

BOOK REVIEW

Haemin Sunim (Trans. Charles La Shure). *When Things Don't Go Your Way*

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Penned by the well-known Zen Buddhist master, teacher, and author, the South Korean Haemin Sunim, *When Things Don't Go Your Way* is the latest among his series of books that combine his profound understanding of reality, his life experiences, and his training in Zen Buddhism to illuminate seemingly universal paths that every individual undertakes in their journey towards a fulfilled existence. Following the monumental success of *The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Down* (2017) and *Love for Imperfect Things* (2018) and their respective guideposts for maneuvering the overwhelming demands and challenges of everyday life and embracing oneself and others with all spots and stains, Sunim generously gifts us anew with sprinkles of his sagacity with this new book that aims to sustain his trademark wisdom and grasp of humanity.

In this few more than a couple hundred pages of reflection, Haemin Sunim explains human emotions and experiences that characterize humanity's struggles and challenges. Drawing both from his own personal life, struggles, and challenges and his profound understanding of human life as a Zen teacher and a fellow human being, he masterfully infers where human frailties such as loneliness, heartaches, and uncertainty spring from and, thereafter, draws for his readers a possibility for dealing with them with grace to attain an enlightened life.

This systematic contemplation of Sunim in this work is divided into six chapters. Each chapter presents what Sunim considers an emotionally challenging time that he himself went through and suffered from. In each of these chapters, he shares three essays that consist of his own riveting experiences and his advice to anyone who undergoes these experiences. Every chapter is punctuated with a series of short stanzas that, according to him, capture his "a-ha" moments or "ouch" experiences. Both these essays and strings of quips share a common thread of exploring the human condition with particular highlight on humanity's universal share in disappointment and suffering, a core tenet of Buddhism, in fact, its first noble truth—that life is at its very core, *dukkha* or suffering. He rounds up every chapter then by guiding his readers to shift their attention to advocating for mindfulness and acceptance as one embraces life fully for what it is, mirroring Buddhism's Eightfold Path that leads to the eradication of desire, the root cause of all suffering.

In his first chapter, entitled “When Things Don’t Go Your Way,” Sunim underscores the unifying theme of the book and provides the foundation of the succeeding chapters: acceptance and healthy confrontation of our disappointments and sufferings in life. He begins by posing an uncomfortable question about existence and the equally uncomfortable feelings that humanity constantly experiences: “[c]an you sit still with difficult emotions? Rather than trying to quickly escape from them, are you able to allow them to stay with you and witness how they unfold in your mind” (Sunim, 2024, 2)? In an attempt to cement the axiomatic Buddhist truth that life will always be a combination of joy and pain, victory and defeat, birth, and death, Sunim first invites readers to consider a shift in perspective to finally come to grips with this reality rather than to resist. He counsels that being all right despite things not going one’s way and accepting the negative feelings accompanying these episodes in one’s life is truly the way to go. Sunim embarks on a tour de force of argumentation to drive home the point that suffering is brought about not precisely by life’s externalities but by the human person’s constant rejection and the accompanying attitude towards these externalities. He points out that “[w]e are unhappy because we can’t find peace with what is” (Sunim 2024, 19). We constantly grasp what is not and fail to accept that life is always accompanied by suffering and disappointment. According to him, this is what Buddha calls the dual process of “grasping” and “resisting.” Humanity’s penchant for grasping at something that is not there and avoiding contact with what is there that our mind finds disagreeable. According to him, the more we resist, the more intolerable the situation becomes. According to him, this is what we now know as “stress” (Sunim 2024, 20). He ends the first chapter by inviting his readers to practice gratitude and healthy trust in the universe. By shifting our attention to the good things that happen to us and deciding the universe we want to live in, we are inviting happiness rather than grief.

In the second chapter, “When Your Heart is Aching,” Sunim brings attention to one universal experience of suffering: rejection and unfulfilled expectations from oneself or others. By grounding this chapter on the second noble truth of Buddhism, that suffering is caused by *tanha* or desire, Sunim offers a consideration of humanity’s experience of suffering because of their many forms of desire such as one’s personal desires (a career ambition for example) that may cause rejection, one’s desire for others to be compliant of their desired state from them (one’s expectation from a friend or family), and one’s desire to become something else that they are not (i.e. jealousy arising from comparing oneself with others). Culling ideas from Buddhism and the Indian thinker Jiddu Krishnamurti, Sunim recommends first, one’s focusing on the present moment rather than an inexistent future desire and second, becoming mindful of one’s relationship with another person and of how connected despite differences they may be with one another as the ultimate ways on how to deal with the said negative emotions.

