

Book Review

Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler
The Art of Happiness at Work
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003

Reviewed by Raymond A. Lemay

In the public sector and in human services particularly, human resources – employees – are the means to the end. The old Defasco steel ad slogan told us “Our product is steel. Our strength is people” and, in the public sector where the product is the crafting of the public good, the adage about *the people* is likely more critical. So what about our people? Are they well enough to be the strength of the system that guarantees the public good? Recent surveys (AOL, 2011; Barrows & Wesson, 2001; Burch and Axworthy, 2010) suggest that not all public servants are satisfied with their roles, and these authors recommend systemic change, suggesting that the employer must reform its human resource practices. Organizational, employee and workplace “wellness” are strategies that put the onus on the employer to create work conditions that promote healthier and happier employees.

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It would seem, however, that the Buddhist tradition, without refuting the possibility of systemic reform, would view such problems from a different and more personal perspective. The Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler weigh in on the issue of employee happiness in a different and interesting way.

The authors of this book had previously collaborated in 1998 on the book *The art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, the purpose of which was to convey to novices the basics of Tibetan Buddhist psychology:

- The purpose of life is happiness.
- Happiness is determined more by the state of one’s mind than by one’s external conditions, circumstances, or events – at least once one’s basic survival needs are met.
- Happiness can be achieved through the systematic training of our hearts and minds, through reshaping our attitudes and outlook.
- The key to happiness is in our hands (p. 1).

In this book they particularize the teaching to work; happiness at work is bound to have an impact on one’s life more generally: we spend a lot of time at work, and Cutler quotes researchers (Harter, Schmidt and Corey Keyes, 2003) who report that “as much as a fifth to a quarter of the variance in adult life satisfaction can be accounted for by satisfaction with work” (p. 188: NB: all page references are to work under review).

The book, however, focuses only on the individual worker, “happiness at work generally from the standpoint of the worker, the employee, and measures they can take to become more satisfied at work through their own efforts, by changing their outlook, increasing self-understanding...” (p. 206). The Dalai Lama adds that this “is only part of the picture. The employer also, the management, the organization, all plays a role in setting the tone of the workplace environment, and have an impact on the happiness of the employees, and of course if we are to discuss wider issues of ethics in business, the economy, and so on, that is another thing...” (p. 206)

The book’s nine chapters discuss various sources of (un)happiness at work and the Dalai Lama proposes ways to address and rectify sources of unhappiness.

Transforming Dissatisfaction at Work

There are many sources of dissatisfaction at work, but a good place to start is with oneself, and one’s attitude. If one doesn’t like a job, then one should change and get another job, or alternatively develop an attitude of contentment. There are undoubtedly worse jobs, and more trying situations. Indeed, one should come to the realization that there are a myriad of factors that make a job satisfying or not. Some of these factors (indeed many) are simply beyond our (or our boss’) control. Cutler asserts that the Dalai Lama has an “unsentimental” (p. 33) view of life difficulties:

There will always be problems in life. It is just not possible to go through life without encountering problems. There is no event from which you get one hundred percent satisfaction, right? Some dissatisfaction will always remain. The better we are able to accept that fact, the better we will be able to cope with life’s disappointments.

Of course this is in ordinary circumstances. If one is the victim of gross injustice, then one should not think that it is simply karma and that one should be content. The Dalai Lama states that “if there is injustice, then I think inaction is the wrong response. The Buddhist texts mention what is called “misplaced tolerance,” or “misplaced forbearance” (p. 19). The word *injustice* is, however, a powerful one, and should apply only in exceptional cases.

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Karma is an often used trendy term that one uses to describe today’s events as being inevitable, a kind of fatalistic judgment on what happens to a person, and how this is merited: what goes around comes around, in a sense. The Dalai Lama points out that an incomplete understanding of karma can be very fatalistic. Buddhists believe that one must take “responsibility for one’s own karma” (p. 142). “The notion of karma is based on the law of cause and effect, the theory that one’s current circumstances are the result of one’s past actions, either in this life or a previous life” (p. 143). The authors point out that the Sanskrit root of the word “karma” means action. “And just as one’s past actions may have contributed to one’s current circumstances, one’s present actions can change one’s future” (p. 143). Thus the fatalistic

understanding of karma should be tempered by the fact that for Buddhists we are viewed as change agents, even of our own karma.

The Human Factor

Happiness at work is very much about relationships. We work with people and not surprisingly, that will be an important source of (dis)satisfaction: “So we should take special care to pay attention to the human relationships at work, how we interact with one another and try to maintain basic human values, even at work” (p. 37). When pressed by Cutler to explain “basic human values” His Holiness adds: “Just basic human goodness. Be a good person, a kind person. Relate to others with warmth, human affection, with honesty and sincerity. Compassion” (p. 37). He does not focus on how others might relate to us, but rather about how we should relate to others. Once again he views us as agents of satisfaction, ours and that of others. It is in one’s best interest to practice such attitudes because “they are for our own benefit” (p. 38). “Often, people wait for the other person to make the first move, but I think that is wrong... you must take some initiative, even your first day on the job, and try to show some friendship to others, introduce yourself, say hello, ask how long have you worked here and so on” (p. 39). Dealing with unpleasant co-workers requires the same proactive approach; such people are also subject to suffering. “They are worthy of compassion on that basis, on the basis of being a fellow human being” (p. 45).

