Hankering for a Higher Quality of Life
By Michael A. Schuler
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On the Path—Two Perspectives
By Stephen Batchelor
(a Buddhist writer and teacher)

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. Job complains that his diabolic God has "fenced up my way that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness on my paths."

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 does not entail suppressing them but creating a space in which we are freed to let them go, and they are freed to disappear. … Given the space to do so, a compulsion frees itself (which allows) the boundless diversity of phenomena to pour forth in creative profusion and abundance.

Portion of Statement by Cory Mathieu*

When I was young, my parents instilled in me the notion of "service to others." In elementary school, my free afternoons would be spent not running around the park but at the Second Harvest Food Bank sorting peas or sweeping floors. The idea of taking my own time to help others was so common, so without fanfare in my family, that I never actually reflected on the meanings of my actions or even why I chose to volunteer. I don't remember why I signed up for my first of three FUS-sponsored Habitat for Humanity trips, but I do know that the two that followed were … a given. After my first experience in Michigan, I could not imagine my summer without a week dedicated to building houses for others because the experience provided me with a sense of fulfillment nonexistent in my ordinary life.

The irony I have wrestled with when contemplating the notion of "service to others" is that throughout my life my attempts to serve others most often serve me as well. During these Habitat trips I built a roof, hammered nails and pulled weeds, but I also learned to collaborate with my peers, stretch my boundaries, and communicate effectively. … Each year I personally gained so much from the experience that at times I felt selfish. But I now believe that one of the beauties of "service to others" is that selfless giving most often results in unexpected rewards.

Although we spent the majority of our time working on the main project, at times we were presented with opportunities to spend an afternoon addressing smaller needs. For instance, on my second trip our large assignment was to attach siding to a house, but on our last afternoon the site leader asked us to help a different family move furniture into their newly completed house. Though this work only took a couple of hours, the connection I felt in meeting the family and seeing the joy the house brought them greatly outweighed my personal satisfaction in watching the siding grow.

This experience taught me that when serving others, although the large projects may seem more grand and impressive, it is in the small moments when two people connect on an equal basis that the real gift appears. … These trips taught me not to look down on the families in need, but rather to share with them the great happiness that comes in receiving a new home.

With only 19 years of experience, I don't really feel qualified to preach to this congregation, but since this is probably my only chance, please indulge me: Service to others is one of the most important aspects of a complete life. In doing so, one grows and changes in ways that were previously unimaginable.

*Cory Mathieu is a young woman who attended Church School at FUS, Cory is now a college freshman. This was delivered at a worship service last summer.

Reflections

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. A recent Gallup poll found that half of Americans are chronically concerned about money or health, compared with only 17 percent in Denmark. When the World Health Organization and Harvard Medical School studied the rates of depression in 14 developed nations, the U.S. topped the list.

For all our gadgets, gimcracks, and 120 TV channels, we are not 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." A more mature civilization would be conscious of what its own members require in order not just to *survive* materially, but to *thrive* emotionally and spiritually.

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 that often haunts the inhabitants of democratic countries in the 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?

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. This Buddhist metaphor is compelling; it graphically describes a condition that afflicts many Americans. Emile Henry Gauvreau captures the sense of this 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.

Our culture's crude equation of material abundance with happiness presents a real problem. Despite the demonstrable fact that rich people are no more satisfied with their lives than those of modest means, most Americans still hunger for wealth—even if that means putting additional strain on an overburdened planet and placing more of their fellow human beings at grave risk.

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Moreover, "most American consumption is wasteful and contributes little or nothing to our well-being," Jared Diamond says. Our overall quality of life wouldn't suffer a bit and might even improve if we adopted a more responsible and generous set of priorities.

The question is, can human beings truly thrive as individuals if the social, economic, and natural systems to which they belong are not also doing reasonably well? Even those ancient writers who composed the books of the Bible, Dan Hotchkiss observes, were aware of the dangers posed by individual acquisitiveness. "The right use of wealth will be oriented outward toward the community rather than inward to self"—that theme is repeated over and over in the Biblical literature, Hotchkiss tells us.

Canadian writer Margaret Atwood is hopeful that even as it creates discomfort, a prolonged economic downturn might serve to bring society back to its senses. Perhaps people will begin to realize that the most reliable sources of happiness—family, friends, good literature, home-cooked meals, communing with the natural world—mean so much more than the plethora of possessions we've packed into our homes. And perhaps, Atwood writes, "'I' will be spoken less, 'we' will return, as people recognize that there is such a thing as the common good."

As I've already alluded, beyond a certain modest level of achievement the correlation of financial and material well-being with happiness largely disappears. What seems to make human beings reliably happy are 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 chagrined to find that while mansions and castles are impressive, they aren't necessarily inviting, cozy, or comfortable.

Cultural conceptions of the good life do vary, but certain features remain fairly consistent. Robust good health and vitality—even physical exuberance—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. In this respect, self-aggrandizing behavior may actually prove counterproductive, compromising rather than complementing our happiness. Yi Fu Tuan quotes a repairman who contrasts the experience of fixing a television for a house full of appreciative children with other jobs where fee-for-service is his only reward. "Knowing that I made a family happy" magnified the repairman's sense of accomplishment.

