

# Living with Joy in the World As It Is

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*“Happiness that depends mainly on physical pleasure is unstable; one day it’s there, the next day it may not be. True happiness relates to the mind and heart.”*

*--His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

*"There is no way to happiness -- happiness is the way."*

*-- Thich Nhat Hanh*

## Readings

from the *Dhammapada* (early Buddhist text)

Let us live in joy, never hating those who hate us. Let us live in freedom, without hatred even among those who hate.

Let us live in joy, never attached among those who are selfishly attached. Let us live in freedom even among those who are bound by selfish attachments.

Let us live in joy, never hoarding things among those who hoard. Let us live in growing joy like the bright gods.

from *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret & Science of Happiness*  
by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche:

The truly sad thing is that most people seek happiness in ways that actually sabotage their attempts.

As a child, I was taught that there are two kinds of happiness: temporary and permanent. Temporary happiness is like aspirin for the mind, providing a few hours of relief from emotional pain. Permanent happiness comes from treating the underlying causes of suffering.

This sense of well-being, regardless of the fluctuation of outer and inner experience, is one of the clearest ways to understand what Buddhists mean by “happiness.”

## Sermon

The Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein recounted in a recent interview that when she used to study with the teacher Sharon Salzberg, Salzberg would often say as Boorstein left “Be happy Sylvia.”

For a long time, Boorstein said, she simply thought of this as a pleasant farewell, an expression of good wishes. Eventually, though, it dawned on Boorstein that her teacher was recommending a practice!

“Remember to be happy Sylvia, practice being happy” she was actually meaning if not quite saying.

Okay then, we might want to know how to do this – and I’ll get to that, that’s part two.

But first, *is* it really okay to seek happiness and joy in the world as it is, a world with so much suffering, pain, and sorrow?

Come on! Syria, Iraq, climate change, nuclear proliferation, gun violence, poverty, hunger...

Living with joy in *this* world?

Although... *it is* a beautiful day in this neighborhood today!

*Are* we allowed to *enjoy* the blue sky and gentle breezes and slowly turning leaves... without feeling guilty about it because others close to home and far away are suffering and because the planet’s future looks pretty grim?

How about when we light our candles of joy and sorrow? How are we to feel when one candle is for a dear one’s death and another for a new grandchild? Are we allowed to feel the joy even in the shadow of the sorrow? Or should we feel guilty, even ashamed – or at least awkward – for our joy and happiness?

We have a hymn (No. 17) which sings words by poet William Blake that suggest we need not feel ashamed, that this is just the way life is... maybe even should be – but *is*, in any case:

Joy and woe are woven fine, clothing for the soul divine:  
under every grief and pine runs a joy with silken twine.

It is right it should be so: we were made for joy and woe;  
and when this we rightly know, safely through the world we go.

So maybe in this spirit a better response than guilt or shame or even just discomfort in the presence of these dramatically varied candles... is to notice how *beautiful* it is that on the same day a parent or friend is mourned, a child is born... or that on the same day someone reports a broken hip another reports they are cancer-free for year the fifth.

We may not understand why, but it is undeniable that “we were made for joy and woe” – this is the nature of our lives. Isn’t it better to accept that this is the case than to rail against it – which we can’t change? And after all, it does no good for those who are in the midst of sorrow and woe for others to deny their times of joy and happiness. In fact, maybe quite the contrary.

Not that we should enter the refugee camp or the hospital room blithely whistling a happy tune, as if nothing were wrong. But if sad or hurting, I for one, anyway, would appreciate the arrival of someone whose presence somehow glows with an underlying joy and peace – yes, sympathetic, understanding my serious condition, but bringing beauty and joy into the room at the same time.

“*Underlying* joy.”

The French Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard writes (echoing his Buddhist tradition along with most of the world’s wisdom traditions): “The most common error is to confuse pleasure for happiness. Pleasure, says the Hindu proverb, ‘is only the shadow of happiness’”. This is an echo of what we heard in the second reading about temporary and permanent happiness. (And tragically of course this is an error that our entire culture

of consumption is based on – entirely misunderstanding what Jefferson meant by “the pursuit of happiness” – not to mention all of the world’s wisdom traditions. And it is an error that is not so good for our spirit or for our earth.)

