

YOU ARE THE HAPPINESS YOU SEEK

## INTRODUCTION

# A Silent Prayer

*And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

T. S. ELIOT

It is mid-afternoon on the 20th of March 2020, and a silent, invisible intruder has brought humanity to a standstill. Almost overnight I have cancelled all live speaking engagements for the foreseeable future and have transferred my activities online. My first online retreat, with five hundred people from around the world, will shortly begin.

When holding a meeting or retreat, I do not plan what I am going to say. I often sit quietly in an attitude of unarticulated prayer that my understanding, such as it is, might formulate itself in response to the moment. And this is no ordinary moment.

I check my emails, and my attention is attracted to one whose subject is *World Happiness Day*. A friend has sent me a message letting me know that today, the Spring Equinox, has, since 2006, been designated by the UN an international day of happiness, in honour of the understanding that ‘the happiness, well-being and freedom of all life on earth is the ultimate purpose of every human being, nation, and society’.\*

How poignant and how ironic, when the world finds itself plunged into a crisis which will bring untold distress and hardship to so many people, that this day should be consecrated a day of happiness, well-being and freedom.

The familiar objects, activities and relationships that we take for granted are rapidly being removed from us: the freedom to earn a living, to socialise and to travel, a plentiful supply of food and goods in shops, education for our children and grandchildren, and security for our future.

\* See <https://www.dayofhappiness.net>.

But what about happiness? Can it be given and withdrawn? If so, by whom or what? What is its cause? Is it something that is taken in from the outside, or does it originate within us? Is there such a thing as lasting peace and happiness, or is this destined to alternate with suffering for the rest of our lives?

These questions have troubled the minds of innumerable people for thousands of years, and as I ponder them I recall the first time they formulated themselves in my mind. It was 1980 and I was twenty years old, living on the edge of Bodmin Moor in Cornwall in the South West of England, studying pottery with Michael Cardew, then eighty years old and one of the founders of the British Studio Pottery movement.

It was a somewhat monastic existence, and in many ways life at Wenford Bridge – Michael's home and pottery – resembled an apprenticeship with an old Zen master. However, I had a friend, and, although we rarely saw each other due to the remoteness of my circumstance, her presence in my life was a source of consolation and happiness.

Every Friday evening after dinner, I would walk a mile or so up the hill to the phone box on the edge of the village of St. Breward, beneath which the pottery was situated, and call my companion. It was something of a ritual whose anticipation and memory, as much as the event itself, sustained me throughout the week.

On this occasion, the quality of her first 'Hello' conveyed everything I needed to know. The brief conversation that ensued simply confirmed it. Little did I know then that her parting words were to be one of life's great gifts to me.

Later that night, lying awake in bed, as the initial wave of confusion and sorrow began to subside, I kept asking myself how a person can be the source of happiness one moment and the source of misery the next. For the first time in my life, I became acutely aware of the extent to which I had invested my happiness in my circumstances, in this case in a relationship.

I had already been interested in spiritual matters for some time, and since my mid-teens had been studying philosophy and practising meditation in the Vedantic and Sufi traditions at Colet House in London, under the guidance of Dr. Francis Roles. However, this event injected intensity and urgency into my interest; it became a passion.

It was obvious that I loved happiness above all else. It was also clear that nothing objective is certain or secure, and clearly does not unfold according to one's own wishes and expectations. And now the absurdity and futility of investing one's desire for lasting happiness in objective experience was inescapable. I fell asleep that night with a simple question in my mind, 'How may one find lasting peace and happiness?'

Almost exactly forty years later, circumstances are again demanding this question be addressed. However, on this occasion it is not just my personal circumstances that have precipitated the question in my mind, nor is it individual happiness that is at stake. It is the shared circumstances of each one of us that requires a response, and our collective happiness that is calling for attention.

The universe had responded to my silent prayer. Our online retreat began with this question, and the exploration of it evolved into this book. It is my hope that this book will take you from your self, who seeks happiness, to the happiness that is your self.

Rupert Spira  
April 2021

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Search for Happiness

*Happiness, being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the end at which all actions aim.*

ARISTOTLE

### WE SEEK HAPPINESS ABOVE ALL ELSE

Imagine a survey in which all seven billion of us were asked what we want in life above all else. Most of us would respond that we desire better health, increased income, an intimate relationship, improved living conditions, a family, better work or preferably no need to work at all, and so on. Some of us would ask for less tangible things: enlightenment or knowledge of God. Whatever our priorities, most of us would select from a relatively short list of possibilities.

