



TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

# HAPPINESS

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 “Conceptions of Happiness,” by various authors
- 2 “The Evolution of Happiness,” by Joseph Goldstein
- 3 “What Is True Happiness?” an interview with B. Alan Wallace
- 4 “The Pursuit of Happiness,” by Pamela Gayle White
- 5 “The Pleasure Paradox,” an interview with Daniel Gilbert
- 6 “Forget Happiness,” by Ken McLeod
- 7 “The Wisdom of Frogs,” by Clark Strand
- 8 “Passing it On,” by Mark Magill
- 9 “Lighten Up!” by James Baraz
- 10 “The Happiness Metric,” by Madeline Drexler
- 11 “Simple Joy,” by Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara

1

CONCEPTIONS OF  
HAPPINESS

Happiness is awakening to the question “Who is happy, who is unhappy, who lives, and who dies?” True happiness is uncaused, arising from the very nature of being itself. We seek happiness only when we are asleep to our true nature—dreaming that enlightenment is over there, somewhere else. But we are all, already, what we are seeking. Buddhas seeking to be buddhas. Ha! How ridiculous.

—**Adyashanti**, San Francisco Bay area teacher who draws upon Zen and Advaita Vedanta

We’re always trying to free ourselves from misery but we go about it the wrong way. There are a lot of small sweetnesses in life that we ignore because they’re so fleeting. It’s very important to look at what lifts our spirits and brings us happiness—to cherish those moments and cultivate appreciation. Happiness comes from being receptive to whatever arises rather than frantically trying to escape what’s unpleasant.

—**Pema Chödrön**, from *True Happiness*, a Sounds True CD set

Society teaches us that suffering is an enemy. We are constantly encouraged to reject what is unpleasant, disappointing, or difficult. “What’s

all this suffering? Let's be happy! Have fun!" But our suffering is not our enemy. It is only through a relationship with my pain, my sadness, that I can truly know and touch the opposite—my pleasure, my joy, and my happiness.

—**Claude AnShin Thomas**, Zen monk, teacher, and author, *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace*

Happiness is primarily a matter of work that is fulfilling. There are many other factors, of course—a nice marriage or relationship, economic security, intellectual and artistic stimulation, and so on—but if the job is unsatisfactory, nothing else can really compensate.

—**Robert Aitken** (1917–2010), Zen master

Isn't it funny?—I have been studying happiness for at least 40 years, but I still don't have a definition of it. The closest one would be that happiness is the state of mind in which one does not desire to be in any other state. Being deeply involved in the moment, we do not have the opportunity to think about anything but the task at hand—hence, by default we are happy.

—**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**, director, Quality of Life Research Center, Claremont Graduate University, and author, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimum Experience*

Studies my colleagues and I have conducted consistently show that when people focus on money, image, and status, they experience less happiness, vitality, and life satisfaction, and more depression and anxiety. Whereas materialistic pursuits tend to alienate people from their true selves, from others, and from the world at large, "intrinsic" pursuits encourage people to become who they really are and to deeply connect

with other people and the broader world.

—**Tim Kasser**, Professor of Psychology, Knox College, and author, *The High Price of Materialism*

Usually, when we use the word “happiness,” it refers to how we feel when things appear to be going our way. This kind of happiness is superficial and ultimately unsatisfying. During the fourteen years I served in a maximum security federal prison, it was clear that things did not appear to be going my way. Practicing the Buddhist path, grounded in meditation, study, precepts practice, and service, I discovered an abiding cheerfulness and even joy. This kind of happiness is worth pursuing.

—**Fleet Maull**, founder, Prison Mindfulness Institute

I think the best way to think about happiness is that it comes not from the inside or outside but from between. We can best find happiness by getting the conditions of our lives right, conditions that allow us to connect with others, with projects, and with something larger than the self, be it God, a social movement, or a profession with an ennobling tradition, such as teaching, art, medicine, or science.

—**Jonathan Haidt**, Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership, NYU Stern School of Business, and author, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*

My teacher Tsoknyi Rinpoche uses an image I like: “happiness for no reason.” When I think of that I think of being at home in one’s body and mind, in life as it is. That feeling of belonging is quieter than a lot of the flash we try to experience, but it is ours, not someone else’s to give us or to take away. It is steadfast and supportive, unbroken when conditions change. It can flourish in the face of obstacles, it can be there for us when

everything else seems to fail, and it reminds us that each moment of life, delightful or painful, is precious.

—**Sharon Salzberg**, cofounder, Insight Meditation Society, and author, *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation*

Ultimately, happiness is equanimity. While we all seek to be happy, we need to reduce suffering to get there. Neuroscience offers a biological metaphor: the brain areas most active during happiness, in the left prefrontal cortex, contain the neurons that silence disturbing feelings, allowing us to recover from states of emotional suffering more quickly or be less thrown off balance.

—**Daniel Goleman**, author, *Emotional Intelligence*

2

# THE EVOLUTION OF HAPPINESS

The Buddha's steps to nirvana

JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

It is said that after his enlightenment the Buddha was motivated to teach by seeing that all beings were seeking happiness yet out of ignorance were doing the very things that brought them suffering. This aroused his great compassion to point the way to freedom.

The Buddha spoke of different kinds of happiness associated with various stages on the unfolding path of awakening. As we penetrate deeper into the process of opening, the happiness of each stage brings us progressively closer to the highest kind of happiness, the happiness of nibbana, of freedom.

What are the causes and conditions that give rise to each of these stages of happiness? How does this joy come about? The events and circumstances of our lives do not happen by accident; rather they are the result of certain causes and conditions. When we understand the conditions necessary for something to happen, we can begin to take destiny into our own hands.

The first kind of happiness is the one that's most familiar to us—the happiness of sense pleasures. This is the kind of happiness we experience

from being in pleasant surroundings, having good friends, enjoying beautiful sights and sounds and delicious tastes and smells, and having agreeable sensations in the body. Even though these pleasures are impermanent and fleeting, in the moments we're experiencing them, they bring us a certain delight.

According to the Buddha, each of the different kinds of happiness is created or conditioned by a different level of purity. The level that gives rise to sensual happiness is purity of conduct, sometimes called purity of action. Purity of conduct is a fundamental way of coming into a true relationship with ourselves, with other people, and with the world. It has two aspects. The first is the cultivation of generosity—the expression of non-greed and non-clinging. It is greed or attachment that keeps us bound to the wheel of samsara, the cycle of life and death. With every act of giving we weaken the power of grasping. The Buddha once said that if we knew as he did the fruit of giving, we would not let a single meal pass without sharing it, so great is the power of generosity.

The Buddha spoke of three levels of generosity. He called the first beggarly giving—we give the worst of what we have, what we don't want, the leftovers. Even then, we have a lot of doubt: "Should I give it? Shouldn't I? Next year I'll probably have a use for it." The next level is friendly giving—we give what we would use for ourselves, and we give it with more spontaneity and ease, with more joy in the mind. The highest kind of generosity is queenly or kingly giving. The mind takes delight in offering the best of what we have, giving what we value most. This is the perfection of generosity.

Generosity takes many forms—we may give our time, our energy, our material possessions, our love. All are expressions of caring, of compassion, of connection, and of renunciation—the ability to let go. The beauty of generosity is that it not only brings us happiness in the mo-



ment—we feel good when we give—but it is also the cause for happiness to arise in the future.

The other aspect of purity of conduct is *sila*, the Pali word for morality. In the Buddha's teaching there are five precepts that lay people follow: not killing, not stealing, not committing sexual misconduct, not using wrong speech—false or harsh speech—and not taking intoxicants, which cloud or delude the mind. The underlying principle is non-harming—of ourselves, other people, and the environment.

Just as generosity is a practice, so, too, is commitment to the precepts. Consciously practicing them fosters wakefulness and keeps us from simply acting out the habit patterns of our conditioning. The precepts serve as a reference point, giving us some clarity in understanding whether our behavior is wholesome or unwholesome. They are not a set of commandments—"Thou shalt not do this" and "Thou shalt do that"—but rather guidelines for exploring how our actions affect our mind: What happens when we're in conflict with the world? What happens when we're in harmony with other people and ourselves? In the traditional teachings of the Buddha, morality is the foundation of concentration, and concentration is the foundation of wisdom. When the mind is in turmoil, it's very difficult to concentrate. The power of virtue is a steadfastness and ease of mind. And when we're in harmony with ourselves, we give a wonderful gift to other people—the gift of trust. We're saying with our lives, with our actions, "You need not fear me." Just imagine how the world would be transformed if everybody observed one precept: not to kill.

The joy we experience when we're practicing generosity and morality gives rise to the second kind of happiness, the happiness of concentration. The Buddha called this purity of mind. When the mind is steady and one-pointed, there's a quality of inner peace and stillness that is

much deeper and more fulfilling than the happiness of sense pleasures. We enjoy sense pleasures, but at a certain point we tire of them. Just how long can we listen to music or eat good food? By contrast, the happiness that comes with concentration of mind is refreshing. It energizes us.

There are many techniques for developing concentration. We can focus on the breath, on a sound, on a light, on a mantra, on an image, on walking. We can practice metta, lovingkindness, or karuna, compassion. We can each find the way that for us is most conducive to strengthening the state of one-pointedness, of collectedness. We learn how to quiet the inner dialogue. As concentration becomes stronger, we actually start living from a place of greater inner peace. This is a source of great happiness, great joy.

The happiness of concentration makes possible the next kind of happiness, the happiness of beginning insight. When the mind is still, we can employ it in the service of awareness and come to a deeper understanding of who we are and what life is about. Wisdom unfolds in a very ordered way. When we sit and pay attention to our experience, the first level we come to is psychological insight. We see all our different sides—the loving side, the greedy side, the judging side, the angry side, the peaceful side. We see parts of ourselves that have been covered up—the jealousy, the fear, the hatred, the unworthiness. Often when we first open up to the experience of who we are, we don't like a lot of it. The tendency is to be self-judgmental. Through the power of concentration and mindfulness, we learn how to rest very naturally in the simple awareness of what's happening. We become less judgmental. We begin to get insight into the complexities of our personality. We see the patterns of our thoughts and emotions, and the ways we relate to people. But this is a tricky point in the practice. Psychological insights can be very seductive—who's more interesting than oneself?—so it's easy to get

lost on this level of inquiry. We need to be watchful and keep coming back to the main object of meditation.

Through the practice of very careful momentary attention, we see and connect very directly with the nature of thoughts and emotions, not getting so lost in the story. What is the nature of anger? What is the quality of happiness? What is the quality of compassion? The momentum of mindfulness begins to build.

At this point there's a real jump in our practice. The Buddha called this level purity of view, or purity of understanding. We let go of our fascination with the content of our minds and drop into the level of process, the flow of phenomena. We see clearly that what is happening in each moment is knowing and object, arising and passing away.

The Buddha once gave a very short discourse called "The All" in which he described the totality of our experience in six phrases:

The eye, visible objects, and the knowing of them.

The ear, sounds, and the knowing of them.

The tongue, tastes, and the knowing of them.

The nose, smells, and the knowing of them.

The body, sensations, and the knowing of them.

The mind, mind objects, and the knowing of them.

This is our first clear glimpse of the nature of the mind itself. We see that all we are is a succession of mind moments—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, feeling. At this stage, we have a very direct understanding of what the Buddha called the three characteristics. We have a visceral experience of the truth of *anicca*, impermanence: everything is changing constantly. And out of this intimate understanding of the momentariness of phenomena, we begin to comprehend more

clearly what the Buddha meant by *dukkha*, suffering—the unsatisfactory nature of things. When we see that even pleasant things are changing—and changing rapidly—it becomes obvious that they are incapable of satisfying us. Not because they are inherently bad but because they don't last. This insight leads to an understanding of the characteristic that is most difficult to see—*anatta*, or selflessness. There is no one behind this process to whom it is happening; what we call “self” is the process of change.

Purity of view is a gateway to greater insight and even deeper levels of happiness. The momentum of mindfulness becomes so strong that the perception of phenomena arising and passing away becomes crystal clear. Concentration and awareness are effortless. The mind becomes luminous. This point in the practice is called Vipassana happiness. It is a very happy time in our meditation. The joy of it far exceeds the happiness of concentration or of sense pleasures, because we experience such precise, clear insight into the nature of things. It's our first taste of coming home. We feel tremendous rapture and overwhelming gratitude: after all the work we've done, we're finally reaping a great reward.

But there's a problem here. This stage is often called “pseudo-nibbana.” Everything we've practiced so hard for—clarity, luminosity, rapture, lightness, joy—is reflected back to us as what the Buddha called “the corruptions of insight.” The qualities themselves are not the problem; indeed, they are the factors of enlightenment. But because our insight is not yet mature, we become attached to them and to the happiness they bring. It takes renewed effort to come back to simply noting these extraordinary states. At this point we hit a bumpy stage. Instead of the arising and passing of phenomena, we begin to experience the dissolution of everything—our minds, our bodies, the world. Everything is vanishing. There's no place to stand. We're trying to hold onto some-

thing that is continually dissolving. As this stage unfolds, there is often tremendous fear.