And none of which is to say that we should refuse to appreciate and enjoy pleasure as it comes to us – pleasure that is simply one of the gifts of creation. Rather, the point here is that we should not *depend upon* passing pleasure for enduring happiness.

Joseph Campbell called this more enduring happiness “bliss” – the bliss that can be found at the center of the wheel of fortune, the wheel turning, up and down with the ups and downs, pleasures and pains, that simply come with a human life, but at the center a still point, a deeper happiness, a more enduring joy.

How can we live more consistently at the center?

Do you ever get a taste of this bliss, this deeper happiness, more enduring joy, wellspring of well-being? I believe we all do, perhaps with not even realizing that this is what we are tasting, experiencing. Because in one way of looking at it, it is actually nothing special, so ordinary we are in danger of missing it for what it is.

Emerson famously shared such a moment:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.

And here’s one of mine... at least I think this is what it was:

Not long ago I was walking down Boylston Street from the Prudential Center to Fenway Park on a beautiful afternoon. Young people were eating and drinking and talking at the outdoor cafés. I was on my way to a baseball game. It was beautiful, and I felt happy and noticed that I felt happy.

Even though as I walked I also had in mind latest headlines from Syria (which at the time were about chemical weapons and missile strike threats), along with awareness of more local sorrows, including those in our own community. So I felt a measure of anxiety and sadness too.

Yet in the midst of all of this I also seemed to have a taste of an underlying well-being in which I was living, moving, having my being. Was I delusional?

Maybe... maybe not.

Because I don’t think it was just that I was headed to a baseball game on a splendid evening. For I’ve also – as perhaps you have – experienced some of that taste in the midst of my own personal sorrow. Grieving or moving through some other personal challenge in my life, yet being held by others and so feeling a deeper if poignant kind of well-being, even joy; to steal from Ricard again, something like the peace and stillness at the depths of the ocean, even as storms rage at the surface.

Now, at our Bodhisattva Study Group a couple of weeks ago, in preparation for our reading of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche’s book *The Joy of Living*, I asked the very question I’m addressing today: Is it okay to seek happiness, to be happy, in a world filled with pain and suffering.

Our conversation was wide-ranging and rich. Then, eventually someone said – and there were nods around the circle – that we don’t so much have a *right* to seek happiness and joy as we have a *responsibility* to seek happiness and joy. “Be happy Sylvia!” Exclamation point.

Why? What is this about?

Well, think of it this way: just as we might want a genuinely peaceful, happy person to enter our hospital room to offer sympathy, so might the world need such people... like everywhere. Yes, we need competent people, we need smart people, we need kind and caring people. But if we had all those sorts of people and they were sour and sad all the time... well, that would not be a world I'd want to live in.

The world needs happy people, joyful people.

In other words, it may well be more important than ever for us each to cultivate joy and happiness. Think of your own life. When you are happy, when you have a taste of that deep sense of well-being, don't you have more energy for the tasks at hand, aren't you readier to address the challenges before you, whether personal or global?

I know I feel more energetic and able to do what I need to do on a beautiful blue-sky day than on a cloudy, humid, heavy day.

So can I – can we – cultivate an *inner* climate that enables us to have that blue-sky feeling and energy more of the time, that sense of well-being, that experience of deep peace even as the currents swirl above and around us?

The short answer is yes. And what better life-work than cultivating that deep well-being, that more enduring joy which is not dependent upon the turning of the wheel one way or another, up and down, less shaken by the waves at the surface?

Yes, we *can* – and maybe do indeed have a responsibility to – seek this more enduring, lasting joy and happiness... to seek at least more frequent tastes of such joy and happiness.

Now, it *is* the task of a lifetime, and most of us will never be in that place of deep peace and well-being and joy all the time. Yet why not more of the time? Realizing too, actually, that the task itself is, though sometimes hard, at the same a task filled with joy – in other words in large measure the path becomes the goal.