Making Money

Not surprisingly, satisfaction at work is not really about money. Cutler references some social science research that confirms that social aspects and how one feels valued at work contribute more to satisfaction. There are subjective (inner) and objective (external) factors. Cutler points out that when we use external markers (the amount of money we make, or others opinion of us) to measure our inner worth, we are headed for problems. He tells us that about a third of American workers view financial rewards as the primary purpose of working. The Dalai Lama sees nothing wrong with making money, but it shouldn’t be an end in itself. Money is simply a means. Indeed, as far as money is concerned, the Dalai Lama suggests frugality, “to reduce one’s expenses, to deliberately have more modest desires” (p. 58) as a better option than always trying to make more money. “Our attitudes about money are more important than the amount we make” (p. 63).

Striking a Balance: Boredom and Challenge

Too much challenge, too little challenge and obviously, the Goldilocks solution: just the right amount of challenge. The Dalai Lama is not sure that too much challenge is a problem. He sees in such situations the pleasure of completing (mastering) a great challenge, thus changing the challenge into opportunity, and an opportunity for deepening one’s knowledge of self. Nor is he sure that jobs can be too dull—such jobs allow one to focus on relational aspects or about self understanding for instance the deepening of one’s spiritual practices (Dharma for Buddhists, or prayer for Christians). Indeed the Dalai Lama affirms that people who have routine and even boring jobs can still be happy people (see p. 92).

Flow, which has garnered much research attention in positive psychology and associated with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, means to be totally absorbed in a given task, to the point of losing track of the passage of time. As the Dalai Lama points out flow is dependent on familiarity and task mastery (see p. 83). But his real knock against flow is that it is infrequent and time limited—one would be hard put to make happiness dependent on it. “What we really need is an ongoing source of satisfaction, of happiness” (p.87). Becoming a better person by improving one’s self by reducing jealousy and greed and increasing kindness, compassion and tolerance “are much more important and stable sources of satisfaction” (p. 87). Cutler, who—to illustrate the issues at hand—quotes the research literature and provides examples of people he has met and known, tells of a research professor who was able to achieve flow regularly as he did his research, but was distant, cold and ungenerous with students and colleagues—not a happy man, and not a generator of happiness for others.

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We are all tempted by the latest fad and, in reference to the current popularity of flow theory, he comments “the thing about theories ... is that they may enjoy some popularity for a while, and everybody talks about these things, but then they get replaced, or at least refined by another theory” (p.86).

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, also references the concept or “principle of adaptation” (p. 94) where overtime and with repetition, everything has a tendency to become mundane and boring. There is a point where repetition and mastery reduce the challenge of doing a particular job; “sooner or later we tend to adapt to new conditions and eventually migrate back to our customary levels of day-to-day and moment-to-moment happiness” (p. 94). Cutler references research that suggests that it takes about six months after a happy or traumatic event to return to our usual state of (un)happiness. So even with the issue of boring work, it ends up that it is the subjective experience, and what we end up making of it, that are the critical factors to happiness.

Job, career, and calling

There are three reasons to hold a job: To make money, for advancement and achievement, or for the cause, as a calling. Cutler references research and concludes: “Satisfaction with life may be more dependent on how an employee sees his or her work than on income or occupational prestige” (p. 99).

The Dalai Lama, however, suggests that it might be a bit more complicated than that—in fact, that calling may sometimes subsume all three reasons. He does allow that having a higher purpose “being of some help to other people” (p. 109) is best. However, creativity and achieving mastery—thus improving one’s performance and achieving excellence are also a proper calling. Moreover, sometimes earning money can also be a calling when that money is for supporting one’s loved ones—thus it is not for the money per se but for money as a means to a noble end. Thus persons can view a boring job as a calling and “they can deliberately reflect on providing for

the happiness and comfort of their family, visualize each family member and how this work is providing food and shelter for that individual...” (p. 111).

Every job can be transformed into a calling. A French proverb suggests “Il n’y a pas de sot métier, il n’y a que de sottés gens” (There are no stupid [worthless] trades, only stupid people.) We live in a completely interdependent society where the menial work of some, makes possible the great accomplishments of others. Social workers can come to the aid of less fortunate individuals and astronauts can go into orbit because there are others who raise cattle and grow vegetables, others sell these as grocers and others still do a myriad of other tasks that all contribute to the common good. Calling is not inherent in the job, but in our attitude to whatever we are called upon or end up doing.

