

Your Right to Be Happy
by Rebecca Dixon
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Since I started a daily meditation practice, I've run into a lot of confusion among Buddhists about the word "happy." Even the idea of wanting happiness makes a lot of us uncomfortable. And yet, to a week-long gathering of thousands in Arizona in 1993, His Holiness the Dalai Lama categorically declared, "I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. ... the very motion of our life is toward happiness."

Discomfort about seeking happiness is not confined to Buddhists. Many people feel squeamish about even desiring it, as if there's a finite amount of it in the world and they would be selfish to seek more than is given to them. They seem to feel they would be taking it away from others. A lot of people ask, "How can I be happy when so many people are hungry, grieving, homeless, injured, afraid, sick..." and so on? They seem to misunderstand compassion as a mandate to suffer as much as everyone else.

Still, I have to ask, "wouldn't you *like* to be happy?" One woman in a recent group discussion said she'd always had the sense that happiness was trivial, almost silly. She said happiness looked like actors in commercials, who wear absurd smiles because they've acquired some product. The happy characters in sitcoms are either the ridiculous ones, or the outright boring ones. There's almost an implied equation between happiness and stupidity.

When his co-author of the book, The Art of Happiness, asked the Dalai Lama if he was happy, His Holiness answered "Yes," with quiet sincerity and a smile. The art of being happy, he said, "begins by identifying those factors which lead to happiness and those factors which lead to suffering." He then explained that one gradually *eliminates* factors leading to suffering and *nurtures* those leading to happiness. "That is the way," he said.

Other people, even those who've meditated and studied for many years, have a persistent sense that they're not worthy of being happy. Maybe it's because they feel they should only aspire to making *others* happy. Or perhaps they feel innately defective, or they believe they've done something unforgivable. Whatever the underlying reason, I think these are the people I feel the most compassion for.

So I want to declare that like the Dalai Lama, I believe everyone has the right to be happy. Everyone, including you and me. When I first began teaching, it was to a group of substance abusers who were court ordered to be in the program where I taught meditation. I made this same declaration to them, and many perked up as if the thought had never before occurred to them, or else it had been ground to dust by the harshness of their lives.

It's been my experience that when you ask most people if they're happy, they'll look confused at first and hesitate to answer. Many have countered by asking, "What do you mean by happiness?" This is a very good question.

There are a lot of questions to ask about the experience – or state – of happiness. What does it feel like? What causes it? Can you 'be happy' for a length of time while nasty things are happening? The Dalai Lama says that if you possess, "a calmness of mind, a degree of stability within, then even if you lack various

external facilities that you would normally consider necessary for happiness, it is still possible to live a happy and joyful life.”

I read The Art of Happiness soon after I started my Buddhist practice, and this statement may have helped shape the way I identify happiness. During a month-long retreat, Jack Kornfield gave me the assignment of investigating what Enlightenment feels like and report back in a week. This didn't mean either of us thought I was fully Enlightened or that we fully accepted the Mahayana notion that we all have a Buddha Nature that includes an element of Enlightenment. I think we both recognized, though, that there are times when the mind and heart are freed from what stands between suffering and happiness.

When I returned for my interview with Jack the next week, I confidently told him that for me Nirvana feels like a combination of contentment, love and joy. By “contentment” I mean we aren't pining for anything other than what is. Just satisfying my desires has never made me happy and it's often made me miserable. Contentment arises when cravings cease. Buddhists might call it equanimity and I have no quarrel with that. Under either name, it's a feeling of becoming lighter. I've heard Gil Fronsdal say that as we continue to practice, we get lighter, because it's “enlightening.”

Love is almost the same as metta. Often I think that “metta is bettah,” because it's often more durable. Much of what we call ‘love’ is dependent on impermanent factors that we can't control. Metta is something we can cultivate and maintain all by ourselves.

Metta recognizes our unity with all other beings, so we literally love others “as we love ourselves.” For many years I thought this Biblical phrase was a comparison between the way we love ourselves and how much we love others, saying we should love others *as much as* we love ourselves. Now I understand it to mean we should love others with the recognition that we are not separate. We are all one. When I have metta for anyone it includes me *and* everyone else. Metta isn't something that comes out of us and goes to others, which is how most people conceptualize love. In fact ‘self’ and ‘other’ is a delusion, which can lead to bigotry and mistreatment of groups perceived to be different from the groups in power.

Seeing our unity with all beings is incredibly liberating. When we look at the world and the universe with this understanding, we are naturally generous and concerned for the well-being of us all. It leaves us with no lingering doubts about our self-worth or anyone's right to be happy.

This connection with all beings fills us with the joy of unguarded love. It doesn't make us naïve about the faults of some individuals, or leave us defenseless against their unkind speech and deeds. It allows us to see the suffering that motivates anyone's unkindness, including ours, and it enables us to respond wisely, minimizing harm to anyone.

This is the awareness on which the martial art of Aikido is based. We maintain our balance – or equanimity – so we can respond to aggression without using equal and opposite force. Instead we either move away from the oncoming force or redirect it in a way that ensures no one gets hurt. This takes training, as any practitioner of Aikido will tell you. They might also tell you, like Wendy Palmer in her book, The Practice of Freedom, that practicing Aikido cultivates equanimity and liberation. She describes the experience as joyful.

Just imagine being surrounded by circle after circle of beings you love. Your family, your friends, your cat, people you've just met and would like to know better, etc. You could reach out at any time, in any direction, and touch love, to and from your heart. Metta expands that circle to include everyone and everything. Just imagine a universe filled with this love. That's the joy I'm talking about.

No one should feel they're not entitled to this kind of happiness or that it's trivial, selfish, etc. Buddhist happiness, or liberation, isn't selfish, because the love part of it brings us joy when others are happy. It's a state of mind that nurtures joy for all beings. It radiates out from us and others who have it to all beings everywhere.

So... if it isn't enough to be told by me (and the Dalai Lama) that you have the right to be happy, maybe it would be easier for you to aspire to happiness if I say you have a *duty* to be happy. You may have trouble accepting that your happiness is a gift to others. But it's easy to observe that unhappy people are far more likely to make life unpleasant for others.

My wife and I watch the Great British Baking Show as a way to end the day without the pandemic on our minds. One contestant won despite treating every minor mistake like a total catastrophe, muttering, "That does it, I can't do this, they'll send me home tonight." He always looked miserable, even when he won in the end. For ten episodes I felt troubled by his inability to enjoy a contest in which he was surrounded by happy and loving people.

If you look at those you know who are mean to others, you can probably see that they live unhappy lives. The villains of history were miserable. They hid it, which I urge you not to do, because suppressing what bothered them may be what turned them into monsters.

Where do you start becoming content, loving and joyful? These qualities are the result of working the Eightfold Path. Practice mindfulness and metta, develop equanimity, compassion and sympathetic joy either through meditation or by connecting kindly with other beings.

Whenever you can, take note when you *are* content, loving and joyous, and identify what led to those feelings. Then, nurture those causes. Repeat whatever you did or realized that led you to happiness. Meanwhile, identify what makes you *unhappy*, get to know what caused your unhappiness and use mental Aikido to avoid it in the future.

Ours is a step-by-step Path which we don't have to take exactly in order. We work the parts of the Path with whatever arises. Gradually all the parts fall into place as we improve the skills it develops.

Getting happier is our right. I hope you enjoy it.

Thank you.