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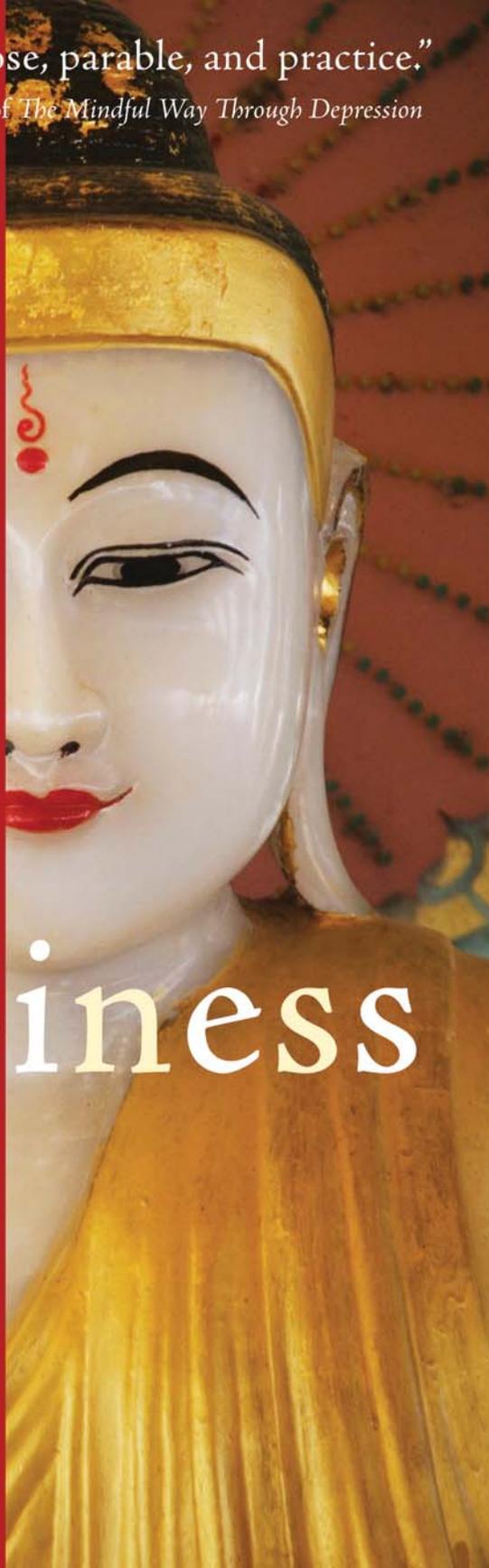
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Foreword by  
Lama Surya Das

*The Buddha's  
Way of*

# Happiness

healing sorrow,  
transforming  
negative emotion  
& finding  
well-being in the  
present moment



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## *chapter 1*

# Being Happiness

*From joy springs all creation.  
By joy it is sustained.  
Toward joy it proceeds.  
And to joy it returns.*

—Mundaka Upanishad

Are you happy? Unless we're completely miserable at the moment, most of us would respond affirmatively. "Yes," we say, "I'm happy." But often we do so automatically, without reflecting on the matter. If we consider the question more deeply, the answer isn't so easy. The truth is more complicated, multifaceted. We may be happy in our careers, but unhappy in our primary relationships. We may be happy with our leisure time, but suffering miserably through our work hours. We may be happy with our sex lives, but unhappy with our bank statements. Moreover, even within these categories, the answer isn't as simple as a mere yes or no. There are aspects of

our relationships we are happy with, others that are unsatisfying. There are aspects of our work lives we like, but others that worry us.

Often, too, we confuse the belief that we *should* be happy with the reality of our actual experience. Bumper-sticker wisdom says a bad day fishing is better than a good day at work, but if we look closely, it isn't always so. There are bad elements in what are otherwise pleasant recreational activities, and good elements in our work lives. Often, the idea that we're happy when it's the weekend and unhappy when it's the workweek doesn't hold up under examination. When we look closely, we discover that the reverse is often true. When we are present to our actual experience, we might find our sense of accomplishment at work more satisfying than the unstructured time of an uneventful weekend—just the opposite of what we frequently imagine.

If you stop amid your various activities and ask yourself, "Am I happy?" (an exercise I heartily recommend), you might be surprised at the answer. Sometimes you're happy doing things you normally consider less pleasant to do, and unhappy doing things you normally consider pleasant. More often than you imagine, you won't even know whether or not you're happy, or your feelings may be mixed.

