

# The Quest For Happiness

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

It is a sign of health and sanity to seek happiness. The founding fathers of the United States acknowledged this indirectly when, on July 4, 1776, they declared the "Pursuit of Happiness" one of the "unalienable Rights." Happiness has been called the American dream. But it is the dream of all peoples and races, so long as their vital powers are unsapped. Only an enervated individual or group will choose unhappiness, pain, or suffering over joy and delight.

I am not merely talking about pleasure or amusement when I mention happiness or joy. I do mean bliss, ecstasy, rapture, felicity—what the sages of India call *ânanda*. Could it be a sign of our times that so much attention, energy, time, and money are invested in the contemplation of disaster, misfortune, crime, war, conflict, trouble, and violence of one kind or another? We read about all kinds of adversities in the papers, see them on TV, hear about them on the radio, and gossip about them with our friends and coworkers. It seems we are intent on bombarding each other with bad news. Somehow it keeps the adrenaline going, and we do tend to confuse stress with aliveness.

Then, suddenly, for one reason or another, we come to a halt and ask ourselves: Am I happy? Am I happy living like this, doing what I am doing? The fact is, we wouldn't be asking ourselves these questions if we were not experiencing unhappiness. We may be blessed (or cursed, as the case may be) with material plenty, and yet we may be deeply disturbed. Why? Most of the time, we don't have an answer for our distress. Sometimes we imagine that if the right job turned up or the right man or woman came along, all would be well with us. Or we feel that a glass of bourbon or a nice long holiday might fix it all. But we are only fooling ourselves. The drink will come to an end, and so will our vacation, as indeed will everything else. Sooner or later, the same feeling of unfulfillment or unhappiness will undoubtedly surface again.

Perhaps you are among those who don't stress out and who would claim that they are generally happy. That may be so. But are you really happy? Blissfully happy? Ecstatically happy? Happy even when things around you seem to come apart at the seams? Or does your happiness depend on external circumstances or internal conditions? Can you remain blissful when your son tells you that he has just totaled your car? Or when you learn from your accountant that you owe back taxes?

I don't mean to say that you should suppress your feelings of anger, which arise naturally enough in such moments. But can you feel beyond them and continue to be a loving presence?

If you can honestly say Yes, you are in a state that has traditionally been celebrated as a highly positive spiritual accomplishment; maybe not yet enlightenment or Self-realization but reasonably close to it.

But let us assume you are not so fortunate. What can you do to become happy? The short answer is: nothing! In fact, the more actively you seek out happiness, the less likely you are to find it. The reason for this is that all forms of seeking pertain to the finite, egoic consciousness (our everyday identity), whereas true, permanent happiness is the

unconditional Reality itself, which transcends the ego. So—all we can hope to accomplish through our search for happiness is pleasurable experiences, and we already know that they do not last.

When I say we can do nothing to *become* happy, this is only a half truth. It would be unfortunate if happiness were to elude us forever. But, happily, it does not. It is accessible to us: We must simply *be* happy in the moment. I learned this secret from one of my teachers, and I don't think I would ever have discovered it on my own. It sounds so simple and even paradoxical. Yet it is really profound wisdom. You cannot *become* happy; you can always only *be* happy.

Most people have experienced moments of joy or delight at one time or another in their lives. That means we know what happiness feels like . . . what we experience when our whole body radiates with joyous energy and we feel like embracing everyone and everything.

In those precious moments, we are in touch with something more real than our ordinary self or the world our ordinary self experiences. Our ego is temporarily suspended, and our consciousness and energy are stepped up manifold. There is simply an overwhelming feeling of happiness, of blissfulness, which has the quality of love.

We can always remember, with our whole body, those occasions of extraordinary joy. Whenever we center ourselves, whenever we are fully present as the whole body, we get in touch with the larger reality in which we are immersed. And that larger reality is neither depressed nor problematical. Then our energy starts to flow more freely, and we feel a deep sense of security, intuiting that our true identity is untouched by any conflict or pain.

To remember to be present as the body is a skill that can be learned. To *be* presently happy rather than to seek to *become* happy is an open option for all of us—in every single moment. We can either lose ourselves in fear, anger, sorrow, lust, jealousy, pride, self-complacency, and all the other diverse egoic states, or we can feel through to the great pool of bliss that lies beyond them.

Happiness is our birthright. But we must claim it.

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