

The Art of Happiness

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There seems to be a lot of interest in this thing called “happiness.” Last July, Time Magazine put out an issue devoted to the topic. I count myself among those who wonder about the various aspects of what makes up a happy life and, fairly often, seek out readings, poetry, and other sources of wisdom when I feel that I might be losing perspective in my own thoughts. I found this to be a really “big” topic that covers a lot of ground.

Time magazine looked at countries around the world and found that evaluating happiness is a complicated issue. For examples, Singapore has one of the highest GDPs in the world with a low unemployment rate, but is the home to the world’s least positive-minded population. In North America, Canadians score significantly higher than Americans while making considerably less money. Mexicans boast higher-than-average levels of happiness despite enduring a long-running drug war that has claimed thousands of lives.

It seems that different cultures define happiness in different ways. In Europe and North American where independence of the self is a cultural norm, happiness is often construed as a positive attribute—to be pursued through personal striving and achievement. In East Asia, on the other hand, happiness is dependent on positive social relationships. Pursuing personal happiness is seen as potentially damaging and could create envy in others.

Andrew Weil, in his book “Spontaneous Happiness” talks about his observations, along with those of fellow physicians and researchers, that people in less developed countries, such as rural India, Latin America, Africa, etc. assuming that the basic necessities of life were taken care of, and despite lacking the conveniences and comforts we consider crucial, seem to experience less depression and have better emotional health than is found in the developed world. He relates the story of Dr. Russell Greenfield who wrote of the amazing emotional resilience of the people of Haiti after the earthquake that took place there a few years ago. Under the circumstances, they had every reason to be depressed but, for the most part, were full of gratitude for being alive, for what they still had, and repeatedly expressed hope for the future.

The points I bring up in this presentation on happiness do not really bring forth new information, I realize, but as a fellow seeker in our journey of understanding, it sometimes helps to bring up a topic like this for discussion and consideration. So let’s look at the ideas of a number of some of the philosophers, medical professional, etc. who have written on this topic.

The concept of happiness has, in the West, always seems ill defined. Even the work “happy” is derived from the Icelandic *happ*, meaning luck or chance.

I am drawn to the ideas of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism because his writings resonate with me and, although this religion like others, has its share of dogma, ritual, and required belief in supernatural phenomena, the founder of Buddhism was a philosopher and a teacher, not a deity. He spent a lifetime studying the human condition with the goal of trying to understand unhappiness and discontent and possible ways of alleviating what he considered to be “suffering” or “fulfillment.”

In his book, “The Art of Happiness,” from which I took the title for my talk, Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama talks about hope—based on a belief that while attaining genuine and lasting happiness is not easy, it can nevertheless be done. The very purpose of life, he says, is to seek happiness.

He believes that happiness can be achieved through training the mind—a meaning closer to ‘spirit’ which includes intellect and feeling, heart and mind. We are made to seek happiness. It is clear that feelings of love, affection, closeness, and companionship bring happiness—that the underlying nature of human beings is that of compassion and gentleness. We can see how a calm, affectionate, wholesome state of mind has beneficial effects on health and physical well-being. Conversely, feelings of frustration, fear, anger—can be destructive to our health.

He says that happiness is determined more by one’s state of mind than external events. Temporary feeling of elation or tragedy may send us into a period of depression, but sooner or later our level of happiness tends to migrate to a certain baseline. Psychologists call this process *adaptation*. These tendencies persist even under extreme conditions of triumph or disaster. Researchers have found that after the initial high of lottery winners wore off, they returned to their usual range of moment-to-moment-happiness. Other studies have demonstrated that even those who experience catastrophic events such as cancer or blindness typically recover their normal or near normal level of day to day happiness after a period of adjustment. (I’m thinking of the attitudes of the Boston bombing victims.)

Adam Smith had a similar philosophy in his eventual bestseller, The Theory of Moral Sentiment, published in 1759. “A man with a wooden leg suffers, no doubt, and foresees that he must continue to suffer during the remainder of his life, a very considerable inconveniency. He soon comes to view it, however, exactly as every impartial spectator views it; as an inconveniency under which he can enjoy all the ordinary pleasures both of solitude and of society.”

