

The Book of Joy Summary

By Douglas Abrams

'How do we find and cultivate joy, even in the face of suffering?'

The Book of Joy is a poignant and heartwarming account of a week-long conversation between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Two of the world's most influential spiritual leaders share their accumulated wisdom, and discuss one of life's most fundamental questions, 'How do we find joy and light, amidst so much darkness and suffering?'

The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, is an Anglican priest who stood up against the oppressive apartheid regime in South Africa. Both men are recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize, in recognition of their contribution as spiritual and moral leaders.

This brief summary will look at this gathering of minds. The two leaders met as a once-off opportunity to celebrate the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday, but they formed a deep and lasting friendship. Despite differing faith perspectives, their exploration of common ground allows them to speak from a shared place of concern for humanity. Both men live what they preach. They have both endured hardship and exile, but have retained courage, resilience, and unwavering hope in humanity. But what's truly transcendental is their compassion, and the infectious joy that they radiate. *The Book of Joy* is about finding light in the darkest of places.

These Precious Conversations are a Timeless Gift

Douglas Abrahams, recorded and published these conversations to allow readers to explore how a fleeting feeling of joy, can be transformed into an enduring way of being. And, by weaving in research from psychology, he further validates the hard-won wisdom that these two great men have to offer. The flow of conversation explores the true nature of joy, negative emotions that become obstacles to joy, and the eight pillars that strengthen our capacity to feel joy.

Defining Joy

Joy is a state of being, rather than a transient feeling, because it resides in the mind and heart. As a result, joy is more encompassing than happiness. Whereas happiness largely depends on external circumstances, joy does not. Joy animates our lives, and ultimately leads to satisfaction and meaning, because it's constant and cultivated from within.

According to the Archbishop, 'every day we have the opportunity to create, and re-create our lives. This is the power we yield. No dark fate determines our future'. He says that we will not find any lasting happiness in any accomplishment, or in fame and fortune.

So joy isn't the goal. Rather, joy is a by-product of living life in accordance with our values, and through reducing unnecessary suffering.

Our Perceptions of Suffering

None of us wants to experience suffering. Unfortunately fear and frustration, grief and despair, and loneliness and envy, are all part of the human condition. The Archbishop believes that these emotions are natural and unavoidable and that we shouldn't berate ourselves for experiencing them, because it just adds to our guilt and shame. The Dalai Lama on the other hand, believes that we can be more proactive in how we deal with these feelings and experiences.

How we deal with suffering depends heavily on how we train our minds. Both the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama, liken this to developing mental immunity. The Dalai Lama likens mental immunity to the ocean, with many waves on the surface, but calmness in the depths. Both men give personal encounters with each of these emotions and describe the practices they use to manage them. This aligns with current scientific research.

Increasing Our Capacity for Joy

Our ability to experience joy, is strengthened by cultivating the so-called, eight pillars of joy. These eight pillars are either qualities of the mind, or qualities of the heart. The four qualities of the mind include: perspective, humility, humor, and acceptance. The four qualities of the heart include: forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity. Compassion and generosity are cornerstones of joy, and because of this, this book was almost given the title, *The Book of Compassion*.

Pillar One: Perspective

How do you experience the world?

We experience the world as we see it, and it's all about perspective. The Dalai Lama proposes that perspective is, 'nothing less than the skull key that opens all of the locks that imprison our happiness.'

So by altering our perspective, we can literally change how we experience the world, and this can open up the door to joy. The power of the different perspectives that we're able to adopt, is demonstrated in a story told by psychologist and holocaust survivor, Dr. Edith Eger. By recounting a story of a fellow prisoner of Auschwitz, she explains how perspective can literally keep us alive. Although critically ill and weak, Dr. Eger's fellow prisoner was somehow holding onto life, because of her belief that they would be liberated on Christmas. This prisoner continued to survive against all odds, but sadly when liberation didn't materialize she died on Christmas Day.

Pillar Two: Humility

How do you see yourself?