However, if a second question then asked *why* we desire what we do, almost all of us would respond, in one way or another, that we seek the object, substance, activity, circumstance or relationship because we believe it will bring us peace and happiness.

In other words, what we really long for is not a particular experience for its own sake, but for the peace and happiness that we believe we will derive from it. If we knew that the house we were about to buy, the person we were about to marry, the journey we were about to embark on or the job we were about to begin would make us miserable, we would no longer want it. We wish for these things only insofar as they are considered a source of happiness.

Even those who voluntarily undergo great hardship for the sake of a moral, political, religious or spiritual ideal do so ultimately for the sake of happiness, even if, in extreme cases, that happiness is postponed until after death.

The desire for happiness is, therefore, the driving force in most of our lives.

This longing for happiness takes us on a great adventure in the realm of objective experience. By 'objective experience' I do not refer to physical objects alone but to any experience that has some kind of form, including all thoughts, images, feelings, sensations, perceptions, activities and relationships.

Although any of these may seem to afford moments or periods of happiness, sooner or later they come to an end, the old dissatisfaction resurfaces and the search begins again.

Once the search in the conventional realm of objective experience has failed to deliver lasting happiness sufficiently often, many people turn to a religious or spiritual tradition. In this case, the goal, however we may conceive it, is the same: peace, joy, fulfilment, contentment or wholeness. Only the means have changed. Even those of us who seek enlightenment on a spiritual path, or God on a religious path, do so only on account of the peace and happiness we believe we will derive from it.

If someone were to ask us whether we would prefer to be enlightened or happy, we would obviously choose happiness. If we believed that enlightenment would bring us misery, we would never seek it. It is only because it is believed that enlightenment will bring happiness that we are willing to devote our lives to seeking it. Likewise, if we believed that knowledge of God would make us miserable, no one would seek God.

The only reason we were seeking enlightenment or God in the first place was that all other possible sources of happiness had failed us thus far. It is often as a last resort that we turn to the search for enlightenment or God, in the hope that its fulfilment will finally relieve us of our suffering and provide happiness.

Therefore, the desire for happiness is the highest desire, and as such it is unique: it is the only thing we seek for its own sake.

I use the word 'happiness' as the goal of this search simply because it is the common word for the absence of suffering or the end of seeking. I refer to it this way because I believe, rightly or not, that this word most accurately conveys for the majority of people that for which they long above all else. It is also a word to which everyone can relate, and it refers to an experience with which everyone is familiar. In particular, it is non-denominational and devoid of cultural overtones. It does not have to be believed in and is its own evidence.

However, any word inevitably has its limitations, depending upon our particular associations with it, especially in relation to that for which we all long above all else. If the word ‘happiness’ does not evoke in you that which you love and for which you long above all else, please substitute it with another: fulfilment, contentment, peace, love, truth, beauty, joy, salvation, liberation, enlightenment or God.

Whether we feel a strong yearning in our heart or just the slightest sense of dissatisfaction – the feeling that something is missing which, when found, will finally bring about the happiness for which we long – we are on a great search. However we conceive or name the goal of that search, its source is always the same, namely, the desire to bring our current dissatisfaction to an end.

If happiness is what we all love and long for above all else, then the investigation into its nature and cause must be the greatest endeavour on which one could embark.

## HAPPINESS IS INHERENT WITHIN US

Happiness is always experienced inside us; it is never put in from the outside. It may seem to be connected to or triggered by external events, but unlike the food we eat, the water we drink or the air we breathe, we do not take it into ourself from outside. It originates within us, it is experienced within us and, when it disappears, no residue of it is dispersed into the outside world. Happiness is entirely an interior experience.

If happiness is always experienced within, albeit triggered by objective experience, mustn't it lie in potential in us all the time? And if so, shouldn't it be possible to have direct access to it, and to remain constantly in touch with it, without the need for our external circumstances to be configured in a particular way?

If it *were* possible to be in touch with our inherent peace and happiness without being dependent on external circumstances, would that not be the greatest discovery one could make?

One might argue that *unhappiness* is also always experienced inside us and must, therefore, lie latent within us at all times. According to this view, our inherent happiness or unhappiness would simply be triggered by circumstances, depending on the extent to which they conform to our desire or expectation.

Although most people may not formulate it to themselves in this way, this is the common view of happiness and suffering. They are considered equal and opposite emotions, alternating in varying degrees in our lives, depending upon our circumstances.

