

The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World Summary

By Howard C. Cutler

Is there an art to being truly happy?

The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World, explores how Buddhist teachings and practices contribute to a Western understanding of happiness. Eastern and Western interpretations of happiness are juxtaposed, to reveal how to create an abundance of joy, by minimizing suffering and cultivating happiness and well-being.

American psychiatrist Howard Cutler, met the 14th Dalai Lama while studying Tibetan medicine in Dharamsala. Cutler was inspired by their discussions, and the Dalai Lama's capacity for joy. When it comes to happiness, the Dalai Lama's advice is simple. Identify what leads to happiness, and what leads to suffering. Once you've done this, gradually eliminate those things that lead to despair, and cultivate those things that lead to happiness.

Western perspectives of happiness differ from the Dalai Lama's understanding. Western views support the notion that happiness appears from out of the blue, and is determined by external factors. Alternatively, we see it as an elusive cause and effect scenario, i.e., if I lose a couple of extra kilos, then I'll be happy.

As Westerners, we believe that external events have the power to determine our happiness. Psychological studies however, show that each of us has an individual baseline level of happiness, and external

circumstances don't permanently recalibrate this level.

How would you feel if you won the lottery?

Most lottery winners do experience a short-term happiness high, but then this level subsides, and they return to their customary set-point of happiness. Conversely, people confronted by severe health problems, such as paralysis or cancer, tend to revert to their previous happiness level, after the initial stages of shock and grief.

This summary takes us briefly through the Dalai Lama's somewhat different perspective on happiness. He believes that happiness is available to all of us, because it generates from inner resources, rather than outside circumstances. He suggests that by training our minds, we can cultivate happiness as an enduring trait, rather than a fleeting state that's dependent on chance.

Accessing Happiness, Requires That We Understand Suffering

The Dalai Lama points out that suffering is a universal, and unavoidable part of life. It's human nature to try and avoid suffering by resisting any change that might trigger it. We often cling to the past, catastrophize about the future, feel victimized, and blame others for what happened. But, by doing this, we're only adding to our suffering. The Dalai Lama believes in facing suffering head-on. He says: 'Although you may not always be able to avoid difficult situations, you can modify the extent to which you suffer by how you choose to respond to it.'

Our response to suffering can often provide our lives with great meaning. How we choose to respond to suffering is well illustrated by Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist, and holocaust survivor. During the Second World War, his experiences in concentration camps, gave him insight into how people managed to survive these atrocities. He observed that those who survived did so, not because of youth or physical strength, but because they derived resilience from their sense of purpose. Being able to find meaning in suffering is powerful because it helps us to cope, even during the most challenging times.

Adopt the Perspective That Suffering Is

Impermanent

The philosopher Alan Watts said: 'The truth is, we know so little about life, we don't really know what the good news is and what the bad news is.' How we perceive and analyze good and bad news is simply a matter of perspective.

The following story, about a farmer whose horse runs away, illustrates how a shift in perspective can change how you respond to things.

After his horse ran away, the farmer's neighbors were quick to comment on his bad luck. The farmer responded that no one can know what's good and what's bad. Hence, when the horse returned with a wild stallion, the neighbors were quick to comment. Only this time, remarking on his good luck. Again, the farmer replied that no one can know what's good and what's bad.

Things changed again when the farmer's son broke his leg, trying to tame

the wild stallion. Now the neighbors were certain of the farmer's bad luck. Again, the farmer responded by saying that no one can know. Sometime later, when war broke out, all the able-bodied young men were conscripted into battle, except the farmer's son. He was spared because of his broken leg.

The message is that; we need to be like the farmer, and develop a more balanced mindset. By stepping back from a situation, without immediately judging something as good or bad, we can train our minds to be more open to the possibility of happiness. But, in order to shift our perspective, we also need to engage with the emotions that feed suffering.

Anger and Anxiety Are Two Powerful Emotions That Are Worth Exploring

Anger tells us that something is violating our deepest values. The difficulty is that, we can be inclined to suppress our anger or express it in destructive ways. If we don't deal with anger appropriately, it can harm our health and relationships. Choosing to respond, rather than to react, can be a mechanism to reduce further suffering. For the Dalai Lama, the age-old traditions of meditative practice, are one of the best ways to cope with anger. It can teach us to respond with patience and tolerance.

How do you respond to anxiety? Anxiety is a useful protective response to imminent danger. It's a warning system that keeps us alert to possible threats. The problem is that in modern-day life, anxiety has become an overactive response, that we can't always switch off.

Take a specific situation like writing a test. We tend to attach our thoughts to the outcome. Perhaps envisioning failure, or wanting to ace our results. If we come from a place of sincerity, our anxiety may decrease. For example, writing a test may be an opportunity to cultivate and refine our skills. A lack of confidence can increase anxiety, and the Dalai Lama believes that being honest with ourselves, about both our capabilities and our limitations, can be the antidote to this.

Suffering Can Be Reduced – But It's Just As Important to Understand and Build Happiness

The Dalai Lama says that our purpose is to be happy, and that our wish to be happy is a natural part of the human condition. He believes that love and compassion are necessities and that humanity cannot survive without them.

Compassion is a cornerstone of happiness for The Dalai Lama. He believes that practicing compassion serves the happiness of others - and ultimately our own. He reminds us that our survival depends on looking after the well-being of others, and our global community. We bring a lot of suffering upon ourselves, because we're so often internally focused. Scientific studies support this. They show that when we alleviate other people's suffering, we also tend to reduce our own.

On a more personal level, our closeness and intimacy with others also builds happiness. The Dalai Lama believes that intimacy with others, is core to our health and happiness. Research supports this. If we have close friendships and people to turn to, then we're more likely to survive health challenges and less likely to develop diseases.

So, intimacy shouldn't just be confined to our close groups, family members, or a significant other. It's based on the willingness to be open, to show empathy, and to embrace countless opportunities to connect with others more deeply and genuinely.

Challenging Western Notions of Romantic Love

The Dalai Lama believes that the Western lustful approach to love, isn't the road to lasting happiness. He asserts that good relationships are based on respect and appreciation for others. Having the capacity to share our deepest, most vulnerable selves with another, makes for meaningful connections. Relationships that are able to draw on this capacity, require time and energy. And, this energy also needs to be put into a deeper sense of spirituality, and connecting to something more significant than the self.

The Religion of Kindness

The Dalai Lama says that his religion is very simple - it's just kindness. With this in mind he says that all religions can make a useful contribution to humanity, but we don't have to be religious to be spiritual.

He advises that each individual takes the spiritual path that best fits

them, their mental disposition, natural inclination, and cultural background. The crucial component is for you to define and follow values that serve the common good.

In Conclusion

The parting advice of the Dalai Lama is that training our minds is critical when it comes to easing our suffering, and cultivating our happiness. However, it's an art. And refining any art-form takes time and discipline.

Just as a tree can't suddenly grow strong roots to survive an approaching storm, we can't suddenly decide to be happy in a stressful situation. It's time to appreciate our potential as human beings, and to recognize the importance of inner transformation. We all have the power to change for the better, in order to enhance our happiness. The Dalai Lama explains; 'like our physical body - where growth takes time, our mental development also takes time. Minute by minute, day by day, month by month, year by year, and decade by decade.'

So, how are you going to begin?