In Vipassana happiness, we can sit for hours. But at the stage of dissolution we sit for ten or fifteen minutes and become disgusted. This phase is colloquially known as the “rolling up the mat” stage because all yogis want to do is roll up the mat and quit. It’s a very difficult time, with a lot of existential suffering. This is not the suffering of pain in the knees or of psychological problems but the suffering inherent in existence. We think our practice is falling apart, but actually this is a stage of deepening wisdom. Out of our opening to dukkha comes what is called “the urge for deliverance,” a strong motivation to be free.

From this urge for freedom emerges another very happy stage of meditation, the happiness of equanimity. This is a far deeper, subtler, and more pervasive happiness than the rapture of the earlier stage of seeing things rapidly arising and passing away. There is softness and lightness in the body. The mind is perfectly poised—there is not even the slightest reaching for or pushing away. The mind is completely impartial. Pleasant or unpleasant, whatever arises is fine. All the factors of enlightenment are in the final maturing stage.

It is out of this place of equanimity that the mind opens spontaneously and intuitively to the unconditioned, the unborn, the unmanifest—nibbana. Nibbana is the highest happiness, beyond even the happiness of great insight or understanding, because it transcends the mind itself. It is transforming. The experience of nibbana has the power to uproot from the stream of consciousness the unwholesome factors of mind that keep us bound to samsara. The first moment of opening to the highest reality uproots the attachment to self, to the sense of “I.” And it is said that from that moment on, a being is destined to work through the remaining defilements, such as greed and anger, on the way to full

awakening.

What the Buddha taught on so many levels was how to be happy. If we want the happiness of sense delights, there are causes and conditions, namely, purity of conduct. If we want the happiness of stillness, of peace, we need to develop concentration—one-pointedness of mind. If we want the happiness of insight, we need to develop purity of view, purity of understanding through strengthening mindfulness. If we want to experience the happiness of different stages of insight, all the way through equanimity, we need to continue building the momentum of mindfulness and the other factors of enlightenment. And if we want the highest happiness, the happiness of nibbana, we simply need to walk this path to the end. And when we aim for the highest kind of happiness, we find all the others a growing part of our lives.

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3

WHAT IS TRUE  
HAPPINESS?

*Tricycle* speaks with scholar B. Alan Wallace about  
the quintessential pursuit

For more than three decades, scholar and contemplative B. Alan Wallace has considered the perennial question *What is happiness?* from the dual perspectives of modern science and traditional Buddhist meditation practice. These two disciplines are at the heart of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies, launched by Wallace in 2003 to conduct rigorous scientific study of contemplative methods in collaboration with established investigators in psychology and the neurosciences. Initial research cosponsored by the Institute includes the Shamatha Project, a long-term study of the effects of intensive *shamatha*—tranquillity—practice on cognition and emotion, and the UCLA Mindful Attention Program (MAP), which is evaluating mindfulness training as treatment for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Cultivating Emotional Balance, a program that has gone through clinical trials, combines techniques from Buddhist tradition and Western psychology, with widespread potential applications for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. All this furthers the Institute's mission to identify and cultivate the mind states associated with optimal happiness and

well-being. So far, the research seems to confirm what Wallace and other Buddhist practitioners have discovered empirically over the past 2,500 years: that meditation can not only counter destructive emotions that get in the way of happiness but also foster the positive factors that give rise to it. True happiness, as Wallace emphasizes in his book *Genuine Happiness*, is the fruit not of worldly trappings and ambitions but of a focused mind and an open heart.

*Tricycle* Editor-in-Chief James Shaheen visited Wallace at his California home, near the Santa Barbara Institute, to discuss what Buddhism—and meditation—have to offer us in the pursuit of happiness.

**What is genuine happiness?** I prefer the term “human flourishing,” which is a translation of the Greek word *eudaimonia*. The usual translation is “genuine happiness,” but “flourishing” is more accurate. Like the Buddhist notion of *sukkhā*, and *ananda*—bliss, joy in the Hindu tradition—flourishing is a sense of happiness that’s beyond the momentary vicissitudes of our emotional state.

**And what would that happiness entail?** A meaningful life.

**What makes for a meaningful life?** I consider each day, not just the life as a whole. I look at four ingredients. First, was it a day of virtue? I’m talking about basic Buddhist ethics—avoiding harmful behavior of body, speech, and mind; devoting ourselves to wholesome behavior and to qualities like awareness and compassion. Second, I’d like to feel happy rather than miserable. The realized beings I’ve known exemplify extraordinary states of well-being, and it shows in their demeanor, their way of dealing with adversity, with life, with other people. And third, pursuit of the truth—seeking to understand the nature of life, of reality, of inter-



personal relationships, or the nature of mind. But you could do all that sitting quietly in a room. None of us exists in isolation, however, so there is a fourth ingredient: a meaningful life must also answer the question, “What have I brought to the world?” If I can look at a day and see that virtue, happiness, truth, and living an altruistic life are prominent elements, I can say, “You know, I’m a happy camper.” Pursuing happiness does not depend on my checkbook, or the behavior of my spouse, or my job, or my salary. I can live a meaningful life even if I only have ten minutes left.

**So physical health is not a necessary ingredient?** Not at all. One of my former students has a very rare disease, and every day he goes to the hospital for dialysis and drug treatment, and will for the rest of his life. You could say, “Well, that’s a tragedy, a dismal situation.” But the last time I spoke with him, he said, “Alan, I’m flourishing.” And he was. He was finding a way within the very limited parameters of what was available to him. His mind is clear. He’s reading, he’s growing, he’s meditating, he’s teaching meditation to other terminally ill patients in his hospital. He’s living a very meaningful life in which he can honestly say that he’s flourishing.

**What’s his secret?** He’s not looking for happiness outside himself. When we rely on things like a job, a spouse, or money to fulfill us, we’re in an unhappy situation, because we’re banking on something external. Furthermore, other people are competing for the same pot, and it’s not an infinite pot. That’s the bad news.

**And the good?** The good news is that genuine happiness is not out there in the marketplace to be purchased or acquired from the best teacher around. One of the best-kept secrets is that the happiness we’re striving for so desperately in the perfect spouse, the great kids, the fine job, security, excel-

lent health, and good looks has always been within and is just waiting to be unveiled. Knowing that what we are seeking comes from within changes everything. It doesn't mean you won't have a spouse, or a car, or a satisfying job, but if you're flourishing, your happiness won't depend so much on external events, people, and situations, which are all beyond your control.

**Everyone's heard that wealth does not buy happiness, but few of us live as if it were true.** On a deeper level we doubt it and try again and again to take control of our external environment and to extract from it the things we think will make us happy—status, sex, financial and emotional security. I think a lot of people in our society have given up on the pursuit of genuine happiness. They've given up hope of finding happiness, fulfillment, and joy in life. They think, “Well, genuine happiness just doesn't seem to be available, so I'll settle for a better stereo.” Or they're just getting by: “Forget about pleasure. I'll just try to make it through the day.” That's pretty tragic.

**That sounds like depression.** It's a state in which the space of the mind compresses and we lose vision. I think of lovingkindness—the first of the four immeasurables, or four divine abidings—as a vision quest. In traditional *maitri* [Sanskrit for lovingkindness] practice, you start with lovingkindness for yourself. That doesn't mean “What kind of a good job could I get? How much money could I possibly have?” but “How can I flourish? How can I live in a way that I find truly fulfilling, happy, joyful, meaningful?” And as you envision that for yourself, you extend it out: “How can other people who are suffering find genuine happiness?”

**Shantideva said, “Those deciding to escape from suffering hasten right toward suffering. With the very desire for happiness, out of de-**

**lusion they destroy their own happiness as if it were the enemy.” Why is this so? Why wouldn’t we adopt a life of virtue if it brings the genuine happiness we so want?** It comes back to the idea that we’re clueless as to what would really bring us the happiness we seek. It may take us a very long time before we even notice what’s happening, because we’ve become so fixated on the symbol, the image, the ideal, the mental construct: “If I only had this type of spouse, this type of job, this amount of money; if only people respected me to this degree; if I only looked like this....” It’s delusion. We all know people who are in good health, have love and fame and wealth, and they’re miserable. Those people are some of our greatest teachers. They show us that you can win the lottery and lose the lottery of life, in terms of the pursuit of genuine happiness.

If one approaches the path of Buddhist practice with a strong emphasis on the via negativa and the idea that nirvana is just being free of stuff, then at first glance, nirvana can look pretty boring. But nirvana is not just getting up to neutral, or Freud’s “ordinary level of unhappiness.” It’s a lot more than that. And this is where we tap into this issue that our habitual state is dukkha, being dissatisfied, anxious. But the Buddhist premise, which is enormously inspiring, is that what’s truly “habitual” is your natural state of awareness, the ground state of awareness. This is a source of bliss and can be uncovered, beginning with the meditative practices like shamatha, the refinement of attention, and becoming aware of how things really are. The whole point of buddhadharma is that liberation comes not by believing in the right set of tenets or of dogmatic assertions, or even necessarily by behaving in the right way. It’s insight, it’s wisdom, it’s knowing the nature of reality. It is only truth that will make us free.

**When you say “genuine happiness,” the implication is that there’s another kind.** Yes. We mistake what Buddhists call the eight mundane

concerns for the true pursuit of happiness: acquisition of wealth and not losing it; acquisition of stimulus-driven pleasures and avoiding pain; praise and avoiding abuse or ridicule; and desire for a good reputation and fearing contempt or rejection. The point to mention is that there's nothing wrong with the ones on the positive side. Take having: would you be a better person if you didn't have that sweater you're wearing? No. There's nothing wrong with acquisitions, but there's something wrong with thinking they'll bring you happiness.

Genuine happiness is simply tapping into the true causes of happiness as opposed to things that may or may not catalyze it. And that's basically the difference between pursuing the dharma and pursuing the eight mundane concerns. Some people actually meditate to serve the eight mundane concerns—solely for the sake of acquiring the pleasure that they get in meditation. They're taking meditation like a cup of coffee, or jogging, or massage. That's not bad or wrong, but it's very limited. Meditation can do something that a good massage can't do. It can actually heal the mind.

**In *Genuine Happiness*, you write, “When we’re experiencing dissatisfaction or depression without any clear external cause for it, no bad health, disintegrating marriage, or other personal crisis, could this be a symptom or message to us coming from a deeper level than biological survival? How should we respond? Antidepressants essentially tell such feelings, ‘Shut up, I want to pretend you don’t exist.’ But what is the feeling telling us?” Can you comment?** What we're talking about here is dukkha—not as in “I feel miserable because I lost something that was dear to me, or I didn't get something I passionately wanted,” but this deeper stratum of dukkha that is nonreferential and not stimulus-driven. There are times when, in the absence of unpleasant stimuli, you still have a sense of unease, of depression, of restlessness—something's

not right, but you can't quite identify what it is. This is one of the most valuable symptoms we have of the underlying dysfunction of our minds. Once you sense that you're tapping into that, you may say, "I don't like this feeling, and I'm going to cover it up. I'm going to get lost in work, entertainment, booze, drugs." This society is the most ingenious in history in suppressing that basic sense of unease. We go into chemical overdrive. Here is a symptom of a life that is not working very well, of a mind that is prone to imbalances and afflictions, and instead of taking that as a welcome symptom, we basically shoot the messenger. The drug industry says that if you feel anxious, depressed, unhappy, or angry it's because of a chemical imbalance in your brain. "Take our prescription drug, and this is going to make you happy." The downside of these drugs is that many people think that bad experiences have primarily a material basis—that a chemical imbalance is the root cause. In other words, the second noble truth, the cause of suffering, is chemical imbalance in the brain. And therefore the cessation of suffering means getting numbed out. What this is doing is veiling our engagement with reality rather than getting to the roots of depression and anxiety. What you're experiencing is the first noble truth. And the Buddha says, "Don't just make it shut up, but recognize it, understand it." This is the beginning of the path to happiness.

The existentialists understood that we pursued happiness in vain. How does the Buddhist take differ? In Buddhism, pursuing happiness is not just a moving away from one thing—the acquisition of external objects—but moving toward another, dharma practice. It's extricating yourself from the actual sources of dukkha, which are internal, and moving toward greater freedom, greater mental well-being, greater balance, greater meaning. In existentialist philosophy, this is referred to as "living authentically." Moving away from the true sources of dukkha to-

ward the true sources of happiness—that is basically the whole Buddhist psychology right there.

We have a misperception that if we can get everything to work right, we'll find the happiness we're seeking. Then there comes a point when you say, "I see. This has never worked. It's not working now, and it will never work in the future." That's what a lot of the existential philosophers recognized. Camus, Sartre—they refer to the vanity, the futility, the fundamental meaninglessness. Buddhism, like the existentialists, sees the vanity, the futility, the emptiness of the eight mundane concerns. But it doesn't just say, "Here's a problem and there's nothing we can do about it." It says, "Those are the mundane concerns, and then there's the dharma. Having some faith would be helpful, but if nothing else, you have the practice."

