions since its emergence in the late 20th century. It not only represents a revolution in psychological science but also reconstructs humanity's definition and understanding of a 'flourishing life'. Both academia and society recognise its considerable influence and status.

Buddhism, as a 2,500-year-old system of wisdom, demonstrates unique vitality in addressing modern dilemmas. Its significance and value are deeply rooted in profound insights into the nature of human existence.

Therefore, I decided to conduct a comparative study on the similarities and differences between positive psychology and Buddhism in exploring the core concepts of happiness. I aim to provide some guidance for modern individuals seeking direction in their pursuit of happiness.

Introduction to the Topic

Martin Seligman, regarded as the father of modern positive psychology, proposed the PERMA model in his 2011 book *Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. This model identifies five elements that contribute to well-being: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment.

In his work, Seligman distinguishes between sensory pleasure and higher-level happiness. He explains that sensory pleasures are immediate but short-lived. For example, the comfort of a hot bath after being covered in mud, the fresh scent of grass after summer rain, or the warmth of sitting by a roaring fire on a winter night, these are all physical, transient pleasures. However, building life's joys solely on sensory satisfaction is challenging because such pleasures fade quickly once the external stimuli disappear. Moreover, humans easily develop a tolerance for these experiences, requiring increasingly intense or frequent stimuli to achieve the same level of satisfaction.

In contrast, meaning is fundamentally different. As a more enduring sensation, it originates from our thoughts and interpretations. The power of meaning lies in our strengths and virtues. Therefore, within the PERMA model, 'Meaning' holds a pivotal position. My research will delve deeply into this element.

In Buddhism, the term 'happiness' (Sukha in Sanskrit) is rarely explicitly used in classical texts. Instead, concepts related to happiness are often discussed through the

lens of ‘pleasure’. The Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra categorises pleasure into non-noble wealth-derived pleasure and noble wealth-derived pleasure.

Non-noble wealth-derived pleasure corresponds to Kāma (sensual desires). In the Saṃyuktāgama Sutra, the Buddha teaches that suffering arises when beings become attached to transient conditions of pleasure, which inevitably change or cease. In the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha uses the analogy of a skin patient scratching or burning their wounds for temporary relief. Just as the skin patient’s pain persists until the disease is cured, beings trapped in sensual desires experience fleeting satisfaction but remain bound to suffering. Buddhism rejects such pleasures, urging practitioners to transcend attachment to illusory, destructive desires.

Given this rejection, my research focuses on noble wealth-derived pleasure. According to the Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra, this type of pleasure is rooted in the Seven Noble Wealths (Saptadhana): faith (Śraddhā), morality (Śīla), shame (Apatrāpya), fear of blame (Apatrāpya), learning (Śruta), equanimity (Upekṣā), and wisdom (Prajñā).

Due to space limitations, I cannot compare all seven wealths with each element of the PERMA model. However, since ‘Meaning’ is central to PERMA and ‘Equanimity’ is a core Buddhist practice spanning from initial stages to ultimate liberation, my study selects these two concepts for comparative analysis. Using inductive and comparative methodologies, I systematically explore their theoretical connections and practical distinctions.

Challenges and Solutions

The foremost challenge lies in the substantial theoretical differences between Buddhism and modern psychology. While my understanding of Buddhism is relatively deep, psychology is an almost entirely new field for me. Initially, I was captivated by Epicurean hedonism and Aristotelian eudaimonia (self-realised happiness), intending to contrast these with Buddhist concepts of non-noble wealth-derived pleasure and noble wealth-derived pleasure. However, I soon realised the scope was too broad for a thesis with word limits, preventing in-depth exploration. Consequently, I narrowed my focus to positive psychology, specifically Seligman's PERMA model, enabling a more concentrated and profound study.

Secondly, because Seligman's book does not clearly define each element of the PERMA model, nor does it systematically explain the practical methods for implementing each element. This required me to thoroughly read his original work and independently create a detailed and precise summary.

Furthermore, similarly, although many Buddhist scriptures mention the concept of 'Equanimity', there is also a lack of a systematic and comprehensive definition. This required me to independently summarise and synthesise the concept. Additionally, because the language of Buddhist scriptures is concise and condensed, and far removed from our modern era, the linguistic comprehension challenges needed to be overcome by myself. Moreover, regarding methods for practising 'Equanimity', Buddhist texts similarly lack systematic explanations. I had to carefully search through relevant entries and conduct my own summarisation and synthesis.

And one more significant challenge was comparing two fundamentally different systems. With almost no prior comparative studies between positive psychology and Buddhist theories, I lacked reference materials. However, despite differing subjects, I could adapt frameworks from other cross-disciplinary studies. Ultimately, I compared ‘Meaning’ and ‘Equanimity’ across dimensions such as goal orientation, methodological operations, and scope of practice.

