

What Makes a Good Day?

A Secular Buddhist Perspective

Ease as a Measure of a Good Day

Most of us think of a good day in terms of circumstances: pleasant weather, good food, time with people we enjoy, getting something accomplished, or simply having nothing go badly wrong. Buddhism does not deny the importance of pleasant circumstances. But it asks a more interesting question: **how much does the quality of a day depend on what happens, and how much depends on the way we experience what happens?**

For me, the most useful measure of a good day is **ease**. Not constant happiness, excitement, or pleasure, but a general sense that the day was not spent fighting with experience. There may have been frustrations, discomfort, or problems, but there was also some underlying spaciousness. At the end of the day, and ideally at points throughout it, there is a feeling that things were basically okay. The Pali texts name this quality *passaddhi*, the calming or tranquility that appears among the seven factors of awakening.

Ease in this sense is not the same as comfort. A day of grief, lived honestly and without added struggle, can have ease in it. A day full of pleasures spent chasing the next one may have very little.

Two people can have very similar days and experience them quite differently. Imagine being stuck in traffic. At first there is simply the experience: cars aren't moving, your body is sitting in the seat, perhaps you're going to be ten minutes late. Then the mind begins: *This is ridiculous. Why didn't I leave earlier? Why can't these people drive?* You feel your shoulders tighten and your irritation grow. Nothing about the traffic has changed, but your experience has become considerably worse. On another day you may notice the same irritation beginning, recognize that you cannot presently change the traffic, relax your grip on the steering wheel, turn your attention to the music or the sky, and let the moment be what it is. The traffic is still there, but there is more ease.

The Second Arrow

In the Sallatha Sutta (SN 36.6), the Buddha compares a person who meets painful experience to someone struck by an arrow and then struck again by a second one. The first arrow is the pain itself. The second is what the mind adds: resistance, aversion, the story about why this should not be happening. A person who has trained the mind still feels the first arrow, but does not shoot the second.

We shoot the second arrow constantly. A five-minute problem becomes an hour of rumination. You have an unpleasant conversation at 10:00 in the morning, but at 2:00 in the afternoon you're still having it—only now the other person isn't even there. Practice does not eliminate pain, disappointment, or inconvenience. It can help us notice when the original experience has ended but we are continuing to manufacture suffering around it.

Craving also appears in ordinary forms. You're waiting for someone who is five minutes late and notice yourself repeatedly looking at your phone. You want the person to arrive *now*. The interesting part is not whether they should have been on time. It is the immediate experience of wanting reality to be different from what it currently is. The body becomes slightly tense;

attention narrows; the mind keeps reaching into the next few minutes. Sometimes we suddenly recognize what is happening and think, *I'm sitting comfortably. Nothing terrible is happening. I can simply be here until they arrive.* That shift—from needing the moment to change to allowing it to be enough—is itself a return to ease.

Noticing the Pleasant

The other side of this is learning to notice what is already pleasant. Pleasant experience is often quiet. You sit down after standing for a long time and feel the relief in your legs. You step outside and the temperature happens to be perfect. A dog puts his head against you. You take the first sip of coffee in the morning. For a few seconds there is no problem to solve and nothing in particular that you need. Ordinarily we may barely register these moments because the mind is already moving toward something else. Part of practice is becoming more sensitive to these modest forms of pleasure without needing to hold onto them. These small moments of ease may be much more important to the quality of a day than we usually recognize.

Boundless Friendliness

Mettā, often translated as loving-kindness, can also be understood as **boundless friendliness**: a basic orientation of goodwill toward ourselves and others. This does not mean liking everyone, approving of everything, or becoming passive. It means beginning from the stance, *May this person be well. May I be well. May we both be well.*

That orientation can noticeably change ordinary experience. Someone cuts you off in traffic and the automatic reaction may be anger. Boundless friendliness introduces another possibility: *I don't know what is going on in that person's life. I don't have to add hostility to this moment.* Someone is irritable with you, and instead of immediately returning irritation, there may be a little space. Even when we still need to disagree or set a boundary, the interaction can contain less friction.

The same applies inwardly. We make a mistake, forget something, or say something clumsy. A friendlier response does not deny the mistake; it simply avoids turning it into an attack on ourselves. Friendliness often preserves the very thing that makes a day feel good: a sense of inner ease.

Friendliness is the first of the four immeasurables, and the other three extend it. Compassion meets suffering with concern rather than avoidance or judgment. Appreciative joy meets another person's happiness without comparison or envy. Equanimity meets what does not go according to plan without being thrown off balance. Each reduces a particular kind of friction, and together they make ease more available even when circumstances are imperfect.

Being Here for It

The Bhaddekaratta Sutta (MN 131), whose title Thanissaro Bhikkhu renders as “An Auspicious Day,” speaks almost directly to our question. Its verses advise not chasing after the past and not placing hopes on the future, but seeing clearly whatever is present, right here and now. One who lives this way, the sutta says, has had an auspicious day.

We can spend much of a day physically present while mentally somewhere else. You are eating lunch, but barely taste it because you're thinking about something you have to do later. You are walking outside, but the entire walk takes place inside an imaginary conversation. Then something interrupts the thinking—a breeze, the sound of a bird, the sensation of your feet on the

ground—and for a moment you are simply there. Mindfulness need not be mystical. It is partly the ability to return to the life actually occurring.

What We Did

A good day also has an ethical dimension. Sometimes the moment we remember most fondly is not something pleasant that happened to us but something we did. We were impatient with someone and, instead of saying the sharp thing that had already formed in our mind, we stopped. We listened to somebody who needed to talk. We helped a stranger with something trivial. These moments often have their own quiet pleasantness.

A short sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN 3.155) makes the point plainly: whoever acts well in body, speech, and mind in the morning has a good morning; at midday, a good midday; in the evening, a good evening. From a secular Buddhist perspective, generosity, kindness, compassion, and non-harming are not merely rules; they are qualities that tend to make our own experience, and the experience of people around us, less conflicted.

So What Is a Good Day?

Perhaps the measure of a good day is not simply, *Did I get what I wanted?* Better questions might be: Did I notice some of what was good? Did I create unnecessary suffering around what was unpleasant? Was I present for some of my own life? Did I meet myself and others with some friendliness? And perhaps most simply: **Was there some ease in the day, and do I feel some ease as the day comes to an end?**

A good day does not require perfect circumstances. It may simply be a day in which we were a little less caught by craving and resistance, a little more aware of ordinary pleasure, a little friendlier toward ourselves and others, and therefore a little more at ease in our own lives.

Discussion

- Think of a recent good day. What made it good? Was there a sense of ease in it?
- Can you remember a difficult day that nevertheless felt like a good day?
- What small pleasant experiences do you routinely fail to notice?
- What most reliably destroys ease for you: craving, irritation, rumination, comparison, or something else?
- How does friendliness toward yourself or others change the feel of a day?
- Which of the four immeasurables seems most connected with ease for you?
- Is a good day mainly about what happened, or about how you experienced what happened?

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