**You argue that practice keeps us in the world, and that's a great challenge. For instance, many of us follow the news, and it's easy to get pretty depressed. How can we stay in the game without being brought down by it?** The first thing is to recognize that the news is not all the news that's fit to print or to broadcast. It's taking place in a 100 percent commercial context. They're broadcasting the news because they're paid for it by their advertisers. And they are giving us the news that sells, news that they feel that people would want to watch. It's a very selective slice of what's going on. This is not to say that there are no people in the media who are trying to perform a public service, but the system itself is commercially oriented.

In Buddhism, we say yes, there is an ocean of suffering. So it's not bad to show that there's anger, hatred, delusion, and greed in the world. In a way, the media are presenting some very important facts. Given that, we can look for different emotional responses in ourselves. We can get out of the rut of our cynicism, depression, anger, and apathy by cul-

tivating the four immeasurables. When we see suffering and the causes of suffering, then it's time for compassion. When we see people striving diligently to find happiness, that's a time for lovingkindness. That rare coverage where they show something wonderful that has happened is a time for *mudita*—for empathic joy, for rejoicing in other people's happiness and in virtue. And then there are circumstances like natural disasters. When we see there are responsible people and institutions doing their best to alleviate the suffering, we can decide to maintain equanimity and then do the practice of *tonglen*—taking in the suffering of the world and offering back joy and the causes of joy. The Four Immeasurables are extraordinarily powerful ways of engaging with reality. And they balance each other. They're like the Four Musketeers: when any one goes astray, the other ones leap in and say, "I can help you."

**So if you're feeling indifference instead of equanimity, then compassion will balance that?** Precisely. Or if you're really hunkered down into attachment and anxiety, that's a time for equanimity.

**This alternative route to happiness seems to require a leap of faith, and that can be scary. If I let go of all the externals, what will become of me?** We don't need to jump into the deep end. The Tibetans call that "hairy renunciation." It's like suddenly getting an infatuation and saying, "Oh, the whole of society is a pit of blazing fire. I can't stand it. I'm going to go off to the bliss of practicing Buddhism." It's called hairy because I'd better shave my head to show I'm serious. Then, of course, in a day or two or a couple of weeks, you say, "Oh, this is not so much fun, and where is that girlfriend I left behind, anyway?" It's like a fling.

So what's required is not a sudden, abrupt, and total abandonment of the eight worldly dharmas—the eight mundane concerns—and prac-



ting only the sublime dharma. It's like taking a child into the water to teach him how to swim: you don't fling the kid into the deep end and see what happens. You take him from the first step into the shallow end. So have a trial period. Try meditation for a session in the morning and a session in the evening. See how that impacts the rest of your day. Then, as you start to get a taste of dharma, you may say, "Well, this is actually tapping into my inner resources. This feels good. And it's not just good, it's also virtuous, and what's more, I'm engaging with reality more clearly than I have in the past. If I want to bring something good to the world, I'm in a better position to do so." It is a gradual shift in priorities until eventually your primary desire, your highest value, is living a meaningful life, devoting yourself to dharma. The eight mundane concerns—they'll come and go. In fact, when they're there, they can even support you in your life. As grist for the mill? They're not necessarily grist for the mill, but adversity does provide us with an opportunity if there is a wise engagement with it. For instance, one of the greatest obstacles to a meaningful life is arrogance. Well, it's really hard to be arrogant when you're encountering great adversity. Then there's that unease we've spoken of. If we view that with wisdom, it can arouse our curiosity or maybe even be a very powerful incentive for transformation, for uprooting the underlying causes giving rise to such distress. If you've gone through terrible interpersonal strife, or a loss, or a financial crisis, for example, you could look at it and say, "How did that happen? What did I contribute to it? And why am I suffering so much now?" These are messages—symptoms of an underlying discord, a disengagement from reality, coming out of delusion, hatred, and craving. I think the three poisons are as important for understanding the human situation as the three laws of Newton are for understanding the physical universe. And when you see how important dharma is in the face of adversity, then it becomes a



priority. You let it saturate your life. That's when dharma really takes on its power—when it's not confined to a meditation session here or there.

**Which brings me to your view that the culmination of the Buddha's practice was not enlightenment under the Bodhi tree but service to others.** I believe the Buddha achieved something utterly extraordinary under the Bodhi tree, but he recognized that if this event was to be as meaningful as possible, it had to be shared with others. Enlightenment isn't something just for yourself: "Now I've got the good stuff, and therefore I'm finished." Entire civilizations were transformed by this one man's presence, but it wasn't just the 49 days sitting under the Bodhi tree that did it. It was the next 45 years, engaging with courtesans and beggars and kings and warriors—the whole range of human society—and having something to offer to everyone. So if we go back to the four aspects of a meaningful life, what happened under the Bodhi tree is clearly the culmination of virtue, happiness, and truth. And for the next 45 years he was out there, bringing something good to the world. So I would say the Buddha is the paradigm of a meaningful life.

4

THE PURSUIT OF  
HAPPINESS

Moving toward unconditional fulfillment and freedom

PAMELA GAYLE WHITE

You're bright, curious, and driven. Maybe competitive, certainly inspired by a good challenge, and possibly interested in contributing something to make the world a better place. Maybe you've even thought about what it will take for you to reach 80 or 100 and be able to say: This is what I set out to do, and I've done it. There have been ups and downs, but I've pretty much stayed on track.

You may think: *To go from here to there—becoming a successful and satisfied person with a big chunk of life behind me—I'll need to get this, achieve that, go there.* If you're a romantic, your success will depend on relationships; if you're family-oriented, it'll be family; if you're a materialist, you'll need to acquire certain things; if you're an adventurer, adventures; if you're an intellectual, knowledge. The list goes on. You may well have eminently worthy and admirable goals—especially if contributing to the welfare of others is part of what makes you tick.

But if our fulfillment and happiness depend on obtaining or doing something, will we be unhappy or frustrated if we don't obtain it or do it? Is our happiness dependent on something that is ultimately beyond our personal reach? Does it depend on other people, other events? If those

things, people, events, states or relationships that we depend on for our fulfillment change, what happens? They will change, they do change. Sometimes for the better—but not always. Then what?

It is useful to take a closer look at what actually makes us happy. What do we mean by happy? Where do peace and fulfillment come from? What about dissatisfaction, pain and anguish? How do we define these experiences? And who—or what—is this potentially fulfilled person—this “me”?

Around 2,600 years ago the Buddha, aware that we all share the desire to be happy and to avoid pain, asked himself these exact same questions. And 2,600 years ago the Buddha came up with answers that are still—according to Buddhists, anyway—the most intelligent, pertinent response to human needs in terms of philosophy and practice.

The Buddha was born to a royal family in what is now southwestern Nepal. A holy fortune-teller told the Buddha’s father, the king, that the boy would grow up to be either a great ruler or a great renunciant and spiritual guide. Naturally his father liked the first version better, and he did everything in his power to make sure Prince Siddhartha Gautama was happy. We can imagine the palace, the gardens and fountains, the peacocks, banquets, dancing girls, silks and brocades, musicians and jasmine, and all the rest of it. The king made sure his son never saw anything unpleasant, troubling, or jarring. And we can presume that the handsome, gifted prince believed he was leading a meaningful, satisfying life. He was happily married, had a fine son, and his wish was everyone’s command.

But then, the story goes, he went beyond the perimeters of his idyllic life and for the first time witnessed the shocking truths of aging, illness, and death. And suddenly a yearning for peace and meaning that were not contingent on commodities like health, youth, and wealth arose and

was stronger than everything else. So he left in pursuit of something like unalterable happiness, and he tried to find it through the extreme ascetic practices that were the going thing back then. After six years of astonishing self-abnegation, he came to the realization that the two extremes of earthly pleasures and self-mortification weren't going to take him where he meant to go. So he had some lovely rice pudding, sat on a grass mat under a pipal tree in what is now Bodhgaya, and vowed he wouldn't quit until he found the absolute happiness he was looking for. "Let only skin, sinew, and bone remain," he said, "let the flesh and blood dry in my body, but I will not give up this seat without attaining complete awakening." After a long and very eventful night, he became Buddha, the Awakened One.

Seven weeks later, he gave his first teaching. It laid out the whole story, from our misguided pursuit of happiness to the possibility of awakening and peace, in four points: the four noble truths. His first truth, the truth of suffering, states that suffering is a given in any form of existence that is dependent on causes and conditions. It defines suffering as all levels of discomfort, ranging from blatant pain to the subtle discomfort of change and the far subtler existential suffering that goes along with being alive.

The second truth is the origin of suffering, and here the Buddha explains that the origin of suffering is not some god who has it in for us, or some arbitrary finger of fate, but our own ignorance and its karmic by-products. Revolutionary! We'll come back to this one.

The third truth is the truth of cessation, or the truth of peace: the unequivocal peace that is realized when our veils, confusion, and selfishness have ceased, have been removed, and our natural goodness and wisdom have fully blossomed. *Pure* happiness.

And finally the fourth truth, the truth of the path, maps out the

practice that leads us to the truth of cessation. That route is essentially right view, right action (learning how to be truly helpful), and right spiritual practice, as traditionally expressed by the condensed guide to a wholesome lifestyle called the eightfold noble path.

The origin of suffering is ignorance. The word in Sanskrit is *avidya*—not knowing, not being aware of our fundamental nature or essence as being *buddha*, awake, and of the nature of conditioned manifestation, including us, as being interconnected and devoid of any sort of solid, independent self; impermanent and subject to change, whether we like it or not; and composite, meaning that pain will be part of our experience, since everything that exists as an aggregate necessarily falls apart sooner or later. Even the Buddha, who went on to give teachings on different subjects in different places over a span of nearly 50 years, left his body behind at age 81.

Ignorance means that we don't have all of the elements we need to make informed choices about life. We're all looking for comfort, or meaning, but we make clumsy choices that lead to painful results (eating too much chocolate is a personal case in point). Because of ignorance, we are unaware of the ultimate, fundamental interconnectedness of existence, and our universe is perceived not as the ever-changing lace of illusion it is but as a solid, somewhat static confrontation between self (me) and other (everything else).

We divide our world into me/you, friend/enemy, desirable/undesirable, fulfilling/frustrating, and so on. It's a natural process, but a very arbitrary, utterly subjective one. Somehow we're able to *ignore* this last fact. We're in dualistic division mode, and we act on that; all sorts of emotions come into play, and we act on them. We reinforce the tendencies—Buddhists might say, we create or compound karma—that make the illusion thicker, stickier, more solid. And the further we are from

truth, the more elusive happiness becomes.

A great 20th-century teacher from Tibet, the 3rd Jamgön Kongtrul, gave a talk at State University of New York at Albany in 1985. “Most of the time our relationship to the world around us accords not with its basic nature but with our incomplete perceptions of it,” he said. “We do not experience our own basic nature; instead we experience only what we see. The result is tremendous conflict in our lives. No matter how hard we try to work things out, there is always disorder and dissatisfaction, always something missing. No matter how much we seem to have accomplished, there is still more to achieve. This dissatisfaction continues and its scale increases, because what we are fundamentally and how we perceive are not the same.”

Jamgon Kongtrul refers to our basic nature: according to many teachings attributed to the Buddha, our basic, ultimate, objective nature is impossible to define in words, but it includes that potential for awakening that he presented in the third noble truth, Cessation. It has been described as luminous awareness, emptiness, basic goodness, and buddhanature. Basic nature has absolutely nothing to do with being a Buddhist; all beings share this innate spark of perfection. What Buddhism tries to do is give us the means to recognize, kindle, and experience this potential, no matter who we are.

On a relative level, as beings subject to confusion or ignorance in varying degrees, we are interdependent, impermanent, and subject to the suffering we seek to avoid. The underlying motor of our experience is karma. Essentially, karma refers to the fact that actions and thoughts have results; nothing exists without a cause. This is both bad news and good news.

It's bad news if we choose to remain in “head-in-the-sand” mode, because our tendency will be to relate to happiness and pleasure or frus-

tration and dissatisfaction as having external causes and external solutions. We deal with them by focusing on a prize or a culprit and reacting according to our confused patterns: we turn on the charm, or scheme, or run away, or fight. But as Jamgön Kongtrul explained, “what is fundamentally true is that the experience of pain or pleasure is not so much what is happening externally as it is what is happening internally: the experience of pain or pleasure is mainly a state of mind. Whether we experience the world as enlightened or confused depends on our state of mind.”

And that’s the good news.

It’s good news because there is always the potential for being truly aware of what’s going on and using that to deepen our understanding. There’s always the potential for opening our eyes and being *buddha*: awake. Furthermore, interdependence means that good actions bring positive, happy results for us and for others; and impermanence means that painful situations can change for the better and that we can perceive them differently and use them more wisely.