Smith goes on to say that “A great source of both the misery and disorder of human life, seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another—for example the difference between a poor man and a rich one.

According to Adams “happiness consists in tranquility and enjoyment. Without tranquility there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquility there is scarce anything which is not capable of amusing.”

In his book, “Happy” Dr. Ian Smith writes that researchers have found, in their studies that searched for the origins of happiness, that a large part of how happy we are will have been determined by our genetic makeup—something we have no control over. This is called the “happiness set point.” One of the experts, Dr. David Lukken of the University of Minnesota, concluded that 50% of our happiness is determined by our genes, another 10% by our circumstances, and an important 40% is controlled by our actions.

The Dalai Lama talks about the forces that shape our perception and level of satisfaction. He says that “our feelings of contentment are strongly influenced by our tendency to compare.” So, it appears that our feelings of satisfaction depends on who we compare ourselves to. Of course, there will always be people who have more income, are better looking, and are smarter than we are. If we constantly compare ourselves to them, we feel less satisfaction. Researchers, through a number of experiments, have demonstrated that by shifting one’s perspective and contemplating how things could be worse—or looking at people in the world whose circumstances are very harsh or difficult--one’s level of satisfaction would likely be enhanced.

That probably means—getting rid of those excessively happy postings on Facebook or watching the Kardashians.

Aside from spiritual or religious convictions, there are certain important elements that we recognize as contributing to our feeling of joy and happiness. These include good health, our material wealth, and friendships or companions. In order to utilize these elements to create a happy and fulfilled life, a person's state of mind is key. If we use our favorable circumstances in positive ways—for example, helping others, they can help us to achieve a happier life. But, if your mental attitude is a negative one—for example, harboring intense anger or hate, one's good health and material wealth does not allow for feelings of long-term happiness. There are no guarantees that things like wealth alone can bring a person joy or fulfillment.

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus, claims that one of the greatest secret to happiness is to be as independent of external things as possible. Being content with the simple things in life ensures that you will never be disappointed. If you put your stock in unnecessary pleasures like costly luxuries and food, you will be 1) upset when you lose these things, 2) anxious to obtain them, and 3) continually pushed onwards towards greater luxuries and hence greater anxiety and disappointment.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, expressed the opinion that the goal of every human life was to achieve happiness as one flourishing on a long-term basis rather than fleeting pleasure. He also argued that a certain degree of luck plays into happiness. I tend to agree--Oprah Winfrey has often stated that women born in the U.S. are the luckiest women in the world because they have the freedom and opportunity to realize their potential—something that is denied to women in places like the Middle East.

The Dalai Lama writes that “first step in seeking happiness is learning.” We have to learn how negative emotions and behaviors are harmful to us—and society—and how positive emotions are helpful. With this understanding, we are more likely to cherish, develop, and increase the positive emotions. In the process of learning, we are able to identify the feelings and thoughts that are beneficial to us and those that are harmful. **The secret to happiness is, thus, within one's own hands.** The Dalai Lama goes on to say that the systematic training of the mind—the cultivation of happiness or a positive mental state—is possible because of the very structure and function of the brain. Our brains are hardwired with instinctual behaviors that allow us to adapt and respond to our environment in ways that allow us to survive.

By mobilizing our thoughts and practicing new ways of thinking, we can reshape our nerve cells and change the way our brain works—which is the basis for the idea that inner transformation begins with learning and involves the discipline of gradually replacing our “negative conditioning” with “positive conditioning.”

He advocates that we reflect on what is truly of value in life—what gives meaning to our lives, and set our priorities on the basis of that. For our life to be of value, we develop good human qualities—warmth, kindness, and compassion. Then life becomes meaningful and more peaceful—happier.

One approach would be to frame any decision we face by asking the question, “Will this bring me happiness?” This question can be a powerful tool in helping us conduct all areas of our lives—whether to indulge in drugs or another slice of chocolate cake.