The last difficulty lays in how to integrate the spirit and practices of the two theories. Initially, I even considered abandoning this section, as I doubted my ability to provide constructive ideas or contributions. However, my supervisor emphasised that this was precisely a crucial part of my research. Thus, overcoming my psychological resistance, I calmly conducted a comparative analysis of the two. By identifying differences rooted in their similarities, I further explored possibilities for integration. Regarding proposing new perspectives, I have always been cautious. Yet, this section demanded original, innovative ideas. Therefore, based on objective analysis, I cautiously yet boldly proposed groundbreaking suggestions.

Research Findings

As the core concepts of happiness in positive psychology and Buddhist philosophy, the concepts of ‘Meaning’ and ‘Equanimity’ resonate with each other profoundly in terms of their theoretical connotations, practical approaches, and ultimate goals, and they also display significant differences. Through a systematic comparison and integration of the two concepts, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Shared Pursuits of Transcendence and Inner Transformation

Both ‘Meaning’ and ‘Equanimity’ critique reliance on sensory or mundane pleasures, advocating inner transformation to achieve spiritual transcendence.

They emphasise that ethical behaviour must stem from self-awareness and continuous cultivation, not passive compliance or ritualistic actions.

‘Meaning’ encourages leveraging personal strengths to engage in altruistic, socially beneficial actions, while ‘Equanimity’ focuses on mental discipline to attain non-attachment. Both concepts begin with unlocking human potential and aim to transcend individual limitations.

Differences in Methodology and Practical Orientation

‘Meaning’ relies on concrete tools and step-by-step guidance, grounded in psychological empiricism and practicality.

‘Equanimity’ promotes active practice in daily life and interpersonal interactions but lacks modernised, standardised behavioural guidelines.

‘Meaning’ embraces positive emotions as motivational forces, strengthening social connections and contributions.

‘Equanimity’ requires transcending emotional fluctuations to achieve equanimity and liberation.

‘Meaning’ prioritises worldly happiness and personal growth, reflecting psychology’s ‘worldly’ approach.

‘Equanimity’ seeks ultimate liberation from cyclic suffering, embodying Buddhism’s ‘otherworldly’ orientation.

Complementary and Integration Potential

Structural Integration: Combine PERMA's structured practices (e.g., gratitude journals) with Buddhist equanimity training (e.g., cultivating impartiality) to design exercises like 'Equanimity Gratitude Diaries'.

Personalised Practice: Use psychological assessments (e.g., VIA Survey of Character Strengths) to identify traits like patience or diligence, tailoring Buddhist practices to individual aptitudes for enhanced efficacy.

Philosophical Enrichment: Infuse gratitude practices with Buddhist concepts of 'dedicating merits to all beings', shifting focus from emotional attachment to understanding karmic interdependence.

Expansive Compassion: Extend forgiveness beyond individual offenders to all sentient beings, practising 'equality between friends and foes' (Maitrī-Karuṇā), while applying personal strengths with non-discriminatory acceptance, resonating with the Bodhisattva ideal of benefiting self and others.

The comparative and integrative analysis of 'Meaning' and 'Equanimity' reveals the complementary nature of psychological empiricism and religious-philosophical wisdom. The former provides structured tools for actionable, worldly engagement; the latter infuses transcendent perspectives and ultimate purpose. Their synthesis addresses modern needs for practicality and spiritual depth, offering a path that harmonises societal participation with inner freedom, altruism with wisdom, and temporal achievements with liberation from suffering. This framework not only meets contemporary demands for value-driven living but also fulfils humanity's quest for

existential meaning, advancing both theoretical and methodological innovations in happiness studies.

Implications for Future Research

After analysing and comparing the theories of Western psychologists, I found that the theories of Western psychologists put a lot of emphasis on concrete implementation and practical methods. In comparison, Buddhist theories put more emphasis on the practice of mindfulness. There are many specific practices in Buddhism, but they are relatively less systematic and focused. There are many schools of Buddhism, and each school has its own theories and practices, which are scattered in the voluminous Buddhist scriptures. For modern people who pursue speed and efficiency, it is not so easy to use. This is one of the strengths of Western psychological theories. Take Seligman as an example, he has written the practical methods of the theories in his works in such a concrete way that readers do not need to spend extra effort to use them as soon as they see them. This is where Buddhism can learn from modern psychology.

On the other hand, for the theory of positive psychology, sometimes the scope and target of practice are not as extensive as that of Buddhism, and the mentality of practice is not as transcendent and equal as that of Buddhism, and the orientation of the goal lacks the philosophical depth and the search for the ultimate meaning as compared to that of Buddhism.

By combining psychology's structured pragmatism with Buddhism's holistic wisdom, we may develop diverse, adaptable pathways to well-being, ones that honour both worldly aspirations and transcendent yearnings. Such interdisciplinary efforts could

redefine how humanity pursues happiness, blending ancient insights with modern innovation.

I believe that the differences between the two are not limited to the scope of my research, and that we may be able to compare other psychological theories with Buddhist concepts in order to achieve complementarity and integration, and to provide more paths and possibilities for modern people in their pursuit of happiness and meaning.