The Tibetan word for Buddhist, *nangpa*, means “insider,” as in “those whose focus is directed inside: on the mind, its workings and development.” The Buddha taught that true happiness, or fulfillment, is independent of outer causes and conditions. So for Buddhists, the pursuit of happiness involves training in looking inward. Once we know who we really are, from the inside out, we’re less likely to believe in the viability of our patterns and addictions. We realize that if we’ve been in cahoots with dissatisfaction and confusion, it’s because we haven’t discovered our own birthright.

An oft-given analogy is that of the starving person who is unaware of the larder in the cellar. I always imagine an emaciated fellow in rags, too defeated or unimaginative to think to pick at the dirt floor of the

filthy hovel he's wasting away in. Too discouraged to find the big iron ring just under the surface of the dirt that would lift weightlessly away if pulled, revealing an illuminated cellar filled with cool spring water, gorgeous fruit, lots of good French cheese, fine crusty bread, and so on.

If we're inspired to dust off the big iron ring and give it a pull, if we're interested in working toward replacing our confusion with clarity and peace of mind, in discovering our birthright, Buddhism gives us tools. One of the main tools, which guides us in observing and working with the mind, is meditation.

Meditating isn't about nuking the thoughts and emotions that arise in our mindstream; it isn't about floating around in a bliss bubble; and it isn't about shaving our head, changing our name to Wangmo, and living in a cave. So what *is* it about? Remember that the Buddhist take on existence includes both the absolute and relative levels. When we meditate, we relate to both. We relate to absolute wisdom and relative confusion, and we do it without judgment or politics. The basic meditation called *shamatha*, or "calm abiding," is a neutral process of acknowledging and letting go. It's the Switzerland of practices. We're willing to cut through our attachment to thought—but we are not trying to stop the process of thinking, because thoughts are not the problem. Our hopes and fears, attachment and rejection, the tension they create and veils they reinforce are the problem.

Meditation takes many different forms; there are endless variants, and each variant focuses on revealing one or another of those treasures in the larder. Shamatha is the practice that introduces us to the mind's capacity to be trained and to develop composure. And though composure is not the final goal, stability is the basis for all other practices, some of which can be quite dynamic and demanding. If the mind is constantly scurrying around like a ferret on caffeine, how can we train it?



## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: HAPPINESS

If we look at where the mind is going as it dashes and darts here and there, we see that our thoughts are concerned with the past—things we wish had happened differently, situations we enjoyed and want to recreate, events that are dead and gone—and the future, which doesn't exist, and never unfolds the way we write the stories anyway. When we meditate, we relate to that unsettling, ineffable commodity: the present. We train in letting go of thoughts and feelings as they arise, and settle back into the present: that gap between two concepts—past and future—that don't actually *exist*. We're simply being, here and now. Because just being is so unfamiliar to us, we develop our practice through any one of many methods for calming the mind, like following the breath. We just sit down, settle our mind on the breath, acknowledge what's arising, drop it and go back to our breathing. If we're aware of tension, we soften and let it go. If we're aware of agitation or drowsiness, we make use of diligence and apply a remedy.

Pay attention. Stay open. Note discomfort and go back to your breathing. Use your curiosity. Be patient. You're doing something vital: you're pulling the iron ring. You're moving in the direction of unconditional fulfillment and freedom. You're pursuing happiness the only way that truly makes sense: from the inside out.

**Pamela Gayle White** translates from Tibetan and teaches meditation and Buddhist philosophy in Bodhi Path centers in the Americas and Europe. This article was adapted from a talk she gave at Bryn Mawr College's Multicultural Center in December 2008. After the talk, a student meditation group was formed.

5

## THE PLEASURE PARADOX

Daniel Gilbert explains why we aren't as happy as we think we should be.

Why we persist in pursuing the very things that fail to bring us happiness—a core issue in Buddhism—is also of great interest to researchers like Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard University and the author of *Stumbling on Happiness*. Gilbert took time out on the eve of his wedding to talk with *Tricycle* contributing editor Joan Duncan Oliver about “miswanting” and how it hampers our efforts to be happy.

**How do you define happiness?** The simplest definition is “that general positive feeling one gets from all the things that can possibly generate it.” I don’t think the happiness one gets from, say, helping a little old lady cross the street is qualitatively different from the happiness one gets from eating a banana cream pie. They’re the same emotion. If what we call happiness consisted of very different experiences, then they should have very different signatures in the brain. They don’t. The feeling you get from sending a gift to your aunt on her birthday seems to activate the same brain areas as an orgasm or a snootful of cocaine—the midbrain dopamine structures associated with pleasure. That doesn’t mean these experiences are identical. It means they share a basic feeling.

**Are we “hardwired” to seek happiness?** We don’t know if these ten-

dencies are written into the DNA or they're some aspect of our early socialization. But we do know that when the brain interprets the events we call everyday experience—marriage, divorce, a promotion, sickness, a victory, a football game—it looks for the meaning that will bring the most pleasure, peace, enjoyment, contentment.

**Your research suggests that we're not very good at predicting how we'll feel about future events. But we manage to learn from our experience in some areas—not touching a hot stove, for example—so why do we keep making errors about what will make us happy?** To learn from experience requires that you remember it. One of the things we know about memories of emotional experiences is that they are biased in exactly the same way that forecasts of emotional experiences are biased. We published a study in which we looked at people's predictions of, experiences of, and memories of the 2000 Presidential election. Before the election, pro-Gore voters thought they would be absolutely devastated if Bush won, and pro-Bush voters thought they would be on Cloud Nine. When we measured the actual experience of these people after the election, the difference between them was not nearly as big as these people had predicted. Some months later, all of these voters were contacted again and asked to remember their experience. What they remembered was that they were devastated or elated—exactly as they had predicted they would be, but not as they had actually felt. We have the same illusions whether we look forward or backward in time, and they reinforce each other.

**How does mispredicting or misremembering our feelings lead to “miswanting”—making bad choices?** Our culture, like our own experience, can perpetuate untruths about the sources of happiness. Take

the economy. The only way our economy can perpetuate itself is if lots of people believe what Adam Smith called “a deception”—that constant consumption will bring happiness. Economies are an engine, and constant production and consumption are the fuel. So if everybody realized one day that constant consumption and production aren’t a source of happiness—that all they really do is keep the economy going—how many of us would get up in the morning and say, “I know it’s not going to make me happy, but I want to keep the economy going”? We don’t do that. We get up in the morning and say, “What will make me happy?” So the only way we are efficient fuel for an economic engine is if we subscribe to the big cultural myth that stuff makes us happy. We get on our treadmill, metaphorically speaking, and earn money. It doesn’t bring us the happiness we thought it would, so we assume we haven’t earned enough. We probably need to earn more. The Porsche didn’t do it; it must be a Ferrari that will. The old wife isn’t good enough; we’ll get a new one. We keep assuming that because things aren’t bringing us happiness, they’re the wrong things, rather than recognizing that the pursuit itself is futile—that regardless of what we achieve in the pursuit of stuff, it’s never going to bring about an enduring state of happiness.

**So if we don’t want the right things to make us happy, what accounts for the fact that most people say they are happy? Are we just deluded?** Most of our research is on misprediction of reactions to *negative* events. The biggest error people make is thinking that they will be sad, devastated, annoyed, embarrassed, or frustrated for long periods of time, when it turns out they aren’t. Our research does not say that bad things don’t hurt. It says that however much they hurt, it’s not as much as people predicted. Adaptation—or habituation—is one of the major reasons. Every organism habituates to repeated exposure to the same

stimulus.

**But why is it hard to override our feelings of the moment in making decisions about the future?** Imagination requires the same areas of the brain that sensory experience is already using. If somebody says, “Hey, how does that song go?” and there’s something on the radio, you have to cover your ears, because the parts of your brain that can imagine a song are already listening to a real song. When people are shown a picture and later asked to close their eyes and remember it, you actually see reactivation of the visual cortex, the very part of the brain that was looking at the picture in the first place. Memory, imagination, and perception are like three different software processes. They all run on the same platform, but only one can run at a time. That’s why it’s hard to imagine being happy when you’re sad.

**Another problem is something you call “the pleasure paradox.” What’s that?** Human beings have two basic motives that conflict with each other: to understand everything and to be happy. The mind tends to mull over things it hasn’t fully understood or digested, so part of what makes a positive experience continue to give us positive feelings is that we continue to bring it to mind. If a dozen roses appeared at your door with no card, can you imagine how many years of joy you would get out of those roses? For the rest of your life you would be saying, “And then there was that time...” We’ve done studies in which all the participants have the same experience but in one case they can explain it, in the other they can’t. We find they’re much happier much longer when they can’t explain it. But here’s the rub. If you ask people, “Would you like to have the experience explained to you?” 100 percent of the time they say yes.

**Is that some inherent perversity—we want to kill the very thing that makes us happy?** It's because we don't realize it's the thing making us happy. Part of the reason we try to understand the causes of our experience is that we believe we can make these experiences happen again. The problem is, understanding also makes the experience less valuable, because we adapt to it. It's surprising things, uncertain things, things we don't fully comprehend that seem to bring us the greatest and longest-lasting happiness.

**So is happiness all about the pursuit?** That's too strong, but I would say there are many experiences in which almost all the joy is in memory and anticipation and very little is in the experience itself. George Loewenstein, another happiness researcher, is a mountaineer. A point he makes about mountaineering is that you look forward to it for months and talk about it later for years, but the fact is, while you're doing it, it's hot and sweaty and uncomfortable.

6

FORGET HAPPINESS

Commentary on two verses from Tokme Zongpo's  
*Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*

KEN MCLEOD

The happiness of the three worlds disappears in a moment,  
Like a dewdrop on a blade of grass.  
The highest level of freedom is one that never changes.  
Aim for this—this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

The pursuit of happiness for its own sake is a fool's errand. As a goal it is frivolous and unrealistic—frivolous because happiness is a transient state dependent on many conditions, and unrealistic because life is unpredictable and pain may arise at any time.

The happiness you feel when you get something you have always wanted typically lasts no longer than three days. Bliss states in meditation are similar, whether they arise as physical or emotional bliss or the bliss of infinite space, infinite consciousness, or infinite nothingness. These states soon dissipate once you reengage the messiness of life. A dewdrop on a blade of grass, indeed!

The quest for happiness is a continuation of the traditional view of spiritual practice—a way to transcend the vicissitudes of the human condition. Valhalla, paradise, heaven, nirvana all hold out a promise of eternity, bliss, purity, or union with an ultimate reality. These four

spiritual longings are all escapist reactions to the challenges everyone encounters in life.

Take a moment and think about what you are seeking in your practice. Is it a kind of transcendence, if not in God, then in a god-surrogate such as timeless awareness, pure bliss, or infinite light?

Are you looking for an awareness so deep and powerful that your frustration and difficulties with life vanish in the presence of your understanding and wisdom? Are you not looking for a ticket out of the messiness of life?

If you think of freedom as a state, you are in effect looking for a kind of heaven. Instead, think of freedom as a way of experiencing life itself—a continuous flow in which you meet what arises in your experience, open to it, do what needs to be done to the best of your ability, and then receive the result. And you do this over and over again. A freedom that never changes then becomes the constant exercise of everything you know and understand. It is the way you engage life. It is not something that sets you apart from life. How else is it possible for people who practice in prison or other highly restricted environments to say that they find freedom even within their confinement?

Life is tough, but when you see and accept what is actually happening, even if it is very difficult or painful, mind and body relax. There is an exquisite quality that comes from just experiencing what arises, completely, with no separation between awareness and experience.

Some call it joy, but it is not a giddy or excited joy. It is deep and quiet, a joy that in some sense is always there, waiting for you, but usually touched only when some challenge, pain, or tragedy leaves you with no other option but to open and accept what is happening in your life.

Others call it truth, but this is a loaded and misleading word, carrying with it the notion of something that exists apart from experience



## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: HAPPINESS

itself. Truth as a concept sets up an opposition with what is held to be not true, and such duality necessarily leads to hierarchical authority, institutional thinking, and violence.

In this freedom you are free from the projections of thought and feeling, and you are awake and present in your life. Reactions may still arise, but they come and go on their own, like snowflakes alighting on a hot stone, like mist in the morning sun, or like a thief in an empty house.

What is freedom? It is nothing more, and nothing less, than life lived awake.

All suffering comes from wanting your own happiness. Complete awakening arises from the intention to help others. Therefore, exchange completely your happiness for the suffering of others—this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

Forget about being happy. Put it right out of your mind.

When you say to yourself, “I want to be happy,” you are telling yourself that you are not happy, and you start looking for something that will make you feel happy. You go to a movie, go shopping, hang out with friends, buy a new jacket, computer, or jewelry, read a good book or explore a new hobby, all in the effort to feel happy. The harder you try to be happy, the more you reinforce that belief that you are not happy. You can try to ignore it, but the belief is still there.

Even in close relationships, spending time with a friend, even while helping others or doing other good works, if your attention is on what you are feeling, on what you are getting out of it, then you see these relationships as transactions. Because your focus is on how you are feeling, consciously or unconsciously you are putting yourself first and others second.