To begin with, let me suggest two practices which can help:

First – and I talk about this all the time – simple mindfulness. Here is a meditation in this spirit:

Close your eyes. Listen. Simply allow and notice the flow of thoughts and feelings... like a river. No need to control the flow, just notice it, step back in your mind, be the witness.

Notice too your sense of this room, of those around you, our connection to one another

Notice your own weight in the pew, your breathing in, breathing out.

Notice whether or not you are at home in the moment... or wishing this sermon would be over and we'd sing the closing hymn... just notice.

It is all like a river flowing. Whatever is happening this moment, in our lives, in the world... the river is flowing... and we can allow, witness the flow... of thoughts... of feelings.

Listen... notice... be... here... in this flowing moment...

Why or how does mindfulness as a practice cultivate that deeper well-being and happiness? It is something like this, something like stepping out of the swirling river to the shore. And thus becoming less attached to the things that come and go, and more grounded in that which endures, that which at the same time connects us to one another, to the interwoven tapestry of life. Natural mind. Buddha nature. Atman. Inner light. God within.

Second practice. Be kind. I know, I know, I say this all the time too. But not only is it right and proper to be kind, not only do all the teachers of humanity enjoin us to be kind. Being kind actually does bring us a deeper happiness and well-being. There are studies that prove it is so, and it makes perfect sense – for kindness, like mindfulness, takes us out of our small, ego-bound selves, connects us to others – well, reminds us that we are always connected to others, to life, to the source of life.

Even better news, we can practice before we practice, using in our meditation for example, very old Buddhist words:

May all beings be well,  
may all beings be happy,  
may all beings be at peace,  
may all beings be at ease.

I can close to guarantee that meditating frequently on these words – or perhaps on the Prayer of St. Francis (“Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace...”) will change you and open you to greater well-being, peace, and service to life.

So... pay attention... be kind... and yes, in the words of the second reading:

Let us (*do our best to...*) live in joy,  
never hating those who hate us...  
never attached among those who are selfishly attached...  
never hoarding things among those who hoard.  
Let us live in growing joy...

Be happy friends!

So may it be.

**A few passages from *Happiness* by Matthieu Ricard:**

p. 7 – Happiness is rooted in “deep insight into reality and the nature of mind, and filled with benevolence for others.”

“By happiness I mean here a deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind.” “... also a way of interpreting the world, since while it may be difficult to change the world, it is always possible to change the way we look at it.”

p. 22 – “Anyone who enjoys inner peace is no more broken by failure than he is inflated by success.”

p. 23 “...happiness... is the purging of mental toxins, such as hatred and obsession, that literally poison the mind.”

p. 25 – Sanskrit word “*Sukha* is a state of lasting well-being that manifests itself when we have freed ourselves of mental blindness and afflictive emotions. It is also the wisdom that allows us to see the world as it is, without veils or distortions. It is, finally, the joy of moving toward inner freedom and the loving-kindness that radiates toward others.”

p. 31 – “Happiness is a state of inner fulfillment, not the gratification of inexhaustible desires for outward things.”

p. 40 – “The most common error is to confuse pleasure for happiness. Pleasure, says the Hindu proverb, “is only the shadow of happiness” (not that we shouldn’t enjoy pleasures as they come!

p. 41 - “ ‘Pleasure is the happiness of madmen while happiness is the pleasure of sages,’ wrote the French novelist and critic Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly.”

p. 66 “...one can suffer physically or mentally... without losing the sense of fulfillment that is founded on inner peace and selflessness. There are two levels of experience here, which can be compared respectively to the waves and the depths of the ocean. A storm may be raging at the surface, but the depths remain calm. The wise man always remains connected to the depths.”

p. 69 “It is essential to acquire a certain inner sense of well-being so that without in any way blunting our sensitivities, our love, and our altruism, we are able to connect with the depths of our being.”

p. 204 – A study: the difference between having fun and doing something kind – the well-being and happiness reported by those who do the latter eclipses those who do the former.

p. 254 – “Someone who has used every second of her life to become a better person and to contribute to others’ happiness can die in peace.”