Subtle signs appear when you are not as happy as you imagine. If you find yourself thinking a lot about some future situation when you will achieve your dream of happiness, perhaps you aren't so happy right now. If you observe your stream of thoughts and feelings and find yourself worrying a lot about things that might happen in the future, you are experiencing unease in the present. If you're preoccupied with things that went wrong in the past, it's hard to be satisfied now. Sometimes, when you really look, you may find subtly pervasive feelings of dissatisfaction and emptiness—feelings you try to avoid by running after whatever you can think of running after. Sometimes almost anything will do.

Human beings have been considering these things for a long time. In fact, it turns out that the question of happiness is a very old one.

## Long Ago and Far Away

Some twenty-five hundred years ago, a young man sat at the base of a tree in northern India. His skin was deep brown from exposure to the hot sun, his beard and hair matted and unkempt. The rags he wore barely concealed his skeletal frame.

The young man's name was Siddhattha Gotama. Only a few years before, abrupt encounters with the harsh reality of human life had struck this sensitive and intelligent young man with savage force, leaving a profound existential wound. Afterward, he set out from his home of wealth and privilege, vowing not to rest until he found the answer to the predicament of human suffering, until he found the way to end it. That was now his single-pointed intention. To this end, he studied with some of the greatest spiritual teachers of his day, mastering their teachings with relative ease. And while these teachings were helpful, he remained unsatisfied. He still didn't know the answer. For the sake of other beings and himself, he was determined to find the way. And his determination was strong.

He had lived the life of an extreme ascetic, barely attending to basic bodily needs of food, water, and shelter, holding on to life by the thinnest of threads. But on this particular day, he accepted a cup of milk and a handful of rice. It amazed him how much better he felt! His mind was so much clearer. It was so much easier to meditate with a bit of nourishment. He vowed never to treat his body so harshly in the future. And with greater determination than ever, he vowed not to move from his spot beneath the tree until he found the answer.

That night, he received the breakthrough he had longed for. It changed him. From then on, when people met him, they knew they were in the presence of a remarkable person. They asked him, "Are you a divine being? Are you a saint or an angel?" but he denied being anything of the kind. When they then asked what he was, he merely responded, "I am awake (*buddh*)." And forever after, people called him Buddha, the Awakened One. It's said that when he got his breakthrough that night, the earth shook to its foundations.

What was it that Siddhattha had come to understand? His happiness was so striking that, in addition to being known as Buddha, he was also known as *Sugata*, the Happy One. What can he tell us about how to end our suffering and find well-being? What can he tell us about being happy? In essence, he shows us that, when we remove certain erroneous views we have of the nature of reality, happiness shines forth. Here and in the chapters that follow, we will look together at the Buddha's insights and how they can help us transform our suffering and find happiness.

## Here and Now

Driving on the interstate recently, I spotted a billboard that revealed a lot about our idea of happiness. The billboard featured someone resting in a hammock with two bottles of Coke. The text read simply, "Open Happiness."

This advertisement shows that our idea of happiness has something to do with relaxing. And that's not a bad place to start. But it's also an ironic place to start, since most of us do so little of it. Most of us are better at doing and accomplishing than at taking it easy. This is so much the case that even when we finally have time to relax, we find it difficult to actually do so. After so much doing, we find it hard to have any sort of calmness or peace. Our bodies remain on alert, full of tension, our minds worried and restless.

We simply cannot run around frantically all day and then suddenly relax, unless it's just to crash from exhaustion.

Sometimes we try to relax by watching movies or television, or reading novels or magazines. This at least lifts us out of our usual preoccupations. But generally we expose ourselves to these media indiscriminately, and our bodies and minds become stressed by the very experience we use to try to relax. To truly relax involves just being. And we're not very good at that.

If the billboard captures an element of truth in the idea that happiness is related to relaxing, it's obvious nonsense that happiness will come to us in a bottle of anything. Commercialism and consumerism leave us empty. We would scarcely be taken in at all by this notion if we stopped and thought about it for a moment. Subtle advertising messages can only affect us if they slip in sideways while we're not really paying close attention. The idea that some product will make us happy doesn't survive even cursory examination.