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: HAPPINESS

This approach disconnects you from life, from the totality of your world. Inevitably, you end up feeling shortchanged in your relationships with your family, with your friends, and in your work. Those imbalances ripple out and affect everyone around you and beyond. The transactional mindset of self-interest is the problem of the modern world.

If you were to let go of the pursuit of happiness, what would you do? To put it a bit more dramatically, suppose you were told that no matter what you did, you would never be happy. Never. What would you do with your life?

You might pay more attention to others. You might accept them just as they are, rather than looking for ways to get them to conform to your idea of how they should be. You might start relating to life itself, rather than looking to what you get out of it. You might be more willing to engage with what life brings you, with all its ups and downs, rather than always wanting it to be other than it is.

This is where the practice of taking and sending comes in. Take in what you do not want, and give away what you do want. Take in what is unpleasant, and give away what is pleasant. Take in pain, and give away joy.

It sounds a bit insane—emotional suicide, as one person put it. But it counteracts that deeply ingrained tendency to focus on yourself first and everyone else second. It uses the transactional attitude to destroy itself, because you give away everything that makes you feel happy and you take in everything that makes others unhappy.

In the traditional teachings, you coordinate taking and sending with the breath, taking in the pain and suffering of the world as you breathe in and sending your own joy and happiness to the world when you breathe out. Do this with every aspect of your life—the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful. Extend it to everything you experience,

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: HAPPINESS

internally and externally. When you see other people struggling, whatever the reason, imagine taking in their struggles and sending them your own experience of peace, happiness, and joy. It does not matter who they are—the rich, the poor, the ill, or the criminal. If they are struggling, take in their struggles and send them the joy, happiness, or well-being you do experience, have experienced, or hope to experience. If they are in pain, take in their pain. Send them your relief and ease. If they are causing pain, take in the emotional turmoil or the willful ignoring that leads them to inflict pain on others. Send them the love, compassion, and understanding that you have received or would like to receive.

Do not edit your experience of life. Whatever you encounter—a homeless person shivering on an icy concrete doorsill, a friend whose partner has just left him for someone else, a relative who struggles with chronic pain, news of famine, war, or the devastating effects of greed, corruption, or rigid beliefs—whatever the pain, take it in.

Do not be miserly. Give to others anything and everything that brings you joy. Are you successful in your work? Give away your success. Do you have money in the bank? Send the joy of financial well-being to others. Do you enjoy your intelligence, your ability to think clearly and solve problems? Give them away. Are you talented, musically, physically, or artistically? Give away your talent. Do you enjoy friends and companions? Give them away.

With every exchange, touch both the pain and deficiencies in the world and your own joy and abilities. Take the pain and send your joy.

Does this practice lead to happiness? Not at all; but it does help you to understand the suffering and the struggles of others. Whatever ups and downs and joys and pains they encounter, you can be present with them because you know life is not perfect and you do not expect it to be.

As my teacher once said, “If you could really take away the suffering

of everyone in the world, taking all of it into you with a single breath, would you hesitate?”

Practice written expressly for *Tricycle*. Text excerpted from *Reflections on Silver River: Tokme Zongpo's Thirty-seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, translations and commentary by Ken McLeod. © 2013. Reprinted with permission of Unfettered Mind Media.

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## PRACTICE: TAKING AND SENDING (TONGLEN)

Begin your meditation session by resting attention in the experience of breathing. Let mind and body settle. Then open your awareness to everything around you, everything you see, hear, touch, smell, or taste. Include everything you feel in your body and all your emotions, thoughts, images. Then say to yourself, “This is like a dream,” and ask, “What experiences this?” Don’t try to answer the question. Just ask it and rest there for a few moments.

Then think about all the struggles you have had in your life: in your family, with illness, at school, at work, with failure and disappointment, with grief and loss, and think of how everyone else in the world has the same struggles—easier for some, harder for others—and how they want to be free of them, just as you want to be free of yours.

Think also about everything that brings joy, happiness, meaning, and peace to your life—your health, your talents, your skills and abili-

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: HAPPINESS

ties, your successes, your family, friends, colleagues, your home or garden. Think about how everyone, every being, wants the same kind of joy, confidence, peace, and freedom. Rest for a few minutes there.

Now breathe out gently and imagine that you are giving all beings everywhere everything that brings joy, happiness, meaning, peace, or well-being to your life. Imagine it all taking the form of light, a gentle white light, like the silver of moonlight. The light comes from your heart, goes out through your nostrils, and carries all your joy and happiness to all beings everywhere.

As you breath in, imagine taking in all the pain of the world—suffering, illness, depression, obsession, aggression, oppression, grief, injury, poverty, hatred, or madness, the pain of being harmed and the pain of causing harm—everything that leads people to struggle in their lives. Imagine it all coalescing into a thick, heavy, black smoke that comes into you, through your nostrils, and into your heart, where you feel it.

You do this for all beings, without prejudice, discrimination, bias, or preference. This is equanimity.

Again, as you breathe out, send all your joy and happiness, and again, as you breathe in, take in all their pain and struggles. Do this over and over again. It's important to do both with each breath, touching your happiness and sending it out, touching their struggles and taking them in.

You may encounter emotional resistance, either to giving away what you cherish or to taking in what you fear and loathe. No matter. Include your resistance in the practice and do it anyway.

As you grow accustomed to this exchange, and that may take a while, you come to rest in a different way, in a profound acceptance of the pain of the world and the struggles that comprise most people's lives. In that acceptance, there is a quiet joy, a joy in the wonder of life itself.

7

THE WISDOM OF FROGS

Clark Strand discovers bodhisattvas in his own backyard.

CLARK STRAND

Outside the south window of my house is a small patch of weeds that never gets mowed because it lies between the fuel tank and the wall. Every year in early spring, three or four frogs take up residence there, singing at intervals throughout the day, often while I am chanting. A few years ago, when I placed the altar next to the window, I had not yet noticed their song. Now I would never consider moving it.

Even though the frogs sing only three or four weeks out of the year, I have the vague feeling that even when I can no longer hear them, they are there all the same. Sometimes when I am chanting late at night, I can sense their seedlike bodies under a foot or more of snow, patiently waiting to be reborn. I know that I am supposed to be chanting to the mandala on the altar, but having come to Buddhism through haiku poetry, the truth is, I am often singing to the frogs.

The Japanese priest Nichiren wrote, "Frogs feed on the sound of their mother's voice, and if they cannot hear their mother's voice, they will not grow. The insect called kalakula feeds on wind, and if the wind does not blow, it will not grow." I don't know whether the kalakula actually feeds on wind, as Nichiren says, but having developed an affinity for frogs, I find it entirely believable that they feed on their mother's voice.

In the early springtime, before the trees have begun to bud and my spirit has long since flagged under the forced weight of winter darkness, I have felt myself quicken at the sound of their voices, have felt eternity open up like a heavy gate on its hinges to reveal an endless tableau of beings, all living and dying without end for one another—and singing all the while. My teachers have all gone now, but I have been adopted by the frogs. I have no argument with the various meditation schools of Buddhism, with their comparatively “silent” programs for human happiness. But I have a bone to pick with master Dogen, who in his *Shobogenzo* wrote, “People who chant all the time are just like frogs croaking day and night in spring fields; their effort will be of no use whatsoever.” We all say rash things from time to time, and sometimes even foolishly put them into print. But I am not one, even eight centuries after the fact, to endure the slander of frogs. Human programs for happiness are nearly always shallow at the root. With its reliance on competitive free enterprise, the capitalist vision overlooks the happiness not only of the poor but of the whole natural environment. Even the arhat, in his heroic quest for enlightenment in this lifetime, overlooks the plight of ordinary beings who lack the opportunity or inclination for such rigors. And Dogen overlooks the frogs.

Frogs aren’t storming the gates to nirvana and will let virtually anyone, save a mosquito or two, pass before them into buddhahood for the price of a song. Even those without the courtesy to sing along are not denied entry. Frogs are natural bodhisattvas. They have died by the quadrillions since the introduction of pesticides. Even before that, they filled a *kalpa*’s worth of Ganges rivers with their bodies every year without begrudging their lives. And I believe they did so happily because of their song.

The Chinese master T’ien-t’ai wrote, “Voices do the Buddha’s work.”

I understand what he meant. Whatever realization may come by way of silence, our happiness is never won that way. Happiness is not happiness unless it is shared. For happiness is the one thing in all the world that comes to us only at the moment we give it, and is likewise increased by being given away. Even the so-called “insentient” beings of the natural world—rocks, water, dust motes, sand—understand this truth and therefore never hold back anything of themselves. We may sit at the feet of the wisest lama or Zen master, and if he fails to understand this truth, we would do better to take our teaching from a stone.

Of course, T'ien-t'ai is referring to the voices of those who preach the *Lotus Sutra*. But there is some controversy as to what that really means. There are those who recite the entire sutra, or only one or two of its chapters, and feel satisfied that they have done the Buddha's work. Others recite only the title, *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, which admittedly does sound a little like the croaking of frogs, and teach others to do the same. Nichiren insisted that we preach the *Lotus Sutra* by being willing to risk everything to protect and proclaim its teaching—that all beings throughout the ten worlds, without exception, have buddhanature and can therefore attain enlightenment in their present form. He called this “preaching the sutra even at the cost of one's life.”

It is a strange paradox that true happiness can come only at the price of the lives of those who seek it, but that is the basic idea of the Mahayana. Underneath the panoply of Buddhist teachings on bodhisattvahood, compassion, and the like, lies one radically simple law: We must be willing to give all for all, to sacrifice everything for the sake of other beings, up to and including our lives.

In the eternal scheme of things, we all sacrifice our lives, whether we are awake to this fact or not. This vast interdependence, in which the disappearance of one thing paves the way for the appearance of another,



is the essence of life itself. Like the rest of nature, frogs understand this truth and offer themselves up on the altar of eternity without hesitation or regret. Only in the human realm does it become necessary to have something like Mahayana Buddhism to instruct us in doing what should come as naturally as dusk to the day. Be that as it may, only as human beings do we have the opportunity to acknowledge this truth and knowingly participate it in, and in all the universe there can be no greater happiness than this.

On nights when the frogs don't sing, I sometimes read from the letters of Nichiren instead, where I find the same level of nurturance and companionship, the same basic life force that the frogs spill out without thinking, syllable by syllable, in their spring song. There, I find one theme repeated over and over and over: "How could giving up a body that will decay uselessly for the sake of the *Lotus Sutra* not be exchanging rocks for gold?" Dogen's comment notwithstanding, the frogs understand implicitly that life is only song and so sing sweetly—and happily—for the sake of all beings, until their bodies are gone.

Contributing editor **Clark Strand** is the author of *Whether You Believe in Religion or Not* and *Waking the Buddha*.

8

PASSING IT ON

From father to son

MARK MAGILL

A cookie works for a few minutes. An animated sponge and a couple of well-meaning monsters pass the time until the final credits bring a howl of despair. The stuffed pig from FAO Schwarz provides some comfort, though a fruitless search for a duplicate since Schwarz went bankrupt only magnifies the dreaded day when the pig goes missing for good.

I want my son to be happy. But cookies and missing pigs only prove how fitfully temporal these measures are. So what will it take? I'm quite sure the answer doesn't lie at Toys R Us.

My father was a quiet man who spent thirty years working at a bookstore and volunteering at a local nature preserve. But from 1943 to 1945 he was a lieutenant with the Thirty-sixth Division as it fought its way through Italy and France into the heart of Germany. Though he did not speak much of the war when we were children, the medals he gave my mother when they married hinted at bravery. An officer who served with him told me a story when I called to inform him of my father's death. Their company was in the Vosges Mountains, on the border between Germany and France. They knew the Germans would put up a fierce fight, since the mountains were the last line of defense before the Allies entered Germany. My father's unit waited in their foxholes for the

attack. Then, in the first gray light of dawn, they saw a vast line of Germans advancing toward them in the mist. “Oh, to be in England, now that the Germans are here,” my father said, and soldiers laughed at his lift from Robert Browning.

He came home from the war to his job in the bookstore where, for a while, he was responsible for hiring and firing. Having seen firsthand what Nazi bigotry had wrought, he had no room for anything but quiet tolerance. Though he never once preached it, I think the fact that I am physically unable to utter a racial epithet came from his determination to view people according to their abilities.

Courage. Resourcefulness. Grace under fire. An open mind. When I think of what would be of value to my son’s happiness, these are the qualities that come to mind. But how to deliver them?

It might help to know what happiness is. Buddha said, “Those who practice the diminishing of desires thus achieve a mind of contentment having no cause for either grief or fear and, finding the things they receive are sufficient, never suffer from want.” Those who are contented are happy even though they have to sleep on the ground. Those who are not contented would not be so though they lived in celestial mansions.

The First Panchen Lama said, “The naive work for their aims alone, while the Buddhas work solely for the benefit of others.” Who do you suppose is better off?

