

Beyond Happiness

You think you want to be happier, but what if you could experience something even better?

By Phillip Moffitt

Erika has many reasons to be happy—she’s healthy, has a well-paying, secure job and a steady, loving relationship—but you wouldn’t know it from listening to her. She’s always worrying about one thing or another and gives the impression that there’s no joy in her life. Sometimes her fears are real—for instance, her brother has a chronic illness, so she’s understandably concerned about him. But more often than not her worries are overblown. Right now she’s fretting about her job. She recently gave a presentation to the senior management team in which she omitted an important point, so she’s afraid it appeared that she wasn’t on top of her material.

Erika is sharing this worry with me during a personal interview at a meditation retreat. As her teacher for several years, I’ve noticed that she often looks for reasons to be unhappy. I point out to her that her anxiety about the presentation seems much greater than the actual problem. This feedback makes her agitated at first, but eventually she acknowledges that this worry is not that big a deal.

“So why haven’t you told me about your happiness?” I ask. My question surprises Erika, because she’s accustomed to talking about her suffering during these interviews. Again she becomes uneasy, but then acknowledges that, overall, her life is really quite good. She smiles, and the worry lines vanish from her face.

Erika is a dedicated practitioner of vipassana, a type of Buddhist meditation that is also known as “mindfulness” or “insight” meditation. A central part of her practice is to focus attention on the causes of suffering in order to someday free herself from them. But Erika has become so attached to her attitude of worry that she is no longer present for her own moments of happiness.

Many of us aren’t. Think back to the last time you had dinner with a friend. Did the two of you spend most of your time commiserating about your struggles and disappointments, and less time celebrating your brighter moments?

Surprisingly enough, I’ve found that ambivalence, defensiveness, and even aversion to happiness are quite common. If there wasn’t much joy in your family of origin, you may not trust feelings of happiness when they arise. Or if you’ve experienced a lot of disappointment, you may believe that you really can’t affect how happy you are. You might even feel that if you open up to happiness, you’ll jinx it. In each of these instances, ironically, your joy has become a source of suffering.

Liberating Happiness

The Four Noble Truths, which are among the cornerstone teachings of Buddhism, describe the Buddha focusing primarily on suffering, or *dukkha*, as a gateway to finding freedom from suffering. But he also taught that being mindful of *sukha*, the pleasant times in your life, can provide the same liberating insights. So I suggest to Erika that she practice being mindful of her moments of happiness. This is not just so she’ll appreciate the many gifts in her life, although that’s certainly valuable. Instead, the purpose is for her to develop a more subtle relationship to joy that will bring her a greater sense of wellbeing in both happy and unhappy times.

By that I mean experiencing a type of happiness that’s profoundly different than anything else in our lives. Different spiritual traditions call it many names: enlightenment, emptiness, nirvana. It’s the freedom that comes from no longer being identified with your ego sense of self. You become liberated from the fear and suffering



that inevitably come when you're identified with the ego, which is always coping with the fragility, uncertainty, and unavoidable losses of physical life.

Most often this form of happiness occurs out of the blue. It may happen on a retreat, or after an accident or a life-threatening illness, or it can arise out of a spontaneous relaxation into the sacred now, without your having a clue as to why it occurred. But it's also possible, through what I call happiness practice, to cultivate states of mind that will bring you more-frequent glimpses of this ultimate freedom. Even a small taste of it can provide inspiration for your practice.

The first thing to understand about happiness practice is that it is a practice. Just as you sometimes struggle with asanas you'd rather avoid, you may find some elements of this practice difficult, too.

To do happiness practice, you first need to develop clarity about the different types of happiness that you feel. In my experience, there are three. The first arises when conditions in your life are what you desire them to be; the second is the well-being that comes when your mind is joyful and at ease, regardless of the conditions of your life; and the third is the unbounded joy you feel when your mind has reached final liberation. To understand each type more deeply, I suggest using three tools: mindfulness, investigation, and appreciation.

Easy Delight

The happiness you're probably most familiar with is the kind that arises when the external conditions in your life are just as you'd like them to be. It may be during a good dinner or a delightful moment with your child. Or perhaps it comes after you've received praise or finished a challenging workout. It's natural to savor such moments as they occur, but there are ways to expand and deepen your appreciation of them even further.

Begin by becoming mindful of these moments of conditional happiness and recognizing them for what they are. If, for example, you receive a desired award at work, bask in the glow; acknowledge the work you did to earn it and the good fortune that brought it to you. But also acknowledge that all conditions change and that the positive feeling you are having will eventually be replaced by a less pleasant one. That may sound like a downer, but it really isn't. Rather than diminish your happiness, your acknowledgement puts it in a context that allows you to appreciate it more.

Next, start to investigate how you respond to this kind of happy experience. How does it feel? Are your thoughts about the past or the future diluting your well-being? Are you scared that you won't be able to live up to others' expectations or worried that others will be jealous of you? What happens when you acknowledge that this happiness is temporary?