Seeing ourselves as neither superior nor inferior to others, helps to reduce anxiety, and also allows us to connect more easily to others. The archbishop argues that we will experience joy when we are less self-regarding, and the Dalai Lama explains how important human connection is. The Dalai Lama used to experience high levels of stress when addressing an audience. He explains: 'I would be very nervous because I did not see myself as the same as the people in the audience. I started thinking, these people are just like me, the same human being. If we think we are something special or not special enough, then fear, nervousness,

stress, and anxiety arise.' The message is that humans are more similar than we are different and that the path to joy is connection, whereas the path to sorrow is separation.

Pillars Three and Four: Humor and Acceptance

Humor connects us. The Dalai Lama says it's the most direct line between two people. Abrahams remarks that one of the most notable parts of the seven days of conversation, was the mischievous laughter shared between the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu.

How often do you use humor, as a coping mechanism?

The appropriate use of humor can reduce the intensity in stressful situations. For example, after the Rwandan genocide, the archbishop was invited to address the Hutus and Tutsis, the two warring groups in the country. Tutu reduced the tension through humor, by telling a fictional story about a place where big-nosed people discriminate against small-nosed people. The audience couldn't help but laugh, and they also came to understand the absurdity of prejudice. With humor comes acceptance, and acceptance allows us to engage with life on its own terms rather than how we think it should be.

Much Buddhist practice is directed towards the ability to see life accurately, beyond all the expectations, projections, and distortions that we typically bring to it. Through meditative practice, we can silence distracting thoughts and feelings, so that we can perceive reality, and respond to it more skillfully.

Pillar Five: Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the first quality of the heart and it allows us to let go of the past in order to move forward. The Archbishop admits that 'forgiveness is by no means easy. But we all possess this spirit of nobility'.

The Archbishop recalls a remarkable demonstration of forgiveness during the 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. A mother at this commission, who had witnessed the images of her son's brutal death on TV, was able to move past her anguish and anger. She looked into the eyes of the perpetrator and said: 'my child, we forgive you.' When asked about the possibility of granting amnesty, she said: 'what is it going to help us if he were to go to prison? It won't bring back our children.'

The Archbishop points out that we see Nelson Mandela as the icon of forgiveness, but many ordinary South Africans also demonstrated this magnanimity.

Pillar Six: Gratitude

The Archbishop is frequently heard welcoming new experiences with the word wonderful. How many of us can say the same thing?

Gratitude is the true recognition of joy, and opens us up to wonder and possibility. Anthony Ray Hinton's story epitomizes this. He is an American who was wrongly convicted of murder, and spent 28 years on death row before being released. After his release, he marveled at running in the

rain, when other people wanted to escape it. Having missed the rain for so many years, he was grateful for every single drop.

Pillars Seven and Eight: Compassion and Generosity

A direct translation of compassion is: 'to suffer with.' The Dalai Lama describes how we often want to help others when we're confronted by their suffering. He says that this is because: 'compassion is what connects the feeling of empathy to acts of kindness and generosity.' And, it's not only humans who are hard-wired to care. In a fascinating study, scientists placed an injured mouse in a cage with other mice. The other mice showed concern by licking the injured mouse. As a result, the mouse healed a lot faster.

The difficulty is that compassion requires us to move beyond the self. Ironically though when we alleviate another's suffering, we experience a "helper's high," which is the release of feel-good chemicals in the brain. Scientists call this reciprocal altruism. And this is linked to the spirit of generosity, which is the final pillar of joy.

Joy is enhanced when we make someone else happy. Simply put, it's in giving that we receive. The archbishop joked and said: 'God doesn't know very much math, because when you give to others, it should be that you are subtracting from yourself. But in this incredible kind of way—I've certainly found that to be the case so many times, in giving, you're in fact making space for more to be given to you.'

In Conclusion

The power of *The Book of Joy* isn't just in the theory of joy and how to experience it. This book enables us to become part of a conversation between two of the most spiritually enlightened humans on earth. Put simply, it's an invitation to be part of their lives, and to hear firsthand how they've overcome intense suffering, and to discover joy in its deepest form.