Contentment and a casting off of naive self-indulgence seem to be part of the formula for happiness. How can I foster contentment in a town where spiraling real estate prices and celestial mansions seem the order of the day? We could go sleep on the ground, but my son’s only two, and I’d likely wake up with a backache. It’s obviously the attitude that makes the difference. Now we’re getting somewhere. I used to wonder what love and compassion had to do with enlightenment. One seemed

to rest entirely on feeling, while the other was a question of reasoned insight. What business did one really have with the other? But if the Buddha were indifferent to our suffering, why would he bother to explain the path to contentment? When I see my little fellow with his tears and smiles, indifference seems an insult to intelligence. How can I be happy while he is suffering? Clearly, we're in this together.

I've served for a number of years as a volunteer fireman in the little town where I spend part of each week. I've walked or, more often, crawled into a number of burning buildings. There is a moment when I'm geared up outside, with the smoke pouring out the windows, when it's clear to me that if someone has to go in, it might as well be me. It has always been an oddly peaceful feeling. Whenever that happens, I think of my father and his wry remark as the Germans approached—ready to meet his fate. Maybe it's something I can pass along to my son.

Contributing editor **Mark Magill**'s most recent book is *Meditation and the Art of Beekeeping*.

9

L I G H T E N   U P !

Buddhism's not such a raw deal.

J A M E S   B A R A Z

*Life, though full of woe, holds also sources of happiness and joy, unknown to most. Let us teach people to seek and to find real joy within themselves and to rejoice with the joy of others! Let us teach them to unfold their joy to ever sublimer heights! Noble and sublime joy is not foreign to the Teaching of the Enlightened One. Wrongly, the Buddha's Teaching is sometimes considered to be a doctrine diffusing melancholy. Far from it: the Dhamma leads step by step to an ever purer and loftier happiness.*

—Nyanaponika Thera (1901–1994)

“I didn’t know Buddhism was about being happy,” one of the wedding guests said to me after the ceremony. I had just officiated at the marriage of two friends, longtime dharma practitioners. As part of the ceremony, I had invited everyone to join in a lovingkindness meditation for the couple. “May you both be happy, may you be filled with joy and love,” we had silently repeated, our wishes deepening with each phrase. With the vibrant power of lovingkindness awakened, the guest’s conclusion that Buddhism is about happiness was understandable.

Despite pervasive images of the smiling Buddha, the practice and teachings of Buddhism have had a reputation of being rather more somber than joyful. With so much emphasis on “suffering and the end of

suffering,” there’s not much air time for happiness and joy. Some practitioners may even think that expressing those qualities is un-Buddhist. My friend Rick Foster, coauthor of *How We Choose to Be Happy*, frequently takes calls from listeners when he talks about his book on radio shows. He says he has come to expect that when a caller begins with “I’m a Buddhist . . .” almost invariably the statement will continue with something like “and all your emphasis on getting happy seems to overlook the suffering in life.”

I went through a period of time in my own practice when I might have been one of those callers. For several long years, the truth of suffering became my primary guide. “Real” practice meant committing to “getting off the wheel,” freeing myself of lifetimes of suffering as I wandered through endless cycles of death and rebirth. The “end of suffering” got entangled in my mind with the “end of living,” which meant tempering aliveness and enthusiasm and fun. Perhaps it was a necessary stage in the awakening process, but the smiling Buddha who had so lovingly inspired me during my first years of practice had turned into a stern taskmaster. Practice became a *serious* endeavor.

Playing the guitar and singing had been a joyful pursuit for me since the days of the Beatles. Now I rarely did either, and when I did I noticed an underlying sense of guilt. How could I be a serious practitioner and spend my time just having fun? A lifelong sports fanatic, I felt conflicted when I’d get carried away yelling and screaming at the television as I watched my team play. My poor family and housemates had to deal with my somber persona as I suppressed my natural inclination to celebrate life. I carried this same tendency into my work as a dharma teacher, a slight wariness creeping into my attitude toward those aspects of life that were fun and attractive, that might entice one to remain “on the wheel.” This focus on suffering actually had a numbing effect. Shutting

down my vitality left me feeling rather disconnected from myself and others, and less able to respond compassionately to the suffering of those closest to me.

Through the struggle and crisis of those years, I learned something important: lack of aliveness and joy is not a sign of awakening. In fact, it is just the opposite. As one of the seven factors of enlightenment, joy is not only a fruit of awakening but also a prerequisite. Joy creates a spaciousness in the mind that allows us to hold the suffering we experience inside us and around us without becoming overwhelmed, without collapsing into helplessness or despair. It brings inspiration and vitality, dispelling confusion and fear while connecting us with life. Profound understanding of suffering does not preclude awakening to joy. Indeed, it can inspire us all the more to celebrate joyfully the goodness in life. The Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu are good examples of people who have seen tremendous suffering and are still able to inspire others with an infectious joy.

We all know what it's like to get trapped in dark, constricting states of mind—and how useless it is, in terms of awakening, to dwell there. That is exactly what the Buddha taught: we don't need to stay stuck in greed, hatred, and delusion. Life can be lighter, more workable, even when it's challenging. This lightening up, which I see as an aspect of joy, is the fruit of insight into *anatta*, the selfless nature of reality, and *anicca*, the truth of impermanence. When we are not attached to who we think we are, life can move through us, playing us like an instrument. Understanding how everything is in continual transformation, we release our futile attempts to control circumstances. When we live in this easy connection with life, we live in joy.

Joy has many different flavors. It might overflow from us in song or dance, or it might gently arise as a smile or a sense of inner fullness. Joy

is not something we have to manufacture. It is already in us when we come into the world, as we can see in the natural delight and exuberance of a healthy baby. We need only release the layers of contraction and fear that keep us from it.

Methods for opening the mind to joy and happiness are found throughout the Buddha's teachings. One sure way is through skillful practice of meditation. Through seeing clearly, we can free the mind of grasping, aversion, and ignorance, allowing our natural joy to manifest. In fact, research has amply demonstrated that meditation increases activity in areas of the brain associated with positive emotions.

But formal meditation is not the only way to tap into joy. The teachings say that when we cultivate wholesome mind-states—generosity, love, compassion, happiness for others—we experience *pamojja*, translated as “gladness” or “delight.” In one of the discourses (*Majjhima Nikaya* 99), the Buddha says, “That gladness connected with the wholesome, I call an equipment of the mind . . . an equipment for developing a mind that is without hostility and ill will.” As I climbed out of my “dark night,” I was delighted to discover that those positive feelings—joy, delight, happiness, gladness—rather than being impediments on the path, actually facilitate awakening. They are part of our tool kit for keeping the heart open. Gladness and delight do not merely balance out negative tendencies, they actually heal the aversive mind.

Over the past year, I have been leading dharma groups focused on cultivating joy in our daily lives. Participants learned, some of them for the first time, that relating to the present moment with joy is a choice we can make. Discovering this can change our lives. Whether we are paying careful attention to wholesome states when they arise, reflecting on gratitude, or feeling the delight of living with integrity (which the Buddha called “the bliss of blamelessness”), we can access joy by shifting the



## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: HAPPINESS

focus of our awareness to what uplifts the heart. The Buddha spoke of this as “inclining the mind” toward the wholesome. This doesn’t mean disregarding suffering; it does mean *not* overlooking happiness and joy. With so much fear and sadness in the world, it is healthy to let our hearts delight in the blessings of life. In waking up, it’s important to remember that in addition to the ten thousand sorrows there are also the ten thousand joys.

Ajahn Sumedho, abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England, writes, “Once you have insight, then you find you enjoy and delight in the beauty and goodness of things. Truth, beauty, and goodness delight us; in them we find joy.” When we open a channel to the wellspring of joy, the waters of well-being that flow into our lives are a gift not only to ourselves. As joyful bodhisattvas, we serve by inspiring spaciousness, perspective, courage, and goodness in the hearts of others. May you be happy and awaken joy in yourself and all those you meet.

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## AWAKENING JOY: A GUIDED MEDITATION

Sit quietly in a relaxed posture. Focus on the heart center. As you inhale, visualize breathing in benevolent energy from all around you. With each exhalation, allow any negativity to be released.

Reflect on a person or situation in your life you’re grateful for. Be-

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: HAPPINESS

gin with the phrase “I’m grateful to . . .” or “I’m grateful for . . . .”

Invite into your awareness an image of that person or situation. Fully experience your gratitude, taking time to feel in your body the energy of that blessing in your life.

Take a moment to silently send a thought of appreciation to that person or that situation.

Repeat this for ten minutes, reflecting one by one on the various blessings in your life.

End with the intention to express your gratitude directly to those who’ve come to mind.

Notice the feeling of well-being as the meditation ends.

As an experiment, do this as a daily gratitude practice for a week and notice its effects.

—James Baraz

10

THE HAPPINESS METRIC

Bhutan's experiment in turning principle into policy

M A D E L I N E D R E X L E R

On Friday evenings in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, men, women, and children throng the main street, flowing together in a slow dance. Swaggering teenage boys, arms slung over each other's shoulders, speak in surprisingly gentle voices. Stray dogs assertively cohabit the city. One often hears singing—on sidewalks, pouring out of windows, on construction sites. The melodies persist in the undulating countryside, where men engaged in matches of archery or darts break into congratulatory chants when the other side scores.

Article 9 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan says: "The State shall strive to promote those circumstances that will enable the successful pursuit of Gross National Happiness." In the fall of 2012, I traveled to this simple, complicated, lavishly lovely place to find out how GNH, as the policy is known, plays out in real life. My intention was to glean what makes for happiness in a fast-changing society where Buddhism is deeply rooted but where the temptations and collateral damage of affluence are rising. Bhutanese have practiced happiness, reflected upon it, debated it, dissected it, and legislated it—and they seemed to me, on the whole, happier than Americans. But if for no other reason than the nature of impermanence, that may soon change.

Sandwiched between the world's two most populous countries, India and China, Bhutan is half the size of Indiana, has a population of about 740,000, and has never been colonized. The land rises from 300 feet in the southern lowlands to more than 24,000 feet in the mountains—some sacred and unclimbed—bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region. Bhutan is the only country in the world where Vajrayana Buddhism—deity-dense, merit-based, karma-focused—is the official religion, the only country in the world where Dzongkha—the soft, sibilant tongue closely related to Tibetan—is the national language. The four most common household assets are a rice cooker, a curry cooker, a water boiler, and a religious altar.

Bhutan's constitution stipulates that 60 percent of the country must remain under forest cover forever; today, despite breakneck urbanization, that figure is 80 percent. The government bans plastic bags. Capital punishment was abolished in 2004. Bhutanese take off 16 public holidays and numerous local festival days. And the country is a global biodiversity hotspot.

Yet Bhutan is also rich in contradictions—paradoxes that undermine the promise of GNH. The country prohibits tobacco advertising, smoking in public places, and the sale or illegal possession of tobacco products, but there was a public outcry in 2011 when a 23-year-old monk received a three-year jail sentence for smuggling in \$2.50 worth of chewing tobacco. Leaders have vowed to grow 100 percent organic crops, but most agricultural products are imported from India. The government strives for economic development, but offers few incentives for small, self-owned businesses, which are culturally perceived as ungenerous toward the collective. Bhutan has strict seat belt and anti-litter laws, but most citizens flout them. Homosexuality is illegal, but no one is arrested.

In Bhutan, every conversation about GNH became at some point

definitional. Can a nation be happy if individuals are not? Can individuals be happy if others suffer? Will the country's traditional foundations of happiness erode, to be replaced by a surfeit of stuff?

In the capital, many told me, happiness is increasingly being defined as consumerism. "People in Thimphu are getting competitive. If he has a house, I want a house. If he has a car, I want a car," said a young Ministry of Health worker. "The ones who are making money think GNH is good. The ones who aren't think GNH is bad."

But in rural Bhutan, older villagers' definition of happiness is starkly different. On the way to Punakha Dzong, the resplendent 17th-century monastery/fortress, I spoke (through a translator) with 79-year-old Sangay Lham, a smiling, gray-haired woman dressed in a checkered kira and fine silver brooch, selling fruit by the side of the road. What, I asked, does GNH mean to her? "As long as we have fire when we need it, water when we need it, warm food on the table, tasty curry, what else do we need?" she said. "Happiness is to be good at heart."

"We talk about the economy, but the core Buddhist understanding of GNH, the reality of GNH here, is the realization of compassion," said Lama Ngodup Dorji, a man with a beatific face who is the seventeenth member of his family over 15 generations to head the Shingkar Dechenling monastery. I met him in Thimphu at the offices of the affiliated Ati Foundation, which gives economic assistance to poor citizens and rural communities. The foundation is housed in a brand-new glass-clad building with polished marble floors and an Italian restaurant on the second floor. The weather had turned chilly, and Dorji was wearing a down vest over his red robes. Happiness, he said, warming his hands around a fresh cup of coffee, is a choice. "You have to brew it in yourself. Even from a lump of food, we choose each grain to suit our need. Likewise, in the philosophical manner, we choose to be who we are."

If the word “materialism” is earnestly bandied about here, much as it was in America during the counterculture half a century ago, it’s largely because, until quite recently, Bhutan was a medieval society.