Self-Understanding

The Dalai Lama suggests that there are three barriers to self-understanding that intrude on one’s capacity to find happiness at work: a) arrogance and conceit, b) an excessively low opinion of one’s abilities and c) an agitated mind. Self-understanding requires that we always assess the gap between what we do accomplish and what we think we accomplish. He adds that simple stubbornness and thinking one is always right, leads to arrogance and conceit. Clearly in such a case, there is an important gap between one’s appreciation of one’s accomplishments and reality. Elsewhere I’ve read that the incompetent are the last to know, suggesting that at least part of the source of incompetence stems from a lack of self-understanding.

Being too humble, however, is also a problem and is also a sign of a self-awareness problem. Self-improvement can only come if one has a correct estimation of one’s abilities and accomplishments. Excess is a problem in both directions. “...self-understanding requires the elements of honesty and courage in addition to self-examination – it involves coming to an accurate assessment of who one is, to see reality clearly, without exaggeration or distortion” (p. 132).

As for the agitated mind, a bit of discipline and relaxation (through meditation) could help.

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Work and Identity

The discussion turns here on the importance of having a job, how it shapes identity and thus how losing a job can be devastating. One’s job is a vast social role that in modern societies can take up a vast part of one’s identity. The Dalai Lama acknowledges the issue but finds it perplexing. He mentions that there is no word in Tibetan for *unemployment*; that this idea of a job that is something separate from other aspects of life is a bit difficult to understand. The authors don’t seem to go as far as they could about this: the modern separation of the work function from other aspects of life seems to be a product of industrialization and urban life. In primitive and

agrarian societies, there are no 9 to 5 jobs; for instance, hunting and gathering, and farm life are 24/7. Indeed, the idea of choosing one's line of work is also quite modern; people "were usually born into a particular line of work" (p. 161). Life is/was viewed as integrated, and the Dalai Lama is the perfect example of the historical model of personal identity: he was born to his role and "there [is] no separation between his 'personal' life, 'work' life, 'spiritual' life or 'home' life" (p. 200). When asked what he does, the Dalai Lama often states "I do nothing," that he has no job – he is who he is. One doesn't lose or quit a job, rather one dies.

The best safe guard against being too identified to one's job is to focus on the essence of the thing rather than the external forms of the job. One's growth and progress, and the qualities and skills one develops in this or that job (or hobby or athletic pursuit), are things that cannot be taken from us, and indeed can be transported to any other job or activity.

Right Livelihood

This seems fairly straightforward, but here again it is not so much the external (objective) aspects of the work, but what one makes of it mentally. If one works in a munitions factory (manufacturing objects that will inflict harm), one might view that one's participation – in and of itself – is not harmful; livelihood is an issue, if one quits one will be easily replaced – our withdrawal from such activity will be ineffective. Moreover, we are not soldiers who inflict harm, and if we were soldiers, then we are possibly involved in an action of legitimate defense. Despite espousing non-violence (p. 199), the Dalai Lama, the Head of state of the Tibetan government in exile, is no pacifist: "... nations do need weapons for security purposes. Especially in the American case, you look at the fact that in the world there are totalitarian regimes who are against democracy. I think so long as those nations are there, the American military power must remain" (p. 164).

The Buddhist concept of right livelihood means that you strive to engage in an activity that has no potential for being harmful to others, either directly or indirectly. The wrong means of livelihood is often described as any means of livelihood that involves exploitation of others out of negative motives, such as deceitfulness and guile (p. 162).

Buddhism, it would seem (along with Roman Catholicism and other religions), has a just war theory.

Happiness at Work

As we have seen, work takes up much time and contributes greatly to one's identity. For work to contribute to one's happiness, it should be purposeful, make a contribution or be productive. "I believe that a productive activity must be *purposeful* in that it is directed towards a specific goal. In addition, it must be an activity that is *beneficial* and not harmful to the well-being of the members of a given society" (p. 181, italics in original).

Happiness at work will end up being a complex issue, “the individual’s personality, disposition, interests, social setting, and many other factors can all affect one’s satisfaction at work” (p. 195). From a Buddhist point of view, it is also important to consider the interdependence of everything including one’s job. As mentioned earlier, each person’s toil must be viewed as an important contribution to the general welfare of a community, “...there is an interconnected relationship between everything” (p. 199).

The problem might arise when one considers one’s employment separately from anything else: separately from the common good and as one’s contribution to it, but also as separate from one’s other roles. Indeed a happy man would be no different at work than in any other activity or role—he should just be himself in whatever role he happens to be playing (see p. 204).

Conclusion

Public service is no different from other employment opportunities: it requires engagement and mindfulness, and in this Buddhism (and likely other philosophic traditions – stoicism comes to mind) can provide some guidance. Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes subjectivity—what one makes of the world. There is no denial of external reality—of objectivity—and indeed a source of problems is when there is a gap between reality *per se* and one’s estimation of reality. Happiness is to be found in how one interprets the world and especially one’s place in it. The challenge for people living in the modern world is that we tend to take reality (objectivity) much too seriously—it is superficiality and shallowness that lead to misery.

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