In the absence of understanding the nature of happiness and how it may be found, our culture has conditioned us to believe and even expect that the constant cycle of happiness and unhappiness is normal and unavoidable. Why is this? We do not expect to cycle through periods of health and sickness on an almost daily basis, let alone numerous times within a single day. If we are sick, we consider it a signal from the body that something is wrong and needs attention.

Unhappiness is to the mind as sickness is to the body. It is a state of disharmony and imbalance. It is a signal that something is amiss and requires attention. However, in the absence of any understanding as to the real cause of unhappiness, our culture can only offer consolations and distractions.

We all feel that health is the natural state of the body. Why do we not feel that happiness is the natural state of the mind? In this book, I will suggest that it *is*, that happiness is the very nature of our being or self and, as such, lies in potential within us, accessible by all people and at all times, with the possible exception of those times when the safety and well-being of the body are compromised.

From this point of view, suffering is understood as the veiling or obscuring of our innate happiness. Thus, there is either happiness or the veiling of it, but never its absence.

All that is necessary to access our inherent happiness is to go directly into the depths of our being, behind the obscuring layers of thought and feeling. This is the great understanding that everyone should have from an early age. What could be more important in life than to know that we are already that for which we long?

This understanding is the essence of all the principal religious and spiritual traditions. However, in almost all cases it has been lost, or at least obscured, by layers of superfluous doctrines and practices that arose around the simple and direct insight upon which they were originally founded.



All the methods that are given in the various traditions have the ultimate purpose of facilitating access to the latent peace and joy that lies at the heart of all beings. The reason for so many different approaches and practices is not the complexity or inaccessibility of what is being sought. It is due partly to the differences between the cultures in which this understanding was originally formulated, and partly to the differing responses required to address people's particular difficulties and objections.

In each of these responses, this single understanding was refracted into numerous ideas and methods. However, when we distil these various approaches, they all indicate, in one way or another, that happiness is our nature, or that we are happiness itself.

## THE END OF THE SEARCH

Everybody knows the experience of happiness. However, not everybody knows that happiness is the very nature of our self and can be found in the depths of our being. As a result of this overlooking of the essential nature of our self, a great search is initiated in the realm of objective experience.

In the epic poem *The Mathnawi*, Sufi poet and mystic Jelaluddin Rumi tells of a man in Cairo who dreams of a treasure buried under a certain house in Baghdad. The man sets out on an arduous journey and, after numerous trials and adventures, reaches Baghdad and finds the house that appeared to him in his dream. He knocks on the door and an elderly man answers. The traveller relates his dream and the owner of the house replies, 'That's strange, last night I dreamt of a house in Cairo under which a great treasure was buried'. The man from Cairo recognises the description of the house as his own and returns home. And sure enough, under his own home he finds a great treasure. All those years he had been sitting on it without realising it.

This is the archetypal trajectory of everyone's life: the great search for happiness in the realm of objective experience and the return to the treasure of one's own being. The out-breath and the in-breath. The adventure of becoming and the return to being. The unfolding of one's life on the horizontal dimension of time and the periodic plunge into the vertical dimension of being.

Nature provides numerous such moments: the end of seeking upon the fulfilment of a desire; a moment of astonishment; the unbearable grief at the

loss of a loved one; the rapture of sexual intimacy; a moment of intense danger; a glance from a friend; the silence of the forest; the peace of deep sleep. Our lives are punctuated by such moments, hairline cracks in the world which, although not discernible on the surface of experience, are portals through which we pass out of time into eternity, only to be eclipsed again by the content of experience.

The memory of such times awakens in us a nostalgia, a longing for something that is not past and forgotten but present and veiled. It lies not in the annals of the past or the promise of the future but in the depths of being.

Impelled by this longing, we embark on a great search – outwardly in the realms of objects, substances, activities and relationships, and inwardly in states of mind – frequently sampling its perfume but never finding its source. It pervades the content of experience but is never graspable *as* an experience, like a rainbow whose source can never be found. However, it cannot be found not because it is so far but because it is so close.

At the heart of all the world's great religious, spiritual and philosophical traditions lies the simple, direct means by which it may be recognised: becoming must subside in being.

Most of the time the drama of experience eclipses awareness of being. Now awareness of being outshines the drama of experience.

