

IN QUEST OF HAPPINESS

The peculiar thing about happiness is that everyone wants it but no one agrees on how to get it. Our flourishing times have been hard on achieving happiness. Continual monitoring by the Gallup Organization, for example, looks for how many people in every country are prosperous.. It's no surprise that in nations where political turmoil exists, the number of people who are thriving is very low. But it's less obvious why in rich, peaceful societies like the U.S. the percentage is somewhere between a third and half the population.

If being rich and peaceful doesn't make us happy, why not? Agreement on this question is hard to find. In general, psychology hasn't studied happiness, being concerned instead with mental disorders from depression to psychosis. The world has a record number of people taking antidepressants and tranquilizers, another index of how unhappy we are. By some estimates, half the population should be seeing a therapist.

In the new field of positive psychology, which has begun to study happiness, the findings are mixed. A large contingent of researchers seems to believe that lasting happiness is impractical to pursue. We are bad predictors of what will make us happy in the long run, it turns out, and after getting a better job, a nice wedding, a baby, a big house, and more money, people's initial burst of happiness fades, leaving the problem of lasting happiness as inexplicable as ever. Some psychologists suggest that happiness is accidental and incidental, happening briefly and at haphazardly.

This position, and the general gloom about lasting happiness, contradicts long-held spiritual traditions both East and West. Which hold that happiness is the object of human life, that existence is tailored to make us happy, and that we become unhappy because of our own error and lack of understanding. Here is where a secret comes in.

It seems natural to associate happiness with pleasure. Our brains are set up to register the sensations of pleasure and pain. We like the one and dislike the other. So there is a tendency to say that happiness consists of maximum pleasure and minimal pain. This position, once called hedonism, has become scientific in our day, thanks to brain scans that can pinpoint the pleasure-pain centers and the chemicals they release. With such evidence at hand, we have entered a new phase of

hedonism, and indeed people spend a great deal of time, money, and effort, backed by the massive machinery of mass media, to gain a pleasurable life.

But science is only a thin disguise for the same old mistake, equating pleasure with happiness. The secret known to every spiritual tradition is that pleasure and happiness are not related. There are miserable people who can afford to fill every hour with pleasure. There are people afflicted with painful circumstances who manage to be happy despite their situation. The pleasure and pain centers of the brain don't control us. Look at the physical pain of a marathon runner crossing the finish line. It is secondary, even irrelevant, to his sense of accomplishment.

But triumph isn't the answer either. Happiness is actually rooted in something subtler: fulfillment. It is fulfillment that people seek when they pursue happiness, of what they should seek if they want happiness that lasts a lifetime. So where does fulfillment come from? Meaning and purpose. Where do meaning and purpose come from? That's the real question you need to ask yourself.

Nothing is essentially meaningful as an experience. This is hard to realize and perhaps harder to accept. Pleasure can turn to pain, love to indifference or even hate (ask any divorce attorney), good health can turn to illness, and so on. Such is the human mind's intricacy that even the anticipation of bad events can create unhappiness. So can painful memories, guilt, anxiety, and other mental states destructive to happiness.

Having considered the problem for thousands of years, the world's wisdom traditions concluded that the only source of happiness, the actual secret, must exist in the mind itself. Even though the mind creates all the states of misery just described, only mind can rescue itself from its self-created illusions, false hopes, ill-considered choices, self-destructive habits, wrong beliefs, and other missteps. A journey must be undertaken to a place where mistakes have been corrected. The good news is that a person doesn't have to correct each and every mistake individually. To do that would require years, even decades, of concentrated effort.

Instead, the spiritual journey delivers happiness by taking you to a level of the self that is free of mistakes by its very nature. We **have** often labeled this the true self, but labels are irrelevant. The important thing is the process of transcendence, or going beyond the illusion. As long as you remain in the illusion, the best you can hope for is to upgrade it. To actually escape the causes of pain and suffering

requires more than an upgrade. You must find the underlying reality that removes your allegiance to pain and suffering. To do so is to know the secret of happiness, and having found the secret, actually acting upon it. While everyone seems to be talking about happiness in terms of maximum pleasure, wisdom tells us to look where no one is talking, because that's how you take the first step toward reaching the goal.

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