In 1960, virtually the entire nation was rural. Thimphu, a collection of peasant hamlets situated in a valley on the banks of the Wang Chu river, became the official capital only in 1961. Average life expectancy was 33 years. The gross national product per person was \$51. (By contrast, that same year in the United States, a comparable measure—gross domestic product per capita—was \$2,935.) There was no centralized government administration. Agriculture was subsistence—people bred animals and cultivated only as much from the land as they needed. There were no roads and no motor vehicles—mules, yaks, and horses were the principal modes of transport. There was no electricity, no telecommunications network, and no postal system. Foreign visitors were not permitted. Bhutan had only four hospitals and two qualified doctors.

Then everything started to change. The first paved road was completed in 1962. Schools and hospitals were built. Citizens gained free healthcare and free education. Internet and a national TV station arrived in 1999. Today, life expectancy stands at 67.6 years. Eighty-six percent of people ages 15 to 24 are literate. Per capita income is just under \$3,000. More than 100,000 tourists visited the country in 2012. Ninety-three percent of households own a cell phone. About a third of the population is urban, and the government predicts that figure could rise to 70 percent by 2020.

This rapid development has brought new problems and exacerbated old ones. In Thimphu, there are 700 bars and one public library. The long-hidden issue of domestic violence has exploded in public discourse. Urbanization has put a strain on housing and sanitation. The economy

is stagnant, the private sector is on the verge of collapse, and inflation is soaring. Youth unemployment is up, and along with it formerly rare violations such as drug abuse and vandalism. The country struggles with a dire shortage of doctors and nurses. When a recent government survey asked respondents how their welfare could be most improved, their top answers registered the stubborn needs of a developing nation, GNH or not: roads, water, commerce, transportation, and communications.

In Bhutan, which is ranked 140 of 186 countries in the 2012 UN Human Development Index, the question is how the nation can become modern without losing its soul.

When first conceived, Gross National Happiness was the enlightened guiding principle of development at a time when Bhutan was starting to emerge from cultural isolation and material deprivation. Since 1907, Bhutan had been ruled by a lineage of progressive monarchs. The most visionary of these was the Fourth Dragon King, a somber-looking man named Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who took the throne at 16 after his father's death in 1972. Two years later, shortly after his coronation, the teenager coined the witty phrase Gross National Happiness. In 2006, as a logical extension of the policy, Wangchuck announced that he was voluntarily giving up the throne to make way for a parliamentary democracy in the form of a constitutional monarchy.

The Fourth King's conception of Gross National Happiness rested on four "pillars": good governance, sustainable socioeconomic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation. The humanity of GNH is seen in the roomy definitions of what are known as the policy's nine "domains": good governance; psychological well-being; balanced time use; community vitality; health; education; culture; living standards; and ecological diversity and resilience. "Living standard" refers not merely to per capita income but also to meaningful work. "En-

vironment” includes not only the measured quality of water, air, and soil but also how people perceive the quality of their natural surroundings. “Community vitality” reflects not only crime but also volunteerism.

To learn how these ideas play out in policy, I visited Karma Tshiteem, who at the time was Secretary of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Commission. I had first met Tshiteem at an April 2012 United Nations conference on GNH. He sat at my lunch table and impressed me as a jokester and a sharp observer—the class cut-up who was also the smartest student. Now, as we sat over tea in a modestly furnished anteroom to his office, he wore on his right hip an incongruous ceremonial sword, a reminder of his responsibility to the people.

I asked Tshiteem if a GNH society was really possible and mentioned that though smoking is illegal in Bhutan’s public places, I had seen kids lighting up. “That’s OK,” he said. “There is no one ideal GNH human being. And we are not trying to define a GNH person. We posit GNH, but it doesn’t mean we won’t have these outliers and we will not have a problem with youth, because youth is a time of exploration and rebellion. GNH doesn’t mean that everything has to be picture-perfect all the time.”

In Bhutan, major policy proposals go through a GNH screening tool that has real teeth. In 2008, for example, GNH Commission officials were enthusiastic about joining the World Trade Organization. A preliminary vote showed 19–5 in favor of joining, based solely on economic criteria. But when the proposal was fed through the GNH policy-screening tool, which assesses draft policies based on their impact on GNH’s nine domains, the downsides far outweighed the benefits. Among other things, WTO membership would have compelled the green-centric and health-conscious country to open its economy to a phalanx of junk food franchises such as McDonald’s and Domino’s Pizza. A second vote was



taken, and the proposal lost 19–5. Bhutan did not join the WTO.

“What this tells us is that the decisions we make are very much influenced by the frameworks we use,” said Tshiteem. “When you use the same framework that every other government uses, even Bhutanese arrive at the same conclusions. But when we brought in the GNH framework, which made them think deeply about all the other aspects that are important, suddenly they did not see this as such a great idea. One of the results from the screening tool was that WTO membership would raise the level of stress. That’s something that would never be measured in the United States in anything having to do with economics.”

Every two years, Bhutan conducts a fine-grained survey that captures the texture of citizens’ lives and their sense of rootedness in the traditional culture. Among the questions: Do you consider karma in the course of your daily life? Is lying justifiable? Do you feel like a stranger in your family? How much do you trust your neighbor? The survey asks respondents if they know the names of their great-grandparents; if men make better leaders than women (gender equality is preached but not achieved); if they planted trees in the past year; how they rate their total household income (in 2010, 71 percent said “just enough” and 20.3 percent said “more than enough”); if they think Bhutanese have become more concerned about material wealth (87.8 percent said yes); if they feel safe from ghosts (“rarely,” 20 percent said).

Respondents are considered “happy” if they achieve “sufficiency” in at least six of the nine domains, not outsized achievement in one domain at the expense of another. As Tshiteem reminded me, in Buddhism happiness is balance. “You can’t make up for lack of personal time with community vitality—you cannot. Because each domain, in itself, is a necessary condition,” he explained.

In the 2010 survey, 40.8 percent of survey respondents in the land of

Gross National Happiness tested happy.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies has devised a formula that purports to boil down national happiness into a single number:

$$\text{GNH} = 1 - (H_n \times A_n)$$

where

$H_n$  = percent of not-yet-happy people

=  $1 - H_h$  or (100 – percent of happy people)

and

$A_n$  = percentage of domains in which not-yet-happy people lack sufficiency

In 2010, the most recent survey, that calculation turned out to be 0.743—which means . . . well, I don't know. It did seem to contravene what one Bhutanese friend remarked: “Isn't it the simplest thing that makes you happy? Isn't it the most complex thing that doesn't make you happy?”

Around the world, happiness indexes are proliferating, but in Bhutan, the question of measuring happiness is divisive. Even the GNH Commission's Karma Tshiteem disagreed with the idea of boiling down population-wide happiness into a number. “There is this misconception that, with our clever index and indicators, we are trying to measure happiness.” Rather, he said, Bhutan's GNH parameters should be used like the gauges on a car's dashboard, alerting leaders to problems. Others say

that Bhutan wasn't interested in measurement until the UN and World Bank caught wind of the idea, and the country faced international pressure to come up with hard numbers.

Former Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley conceded that Bhutan's hand was initially forced by outsiders. In an election upset in 2013, he and his ruling Peace and Prosperity party were voted out, in part because of the country's decline in that second P. "What the modern world wanted was a system of measures, indicators quantifying everything," he told me. "At first, yes, I was not very happy with this, because the pressure was on Bhutan to adopt . . . the attitude of the material world: anything that is good must be measurable. And what is measurable and quantifiable has a price to it.

"I thought it was demeaning the sublime value that human society should be pursuing. And I also worried that developing metrics could lead to pursuing what is measurable and what is quantifiable, thereby risking the possibility of leaving out what is not quantifiable—but may be far more meaningful and far more important to creating the conditions for happiness."

Thinley changed his mind and acceded to the data-driven West, partly because he felt Bhutan's evolving instruments to assess well-being did, in fact, extract the essence of GNH. But, he added, "Bhutan has achieved what it has, not because we had the facility of metrics. We simply believed in the idea of happiness being the meaning and purpose of life."

Tshering Tobgay was Bhutan's opposition leader in Parliament when I visited him. Today, he is Prime Minister. A tall, strapping man with a shaved head, his physical energy is barely contained. Soft-spoken, Harvard-educated, Tobgay at times answered each of my queries with a broader question. At other times, he was bracingly candid.

In American politics, Tobgay would probably be slotted as a libertarian brain with a communitarian heart. He heads the People's Democratic Party, which believes in smaller government, decentralized power, and a strong business sector—another seeming contradiction in the land of Gross National Happiness, where the governing policy stresses nonmaterial values.

Outside Bhutan, GNH enjoys great cachet in liberal circles, as dozens of cities and countries dip their toes in the philosophy. Bhutan's tourist logo, "Happiness Is a Place," makes it a prized destination for spiritual-minded vacationers. But Tobgay is skeptical about the Western left's glorification of Bhutan—"the people who tout and market Bhutan as a living Shangri-la."

As he put it, "Bhutan is small, nonthreatening. This can be very cute. And people who are frustrated are desperately looking for alternate paradigms. . . . I want to tell them: Don't misuse our philosophy for your own political agenda." To illustrate, he mentioned an American working for a corporation in Bhutan who writes a blog about the country. "He recently took a picture of the only baggage carousel in the airport—and he is shocked. He is mortified to find that it's packed with flat-screen LCD television sets. About three years ago, a whole team from Brazil—Brazil is very enamored by GNH—came here. They called me for an interview. And the anchor immediately pounced on me. She said, 'We were disappointed. The airport was packed with television sets.' My answer to that lady, my answer to the American, and my answer to you is: who on earth said Bhutan is a monastery?"

Each of Buddhism's four immeasurables—lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—has a "far enemy" and a "near enemy." The far enemy is the virtuous mind's polar opposite—cruelty is the far enemy of compassion, for example. But the near enemy is trickier

to root out, because while it seems wholesome, it is tinged with “mental poisons,” or destructive emotions. The near enemy of compassion, for instance, is pity.

Traveling through Bhutan, I kept thinking that the near enemy of the country’s generosity and pride and abundant sense of time is complacency. Many of my contacts there also seemed disquieted by this shadow side of their benign culture. As a reader observed in *The Bhutaneese*, “The truth is that GNH or no GNH we still struggle with our daily problems of corruption, indifference, and our general tendency to slack away at everything we do and give it the name of GNH.”

Until recently, the Royal Civil Service was the largest employer of the educated, and these undemanding office jobs were coveted. Despite a religion steeped in the idea of impermanence, citified Bhutanese had come to rely on permanent government employment and benefits. Now, however, government payrolls can no longer accommodate new college graduates. “We have been spoiled,” one official told me. Or as a long-term expatriate here explained, “The people have been infantilized. There is a sense of entitlement that is a time bomb for society.”

Bhutanese proudly abjure blue-collar work. In the construction sites that dominate the urban landscape, it is almost entirely Indians who hammer and saw, pour cement and lug rebar. And it is mostly Indians and Nepalese who make up the road crews that labor in broiling sun and biting cold with crude hand tools, repairing the damage from landslides. (The Bhutanese Citizenship Act of 1985—which raised the threshold for citizenship and erected bureaucratic hurdles for naturalization—hurt the Nepali-speaking residents of southern Bhutan, tens of thousands of whom were forced to move to refugee camps in Nepal. Oddly, the controversy is more conversationally alive in the West than in Bhutan itself, where people have been kept in the dark about the painful events of that

time.)

“There are plenty of jobs, but the graduates don’t want to take them because they think the job is low for them,” a teenage boy told me. “They want to achieve greatness at a single step. They want to go to office carrying briefcases and laptops. They see people carrying iPhones and they want to carry them, too.”

In 2000 there was one newspaper in Bhutan—the government-run *Kuensel*. Today there are 11, though nearly all are struggling to survive on low ad revenue. More than 84,000 Bhutanese are on Facebook and 5,000 on Twitter. Lively blogs command thousands of followers. And GNH is jokingly said to stand for Gross National Haranguing or Gross National Harassment.

Democracy has helped the Bhutanese find their voices. As a result, some have conceived an admiration—perhaps reverse idealism—for the United States, which they perceive as culturally more upfront and politically more transparent. This is especially true of those who have lived in the States. “What I liked about people there is they don’t have a double standard,” said Chimi Wangmo, the feminist who directs the anti-domestic violence group RENEW, which stands for Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women.

As Wangmo knows well, domestic violence has been shrouded in silence. Bhutan’s 2010 Multiple Indicator Survey found that 68.4 percent of women ages 15 to 49 “believed that a man was justified in hitting or beating his wife if the woman was not respecting the ‘family norms’ such as going out without telling a husband, neglecting a child, burning the food or refusing to have sex with him.” When she began lobbying lawmakers for a bill banning domestic violence, Wangmo was met with incredulity. Opponents insisted that there couldn’t be domestic violence in Bhutan, because “Bhutan is a GNH nation.” She countered their tau-

tologies with facts, inviting legislators to RENEW's headquarters to view photographs and videos of battered women. (In February 2013, the National Council passed the Domestic Violence Prevention Bill.)