Awareness of being is known in each of us as the sense of 'being myself' or the knowledge 'I am' before it is coloured or qualified by experience. Therein lies the peace of our true nature. When our self is divested of all the limitations it acquires from experience, that for which we long above all else shines by itself.

In the Christian tradition, the same understanding is illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story, the youngest son of the king is dissatisfied with life at home and embarks on a great adventure in the world, seeking fulfilment. In spite of his numerous experiences, nothing fully satisfies him and he ends up in despair, reduced to looking after pigs and eating their food, until at last he 'comes to his senses' and remembers the abundance of his home.

This is symbolic of one who has exhausted the search for fulfilment in objective experience and recognises, or at least intuitively, that they are looking for happiness in the wrong place and must return 'home'. That is, they

remember the peace and happiness that is the nature of their being and resolve to return there.

This remembrance is not the memory of something that we once possessed and have now lost, but the recognition of something that lies deep within us but that, until now, has been veiled and was thus inaccessible.

Some of us have to go to the brink of despair before recognising that we are seeking peace and happiness in the wrong place. For others, a relatively mild dose of failure, loss or sorrow is enough to prompt the intuition that objective experience can never be a source of lasting peace and happiness, and to initiate an investigation into the nature of our self.

Either way, there comes a point in many of our lives when we understand, or at least intuit, that the peace and happiness for which we long can never be found in an object, substance, activity, circumstance or relationship. This understanding does not imply that we lose interest in the world or that we no longer engage with objects, activities and relationships, but simply that we no longer do so for the purpose of finding peace, happiness and love in them.

No one would be reading this book if the search for happiness in objective experience had succeeded. In fact, one who is reading this book is almost certainly doing so precisely because this search has failed sufficiently often that they are at least beginning to suspect that they may be looking in the wrong place.

At some point a crisis is precipitated in our life in which we realise that we have tried everything – the conventional objects that are on offer in the world, and the less conventional states of mind that are available in the religious and spiritual traditions – and seen that nothing has ever, or could ever, give us the lasting happiness we seek.

As a result of this we may have the courage and the clarity to face a simple, unavoidable fact: nothing can make us happy! Likewise, we understand for the same reason that nothing can make us *unhappy*, unless and until we give it the power to, in which case it will do so.

To seek peace and happiness in objective experience is destined to fail. It is a recipe for disappointment and, in time, despair.

## THE ORIGINAL PANDEMIC

At the time of writing, many people are concerned that they may be infected with a virus that will cause sickness and possibly death to themselves or their loved ones. I do not mean to disparage such concern, or the attempts that individuals, communities and nations are taking to minimise the spread of the virus. I only want to point out the attention we give to this virus whilst ignoring another malady that has infected the vast majority of people without their realising it.

This malady is the belief that peace and happiness is dependent upon external circumstances. We have allowed a single belief to steal our innate happiness, to rob us of the one thing we love above all else. And yet, so ubiquitous is this condition that we do not even realise it as such; we consider it the natural state.

This syndrome has a simple symptom: suffering! Our suffering, whether it be an intense emotion of hatred, anger or jealousy that erupts temporarily in response to a particular circumstance, or simply a mild but chronic feeling that something is missing, is the litmus test that indicates we have overlooked our essential nature or being and that, as a result, its innate peace and happiness has been obscured.

Just as physical pain is a signal from the intrinsic intelligence of the body letting us know that the body requires attention, so suffering is a message from the happiness that lies in the depths of our being: 'You are looking for me in the wrong place! I am not caused by anything outside of you. I am the nature of your being; there is no other place to find me. Turn towards me and I will take you into myself.'

As the Sufi mystic Bayazid Bastami said, 'For thirty years I sought God. But when I looked carefully I found that in reality God was the seeker and I the sought.'<sup>\*</sup> Whenever we are seeking happiness, it is in fact our innate happiness that is seeking us. The happiness we seek is the happiness we are.

The great understanding that lies at the heart of all the main religious and spiritual traditions consists of two essential insights: happiness is the very nature of our self, and we share our being with everyone and everything.

<sup>\*</sup> As quoted in James Fadiman and Robert Frager, *Essential Sufism* (HarperCollins, 1997).

The second insight will be touched upon towards the end of this book. As regards the first, in order to liberate this happiness from its hiding place in the depths of our being and bring it out into our lived and felt experience, it is necessary to go to one's essential being or self and recognise its nature.

This is why self-knowledge stands as the foundation of all the major religious and spiritual traditions. It is the great understanding that gives us access to the peace and happiness that is our very nature.