Ian Smith asserts that it pays to be an optimist. Optimism is a way to deal with life's hard knocks. An optimist is someone who can look at a situation, assess it for what is really is, and if it's negative, find a way to see at least parts of it in a positive light. The positive disposition of the typical optimist generally means that the impact of life's difficult situations hits less hard and doesn't last as long as it does for those saddled with a gloomy outlook. Also, he or she tends to live longer!

Dr. Smith writes about the difference between innate talent and strengths. A person can decide if they want a particular strength and can acquire it through active intentions such as practicing, reading, or learning from teachers. Understanding your strengths is important because research has shown that one way to increase your happiness and life success is to spend more time using those strengths. People who know what they are good at and who work on developing and employing those strengths are generally the most successful and happy.

Dr. Smith agrees with the Dalai Lama concept of positive conditioning by advocating that we act and think happy. In other words, you are what you think you are. If you think about happiness, then you are likely to adopt behaviors and make decisions that will facilitate your becoming happier. The good thing is that feelings of happiness, just like a virus, can spread to others.

His other suggestions in moving in the direction of living a happy life are to:

- Find your passion. Passions are the pursuits that make us happy in life. Passions involve the big three: meaning, engagement, and pleasure. Several happiness studies have found that pursuing one's passion is certainly high on the list of what makes people happy. Passion resonates to the depths of our souls and gives us a reason to be optimistic. Have you ever noticed that when a person is talking about an activity or project that they are passionate about—how their eyes light up?
- Forgive those who have wronged you. Forgiving does not mean that you condone what that person did, but it is letting go, shredding resentment, and giving up the desire to get even. Forgiveness is more about the forgiver than the person being forgiven. Forgiving frees one from the thoughts that entrap a person in a negative space and allows one to move on.
- The Dalai Lama would add to this list by advocating that ridding oneself of guilt or regret is an important step toward happiness. A person who wholly accepts himself or herself—complete with limitations, foibles, and lapses of judgment—who recognizes a bad situation for what it is, and can respond emotionally but without excessive guilt and regret, can move ahead to help him or herself and others.

In our Western culture, it is hard for us to accept that there is no avoiding the fact that suffering is a part of life. If your basic outlook accepts that suffering is a natural part of our existence, it will undoubtedly make one more tolerant toward the adversities of life. Feelings of grief and anxiety are natural responses to loss. In reality, there are others going through the same experiences—some at a level that is even more tragic. Once you understand that, you no longer feel isolated—feeling that you have been singled out. That might offer some kind of condolence.

Both the Dalai Lama and Andrew Weil talk about the spirituality—that it is important for each individual to embark upon a spiritual path that is best suited to his or her beliefs, natural inclination, family, and cultural background. Dr. Weil goes on to define spirituality as our non-material essence, that aspect of our being that connects us to the essence of all other beings and to everything in the universe. Spirituality and religion share some common ground, but spirituality is not synonymous with religion.

Spirituality can include connecting with nature—with the realization that we are creatures of nature and, also, in appreciating the art and beauty around us. We can learn that happiness is a spontaneous and natural occurrence by watching the actions of our pets. Weil considers this an important component of health and emotional well being.

The Dalai Lama talks about the fact that our intimate attachments to other human beings are the “hub” around which a person’s life revolves—from these a person draws strength and enjoyment of life and, in turn, gives strength and enjoyment to others. Intimacy, in this case, is defined as “the expression of connectivity.” This model of intimacy is based on the willingness to open ourselves to many others—to family, friends, and even strangers—forming genuine deep bonds, based on our common humanity.

To enjoy a happy, joyful life—factors such good health, material goods, friends, etc. are necessary—but we also need to recognize that we depend on other people for all these things, either directly or indirectly. Of course, We UU’s call this being part of the interdependent web of life.

In conclusion, here are some additional things we can do to forge our own path toward happiness:

- Work to maintain a healthy emotional balance.
- Try to keep stress to a minimum
- Take personal criticism with a grain of salt.
- Commit an act of kindness as often as possible
- Make the most of each day
- Don’t take ourselves too seriously
- Understand that we already have everything we need to be happy.