"Bhutan must come out of self-denial: It is not a Shangri-la," said Wangmo. "No matter how much we flaunt GNH, no matter how much we picture ourselves as a happiness country, the hard reality remains that we are among the most backward, poorest countries in the world. GNH is a beautiful concept. But we could do better than this—not just talking about GNH, but living it. It's basically fundamental human rights, which the Western countries have done much, much better than us."

With Gross National Happiness, Bhutan has turned the metrics of the material into the metrics of the spirit. At the moment, however, the country is poised between centuries-long traditions and an understandable rush toward the security and comforts that the affluent West takes for granted. Will these ambitions subvert the poetic possibilities of GNH?

While preparing for my trip, I had read a number of blogs from Bhutan. One in particular struck me as smart and eloquent, authored by someone who deeply understood this cultural turning point. "Land of the Thunder Dragon" is written by Yeshey Dorji, a government bureaucrat-turned-entrepreneur-turned-nature-photographer.

I met Dorji on the street in front of my hotel in Thimphu. Tall and bespectacled, dressed in jeans and a black quilted Patagonia jacket, he was gracious, impatient, cantankerous, and funny as hell. Everyone seemed to know and respect him. Wherever we went in Thimphu, people greeted him with a smile or came up to talk politics or gossip, and I thought of him as the unofficial mayor.

Dorji is highly attuned to the poignancy of impending loss. "We have jumped from one very strange period to another very strange pe-

riod,” he explained. “Today, people have all the time in the world to talk to you. It’s not productive, but it’s the human side of life. Soon, development will change all that. Bhutanese people will be abrupt, fast-moving. They will no longer be Bhutanese.”

Yet he also believes that Bhutan could learn from the American example. “Times have changed. We have to change ourselves. But we aren’t willing to do that. I am convinced the Bhutanese mentality needs a makeover—total. We keep complaining about how fast your life is in New York. But without the development of that culture, you wouldn’t be where you are.” What he admires about American culture are its energy, innovation, drive, curiosity, cosmopolitanism, ambition—qualities, in fact, that are conspicuous in Dorji himself and have enabled him to be a shrewd observer/participant in his homeland.

Like many people I met here, Dorji feels caught between two ideals: the past perfect and the future perfect—that is, the Bhutan that was serenely remote and the Bhutan that somehow will negotiate modernity. “Development changes the way people move, talk, think, the way they look at value. If you keep the same old habits, then you can’t change the Bhutanese,” he said. “But the moment you change the Bhutanese, you’ve probably lost GNH.”

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11

SIMPLE JOY

Becoming intimate with all of life's circumstances

ROSHI PAT ENKYO O'HARA

I sit here,  
Dappled by the sun filtering  
through the leaves, a child chases a pigeon,  
the old man naps there on the bench,  
a white moth flits by,  
occasions of joy,  
always right here.

Say the word “joy,” and what comes to mind? To me, joy seems to come unbidden, just erupting at the oddest times. It isn't possible to plan for joy, yet when it comes, it is an unmistakable overflowing of feelings of delight in the world and its mysteries.

I remember the morning that my dear friend Robert died, after a long night of struggle. It was one of those bright, early September mornings when the sun rises at just the angle that portends the waning of summer light. The nurses left me in the room for several hours, and I sat with his body. I chanted, I thought of our times together, I said goodbye, and then it was time to leave. When I stepped out on the corner of Lexington Avenue and 77th Street, just a few feet away was a flower

stand bursting with the season's colors. I stood transfixed, staring at the beauty of chrysanthemums, asters, dahlias, and zinnias. The sounds of morning traffic, the people moving down the street, the flowers, the sun, and the sky all seemed to be a joyous celebration of life itself, now seeming so precious after witnessing my friend's long night of letting go.

Yes, that joyful feeling was oddly present. It was as if a vibrant, fresh energy possessed me, like a brilliant dye coloring my whole being—the joy of life all around me. The intensity of his death, the long night of witness, and the early morning of saying good-bye all worked together to encourage a readiness to experience joy. Does that sound strange? It *felt* strange. After a moment or so, I was stunned at the feeling I was having. And I was grateful. Suddenly I was experiencing the vitality and immediacy of life itself—in the flowers, the people, the clamor of traffic—without the walls of resistance that human beings are heir to.

What is this resistance? Why do we again and again resist our feelings of joy or happiness or love? We don't do it intentionally, but our conditioning, our habits of mind, and our culture all seem to work to build up the walls between what we naturally feel and what we allow ourselves to feel. Ironically, it is often the times when we are forced to feel intensely—times of grief, sorrow, or physical pain—that catapult us into feeling joy. That is why we often hear people say they are grateful for the losses or difficulties they have encountered. They are grateful because the shock forced them into an intimacy with life that had been hidden from them. Intimacy seems hidden, but it is actually available to us all the time: in the world we inhabit with people, in the natural world, in our work, and in all our relationships. Once we are willing to be directly intimate with our life as it arises, joy emerges out of the simplest of life experiences. Something happens—a mourning dove coos, the eyes of another person meet ours, a cat stretches, we notice the sensation of

breeze on our cheek—and at once we are intimate with our life. It can be so subtle. You're hurrying along the street, and suddenly you notice a drop of dew on a leaf. You stop and allow that surging feeling in your chest to just well up. The moment passes, and you are back in the diffused attention of the street you're walking in: the people going by, the errand you are on, the way the day is settling on you. Yet this quality of joy hangs around the edges, allowing you to open yourself to being awake and new with each experience you encounter. Joy wells up when we leave room in our consciousness for it to come.

Joy can come as a surprise, when we least expect it. I recall sitting in a dark, airless, funky “multipurpose space” we called the meditation room at an HIV/AIDS health facility in New York City. This was before the arrival of lifesaving medication, and the center was very busy. Twice a week, I would ride my bike across town, walk into the dingy room, stack the chairs, vacuum the floor with our portable vacuum, unlock the cabinet, put out twenty meditation cushions, and wait for anyone who might come in. There were a few regulars who came to each meeting, and there were drop-ins, often those who were waiting for the acupuncture clinic next door. We would sit in meditation, talk about it a little, and then it would be time for me to repack the cushions, reset the chairs, and leave the room. It's hard to explain, because there was a grimness to the scene, yet somehow joy always arose in that little room with those who joined me there. Sickness and addiction were all around us, but the joy of connection, of being able to offer what little I could and in turn receiving the warmth and humanness of others, made those days of service uplifting and alive. No matter how tired and irritable I may have felt going in, I always seemed to leave with a flutter of energy in my chest: simple joy. Such a gift coming from a modest act of service to others! No matter how small or large our effort may be, the activity of giving and receiving in

relationship generates a field of joy when it is not encumbered by our grasping for ego gratification.

In the midst of our work, whatever it is, to recognize our joy is a wondrously beneficial experience. Although the intense feeling may fade, the sense of internal gratitude and respect stays with us. This is especially true when we are working in a group for some mutual goal. When we gather to clean a park, make food, or write a document together, there can be a quality of joy within the whole group, a kind of dropping of our usual preoccupied selves—the selves that want to be gratified in one way or another or to avoid pain—and instead, there is the joy in the efforts we offer together.

What is this intimacy, this joy, this being so close to what is in the moment that we are filled with awe? When we think of joy, we think of a buoyant, upward-moving feeling of delight, pleasure, and appreciation. We may associate joy with happy things, with falling in love, or with getting what we want. But actually there is a deeper, more resonant, soulful feeling: the joy of life no matter what the circumstances.

How is joy like falling in love? They seem similar yet slightly different. When we fall in love with a person or an idea or a project, there is also that upward sensation, that flow of energy that feels really good, almost magical, but the difference can be a subtle one. Falling in love or achieving great success is euphoric, an intensely felt elation that is dependent on the relative success of our attachment to the object of our love. True joy, with its sense of wonder and reverence, comes of itself and neither depends on nor arises out of our personal ego attachments, our projections, or our needs. True joy comes of itself, rather like the ancient Taoist notion of *tzu-jan*—that which naturally emerges from what is present in this moment, this situation. Often this is the simplest of moments: a surprising joy that lifts you up when you feel a cool breeze

on a crowded city street; a flash of inspiration as you glimpse the moon behind the clouds, a drop of water on a leaf, a toddler laughing. It is just what is actually coming up in this moment if we are free enough to notice it.

We can't control joy. It is something that bobs up when we are truly alive and meet the whole world in an instant. We can experience joy in every aspect of our life, in working, in caring, in creating, and even in suffering. I think the key to experiencing joy is, as we say so often, being awake. What is "being awake"? Isn't it our capability to let go of our grasping onto what we *think* we want, what we *think* is happening to us, to drop all of those presumptions and be exposed and intimate with what is here, right now? I believe it is our resistance to what *is* right here, right now, that blocks the natural flow of joy.

You could even say that it is the search for joy that brings us to practice meditation. We may call it something else: freedom from our fear, our anxiety, our obsessions, our sadness, or our grasping (greed). Yet if we go a little deeper, we may find that the key to our liberation from our fears is getting really close to ourselves, finding our own being deep within: the one who is not afraid, anxious, or grasping; the one who is simply here now; the one who spontaneously experiences joy in the ordinary stream of life. How do we get in touch with that deepest, clearest, most intimate self? Isn't it through the practice of stopping, breathing, bringing our heart-mind back to this breath, this reality, whatever it may be?

In that practice of intimate meditation, we enter what the ancients called the "gate of ease and joy." This phrase, from an early Chinese meditation manual, evokes the ease that Shakyamuni felt as he settled onto a cushion made of kusha grass offered by the milkmaid who gave him sustenance after his many years of struggle, intentional hunger, and

self-denial. The offering of something of ease helped to turn him toward a “middle way” between asceticism and excess. Such is the ease evoked in the phrase “gate of ease and joy”: an ease that gently smoothes the sharp pangs of life that invade our mind and leaves a space within us for joy. The joy in the phrase is like the joy evoked in the *Lotus Sutra*, where the Buddha says that those who respond to the teachings with joy will go forth in various places among various people, who will themselves respond with joy and go forth and in this way share joy throughout the world. The infectious quality of joy is like when a baby laughs or an old person smiles; we don’t know why we experience joy, but we do, because it is joy arising.

What is it that opens the gate to joy in our ordinary, day-to-day lives? I’ve been calling it awakeness and awareness: the simple practice of sitting quietly, breathing in and out, dropping our obsessive thoughts and resistance to the freshness of the moment that is exactly here. It is amazing, our resistance to tapping into the joy that is like the blue sky surrounding this earth. Joy is always here if we can just for a few moments stop our constant ruminating and grasping for what is *not* here. Breathing in, we drop our preoccupations and thoughts, and we simply breathe in, enjoying that in-breath. Breathing out, we again simply enjoy that out-breath. In this way, we experience things as they are. Appreciation and gratitude suffuse our whole being, and joy arises.

Maybe it doesn’t always feel exactly like that. When we hang onto our stories and ideas about ourselves, it doesn’t feel joyful; it feels tiresome. We say, “Oh no, that thought again, that desire, that frustration.” But if we take a breath and calmly, without any self-recrimination, see the distraction and let it go, we are back in the reality of this moment. We are at once aware of what we were thinking and of the present moment.

This dual awareness, a split-second really, helps us to recognize the truth and vitality of being awake to this moment. And as we clear away this old debris, a deeper truth emerges. It is like the story of the Chinese Zen master Dongshan, who was asked, “Is there joy in your practice?” He replied, “It is not without joy. It’s like sweeping shit into a pile and then picking up a precious jewel from within it.”

Of course there’s shit; shit is part of life. It is what is left over from our actions, smelling of all the aspects of life. If there weren’t shit, we wouldn’t appreciate the jewel. An old Buddhist theme is that in the mythical “heavenly realm” where everything is perfect, true liberation is not possible. I would add that true joy is not possible in a world without suffering. The suffering (the shit) enriches us, gives us wisdom and compassion. The jewel is this joy of life itself.

When we are willing to be intimate with what actually is here now, to look directly at all of our experience, we might recognize that this *is* our life, however different from our thoughts and ideas about it. It is as if we hunker down and actually get very real, recognizing that our thoughts of gaining and losing, good and bad, happy and sad, are what distance us from ourselves. When we breathe in fully and pause, we clear a space in our mind without judgment. If we are willing to hang in with the practice over and over again, noticing how our thoughts of gaining or losing distance us from ourselves and from what is, we open ourselves to a whole new reality. We enter into intimacy with everything; we enter a world of joy that is so close, so pervasive, that we are surprised we haven’t been aware of its presence all along.

Once Dongshan was asked, “What is the deepest truth? What is the wisdom that liberates?” His response was, “I am always close to this.” It is the closeness itself—the intimacy with what is here with us now—that is the truth that liberates us. Imagine being so close to your

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: HAPPINESS

experience of life! This is true joy. To be so close to your experience of life, so intimate with your world, that you are filled with awe. You are like a child lying in the grass, staring up at the vast starry night.

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