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. Even nomadic peoples and wanderers acquire a deep knowledge of the wider regions through which they move, and thus they feel closely connected to their environment. 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 seems to encapsulate Yi Fu Tuan's several points.

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In the late 1940s, the happiness quotient in the United States peaked. The general public felt a profound sense of relief as the war ended and the economy began to recover. But there was something else. Americans had enlisted in a common cause and experienced an unprecedented degree of camaraderie and collaboration. Despite and perhaps *because* of their shared sacrifices, they felt connected. Before long, however, a fever of consumerism and individual acquisitiveness gripped the nation, and by the 1970s Americans were less happy than the citizens of seven other developed nations. Today at least fifteen other countries report a higher level of happiness than ours.

Human beings are social creatures, but our modern credos of rugged individualism and the autonomous pursuit of self-interest have led to a decline in community involvement, neglect of community maintenance, and a darkening of the national mood. Wendell Berry points out that the word "free"—which many of us take to mean "freedom from constraint, obligation, or commitment"—is etymologically related to the word "friend." Both words come from a common Indo-European root that means "dear" or "beloved." "This suggests," Berry writes, "that our 'identity' is located not in the impulse of selfhood but in deliberately maintained connections."

For his book *Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die,* John Izzo interviewed 200 older men and women, and he discovered a number of common threads in those conversations. One had to do with connection. Those who had established a meaningful relationship with some overarching human or biotic community were far more satisfied than those who focused on what Izzo calls the "small self" with its insatiable craving for material possessions, novelty, and excitement.

Jarid Manos's personal evolution confirms that insight. Founder and director of the Great Plains Restoration Council, which recruits disadvantaged youth to work on the restoration of prairies and prairie dog habitat in central Texas, Jarid had pushed drugs and performed prostitution as a rootless and disconnected young man. But even as a child he had been drawn to nature and dreamed of serving as a planetary steward. Finally, the desire to walk that path took possession of Jarid and he began to turn his life around. "I would never have described myself as happy before," he says.

> I didn't smile most of my life. But I do now.... I love my friends, the kids, and the work—the sense that people are coming together in good faith and accepting that it's an imperfect world but still working to improve it every day.

The experience of Jared Manos—or a young woman like Cory Mathieu—demonstrates how "connecting" is closely related to "contributing." The fact is, a person can't connect meaningfully with an ecology or human community unless they are willing to contribute to it. And paradoxically, the time, energy, and resources we invest in our relationships typically add to rather than subtract from the sum of our individual happiness. A broad-based Canadian study revealed a direct correlation between satisfaction and the degree to which persons were willing to support a cause, project or organization they believed in. Those who give have a higher sense of self-worth and feel more secure in themselves than those who withhold. "The happiest elders we interviewed," John Izzo writes,

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> were the least focused on themselves. … I found that the happiest people had lived full lives, had discovered what was important to them, and … had discovered that love, service and connection to larger purpose are the true food of the human soul.

One more "C"—concentration—still remains to be considered and it, too, is related to connection.

"Concentration" in this context means the ability to hold one's attention steady, to resist distractions and the dissipation of energy on activities that have little bearing on our happiness. Research performed by he University of Chicago's Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that if a person can pursue meaningful work in a focused, uninterrupted fashion, it is very likely to deliver a high degree of satisfaction. Some of the best moments in our lives, Csikszentmihalyi writes, are those when our "bodies and minds are stretched to their limits as we are making some supreme voluntary effort to achieve something."

We could make the same observation about the quality of our relationships. If we are preoccupied, flustered, or anxious to cross off the next item on our never-ending to-do list we can be "with" but not really "present" for another person. Connection, whether with our work or the people in our life, requires concentration—a willingness closely to attend.

Unfortunately, our high-tech culture may be having an adverse effect on people's ability to concentrate. Televisions, cell phones, background music are everywhere, interfering with the kind of deep, intimate conversations Yi Fu Tuan described as being so delightful. Likewise, the impulse constantly to check e-mail may prevent us from immersing ourselves fully in a project on our computer. Nicholas Carr, former Senior Editor of the *Harvard Business Review* had been an early fan of information technology. Now he feels that the fast-paced churning of too much data is compromising the individual's ability to "concentrate deeply and be reflective."

If true, this is too bad, for the moments when we're least distracted and most mindful are precisely the ones in which we are likely to experience the most profound pleasure. Any task and any relationship can benefit from the degree of concentration—the quality of the attention—we bring to it. The late Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa observed that "for the [spiritual] warrior, every moment is a challenge to be genuine, and each challenge is delightful." For Trungpa, to be fully conscious, fully aware, and fully present in every phase of life's journey is to be genuine.

Connecting, contributing, concentrating—three principles to keep in mind as we ponder our own life path and the hopes that we have for it. Connecting, contributing, concentrating—principles to also keep in mind as we think about our involvement with *this* community and the values it represents. A higher quality of life is somewhat about the "I" but it's mostly about the "we."