The third chapter, “When Feeling Burned Out and Joyless,” introduces the distinction between small but certain happiness, a term coined by Haruki Murakami, and the common conception of happiness as the attainment of goals or a set of conceived sources of happiness that one determines for oneself. Small but certain happiness refers to small sources of everyday life, such as the aroma of a morning coffee or the bliss of commuting without traffic. The latter may be understood as one’s life’s aspirations, such as wealth, fame, or even the Greek notion of *eudaimonia* or a

fulfilled experience of happiness that demands a lifetime to achieve if Aristotle is to be believed. Instead of focusing on the latter, Sunim encourages readers to consider the former as a constant source of happiness. By setting moving targets for everyday life, humanity is assured better of a life of joy and contentment. Moreover, finding one's sanctuary as a place where one finds joy is introduced, and emphasis on contentment vis-à-vis the participation in a life of dizzying, endless attempts to capture happiness (e.g., in a rat race) is advocated.

The fourth chapter, aptly entitled "When Loneliness Visits," explains loneliness as a product of disconnectedness in the contemporary world. Due to our failure to reveal ourselves to others and the reign of mistrust in the world today, we fail to accept who we are and open up fully to others. The way technology has gained the upper hand in how we connect has produced effects on our connection with other people, and thus, the idea of "being alone together" has risen. Being "alone together" is constantly observed in groups of people such as families and friends sitting down together but all glued to their own gadgets and phones. Sunim reminds us that unless we rise above our attachment to the convenience of technological tools and confront the inconvenience of face-to-face conversations once again, we will be trapped and suffer from eternal loneliness and disconnection. True connection can only surface once we become ready once again to be vulnerable, confront the inconvenience of meeting people, and reveal our true selves.

The last two chapters, "When Facing Uncertainty" and "When Enlightenment Has Yet to Occur," are invitations to consider regaining the confidence to chart our own paths and not what is expected of us. He distinguishes between a genuinely self-contrived self and one that only keeps up with external pressures. Sunim inspires us to be in contact with our inner selves more and find the true healing that can only come if we heal with other people. Inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings, Haemin Sumin writes,

If we first shine the light of loving attention to ourselves and become mindful of the pent-up emotional energy in our body and mind, that energy becomes softer and then gradually melts away... We were born so that we might wake up from the illusion that we all exist separately. (Sumin 2024, 195-196)

Living harmoniously means constantly being aware of oneself and "discovering His peaceful presence within himself" (Sumin 2024, 228). As one of his short stanzas reads,

In the end, you will understand that
the answer to the question you so desperately sought
was not to be found in your destination.
When the time comes,
You will be awakened to the knowledge
That you have had it in your pocket the whole time.
You just have to relax and see what you already have. (Sumin 2024, 220)

Overall, the book is fun to read and a refreshing take on life's realities and vicissitudes. Having met the author and listened to some of his key ideas during his book talk in the Philippines this January, I personally derive a great sense of relief in his consistency and seeming personification of the ideas he espouses in this work. He constantly admonishes people to smile, laugh, breathe, and walk mindfully when faced with life's challenges because, after all, these are, he intimates and consistent with Buddhist tenets, life's constant accompaniment. Indeed, this work succeeds yet again, just like his previous ones, in presenting the core tenets of Zen Buddhism, such as detachment, mindfulness, and enlightenment, in a manner that is accessible, grounded, and practical. True to his background as a former academic who underwent academic training in spirituality from US academic institutions and who has taught in a college in Massachusetts before coming back to South Korea to establish his own Buddhist school, School of Broken Hearts in Seoul, Sunim succeeds in offering a very good introduction to Buddhist thoughts without complicating them with jargons. In one part of the book, for example, Sunim attempts an East-West philosophical comparison of the notion of happiness by zooming in on the Aristotelian and standard Western conception of happiness as a life-long endeavor vis-à-vis the Buddhist, Eastern take that happiness can be an urgent, even commonplace, everyday experience. Peppered with narratives from his own life, the book embodies otherwise abstract Buddhist concepts such as mindfulness, compassion, and connection with other people. His examples and experiences are grounded and familiar, appealing to this reader and probably many others. The accessibility of language that Sunim offers is also one of the crown jewels of this book and, basically, all his works. Absent any high-level abstraction, the speculation in this work lays open a mine of reflection for any reader with a philosophical leaning or otherwise to dig and unearth. Perhaps this is also where the weakness of the book surfaces; it may be difficult for a mind accustomed to the analyticity of the West to take this piece of work as a serious philosophical artifact. Its tendency to generalize human experience can also be seen as its weakness, especially in a world that now constantly celebrates diversity rather than unity. As the bulk of the work is speculative rather than analytic, phenomenological rather than argumentative, the book may not necessarily appeal to some readers who demand verification and the power of reason more than the pulse of the spirit. Yet while the book may appear as a self-help that warms the heart, rather than an academic work that stimulates the mind, it is more than this; it is a philosophical work that exposes the ties that supposedly bind human experiences and an invitation for their greater consideration and humanity's slow turn to embrace life in all its hues. Through the Buddhist themes of acceptance, impermanence, compassion, and mindfulness, Haemin Sunim offers profound insights that are familiar and resonate with many of us in this ever-complex world. In this day and age, maybe this is exactly what many of us need.

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