As Erika started to investigate why she was uncomfortable with happy feelings, she discovered that being present for them made her feel too vulnerable. "It's overwhelming, and I can't stay there," she says. She also uncovered a fear that if she acknowledged her joy, her suffering would worsen. She realized that she had adopted this attitude from her mother, who distrusted life because of a childhood trauma. Eventually, Erika was able to become mindful of her happy times without having a sense of dread.

Finally, pause to appreciate that in this moment you have a sense of well-being. Notice the effect of this. Does the gratitude lead you anywhere? Many people report that after doing this gratitude practice for a while, they start feeling a desire to share their good fortune.



Surprised by Joy

The second kind of happiness arises when life isn't the way you'd like it to be, but you feel fine nonetheless. You are in such a good mood that even when you encounter an unpleasant person or a frustrating situation, you aren't overwhelmed. You're centered in a state of mind that is happy.

You have many such moments in your life, although you may not always be aware of them. For instance, you receive bad news—but rather than becoming anxious or sad, you continue feeling good. The news conditions the moment but does not define you. A good example is Claudia, one of my longtime students. She had just retired early to pursue her spiritual practice full-time when one of her adult daughters became critically ill. She had to drop her plans indefinitely to attend to her daughter's health. Despite Claudia's disappointment and her fears for her daughter, she had a strong sense of well-being; she attributes this to being mindful that happiness needn't depend on things going just as she'd like.

You can practice experiencing moments of happiness that are independent of conditions but still based on your state of mind by using the same three tools of mindfulness, investigation, and appreciation. For example, say that you've gone to pick up your car from the repair shop. The mechanic tells you that not only is the car not ready, but it will cost \$700 more to fix than you'd thought. But as you wait in the drafty office contemplating your bank account, you realize that you're still feeling pretty good. In a situation like this, first bring mindfulness to the feeling of well-being and note its nature: Does your belly feel relaxed? Is your breathing free flowing? Do you have a feeling of friendliness and curiosity toward the people around you? Then contrast the unpleasant condition with your pleasant mind state, noting the differences. Acknowledge the temporary nature of your well-being and notice whether you are identifying with this feeling of centeredness and creating a sense of "This is who I am."

Now begin to investigate how well-being independent of external conditions arises. Once you become aware that this second type of happiness is possible, you are more likely to experience it. Note the qualities of your unperturbed mind: Can you detect an underlying feeling of trust that no matter what the future brings, you will be OK?

Next, appreciate how fortunate you are to have such independence from conditions. Reflect on the ease in your mind and acknowledge that you now know such ease exists and so can be cultivated. Take time to fully receive the blessing that such temporary freedom represents. Then see what impulses arise from your well-being. Expand whatever warm feelings you have toward others by reflecting on their positive traits, recognizing the challenges that they, too, face in attaining well-being, and acting in ways that might help them find this state of happiness. By helping others, you are acknowledging and showing gratitude for your own blessings.

Without Boundaries

The third kind of happiness is when you're completely free of attachment to your wants and desires; it's independent of conditions and mind state. This happiness is quite different from the other two. There is no sense of an "I" that is separate from others, nor is the feeling of well-being localized in you; it's impersonal, without boundaries. You may have already experienced this briefly. If not, it may arise as you continue your practice.

If and when you have a moment of nondependent happiness, there is not much of anything for you to do as it is happening. You simply appreciate it. Only afterward do your mindfulness and investigation come into play. Remember as best you can what it felt like and notice how this happiness differs from the other two kinds. Also, observe whether you are clinging to the memory of it or falling into the trap of wanting to know it again, or whether your ego is starting to claim your moment of grace as its own achievement.



As you start to make mindfulness of happiness part of your spiritual practice, you may be tempted to idealize this third kind of happiness and strive to be something that you haven't yet attained. This is what I call spiritual ambition, a sign of your ego trying to assert itself. The practice of mindfulness of happiness starts just where you are and asks for humility, persistence, patience, and good humor.

Erika understood this principle of starting where you are and was able to work with her happiness in a most inspiring way. Through the investigation process, she gradually learned to distinguish between the three kinds of happiness and realized that her sense of well-being depended on external conditions being just as she wanted them to be. If one thing was amiss, it was hard for her to be happy. She began to notice how easily she was derailed by even the slightest disagreement or criticism at work. Over time Erika has learned to connect with a sense of well-being despite the bumps of the workplace and to be tolerant of her anxiety when things are going well. And as she has practiced appreciating her happiness, it has allowed her to feel more confident and to trust her inner experience. She now relates much better to her colleagues and is more relaxed around them.

If practicing mindfulness of happiness is something you want to explore, let it be your open secret—visible in your tone, words, and actions, but never directly stated to others. Otherwise you open yourself to skepticism, and you may end up feeling pressured to perform and pretending to be happy.

If you give your full effort to happiness practice, you're likely to feel the effects in just a few months. After a year, Erika reports that her happiness quotient is much higher. This has allowed her to stay present for her moments of suffering. She's better able to respond with compassion and clarity rather than fear and confusion. Having more happy moments and being willing to consciously bear her suffering is giving Erika a taste of well-being that is of a different order of magnitude—the happiness that comes with liberation. As she says, "It is a new universe to be explored."

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