## Happiness Is Available

The billboard implies another message: happiness is found outside ourselves; if we can only acquire the right things and use or consume them, find the right people and be with them, get the right job, find the right psychotherapy, have enough money, and many other such schemes, we will be happy. Some of these things may be pleasant and even helpful, but the underlying implication—that happiness is found outside ourselves—is destructive.

How then do you find happiness? First, by realizing that happiness is always available. The moment you see the truth of this, you can be happy right away. You don't need to do anything else. You don't need to go anywhere else. You don't need to reform yourself or become a different person. Happiness is very simple. It's only our tendency to complicate things that makes it difficult.

Happiness is simple because ultimate truth is simple. When Christ says, "The kingdom of heaven is within," when the prophet hears God tell him to be still and know, we can't believe that's all there is to it. "All religions have come into existence because people want something elaborate and attractive and puzzling," comments the Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi (Mitchell 1991, 147). We have to add all manner of complications. We must have the correct belief. We have to follow certain rules. And all of this only obscures the fundamental truth, sometimes to such a degree that religion often insulates us from the lightning insight of awakening instead of facilitating it.

And it isn't just religion that makes happiness complicated; we manage to do this in many other ways as well. Many of the ways we go about seeking happiness only make it more difficult to find, and even prevent us from finding it.

Happiness is always available. This means, first of all, that you *can* be happy, right now, just as you are, in whatever circumstances you find yourself. There's nothing that needs to happen first for you to be happy. There's nothing that has to be added, subtracted, or changed. You don't have to be someone else. You can be happy right now.

Since happiness is always available, the real question is whether *you* are available to happiness. As the Upanishads (see chapter 2) tell us, joy is the underlying nature of things. You don't have to manufacture it. You need only remove the obstacles, including your unexamined concepts about happiness. When you learn to be available to happiness, these obstacles vanish. You immediately see that there's already enough, right here and right now, for you to be happy.

There's already enough happiness at hand. Consider our everyday human senses and capacities. You already have eyes that open you to the realm of wonderful forms and colors, ears that open you to the realm of beautiful sounds. You have two good hands, capable of doing many helpful and wonderful things. You have legs

and feet that afford you the pleasure of walking, of contacting the earth joyfully with each step. You have a wonderful human mind with its almost mystical capacity for language. These are already incredible sources of joy. Even those of us who lack one or more of these capacities can still find rich sources of happiness in the remaining ones if we learn to appreciate them.

Happiness isn't something that's only for other people. The capacity to be happy is in you already. It isn't the sole right of special people, of people with the right genes, the right connections, the right looks. Often, what blocks you most from being happy is the idea that you don't deserve it. But deserving is only a concept. It's not about deserving or not deserving. Happiness simply is.

Finally, because happiness is always available, you can be happy *right now*. In fact, now is the only time you *can* be happy. The Buddha taught that the past is gone and the future is not yet here. The only time you can be alive is now. Now is when life is available. Do you believe you had happiness at some time in the past, but now it's unavailable? The past is gone. Happiness isn't available in the past. If you want to enjoy a refreshing glass of cool water, now is the only time you can do it. You can't drink the water of yesterday. The source of true happiness is the good and nurturing things around you and within you right now.

Do you think you will be happy in the future? The future isn't here. The future is *never* here. You can't be happy in the future any more than you can enjoy tomorrow's glass of water. If you don't know how to be happy in this moment, you won't be happy in the future either. The refreshing water that's available to you isn't a future glass of water any more than it's a past one. Both the future and the past are insubstantial images, hollow and empty, mere clouds and shadows. The past is a ghost, the future a dream. The water of life is available to you, in all its concrete and vivid reality, but only here and only now.

The idea that we can only be alive in the here and now is profound. But unfortunately, we rush past this insight as if it were obvious and not terribly interesting. But to grasp this insight fully, with clear understanding, is to be happy. We become available to life, and life becomes available to us. Taken superficially, as just a concept, the idea of living in the now offers little help. But if we take it as a practice, as a way of life, we can open to the experience of drinking this delicious water. And when we are present, when our awareness isn't squandered on what comes next or what came before, we are fully alive.

To put an end to suffering was the Buddha's only goal. He wasn't interested in starting a religion or a philosophy, or in speculating about metaphysical truth. He wanted only to end human suffering. To end suffering means to find happiness. To understand how this is so, to catch a glimpse of what the Buddha discovered on that night long ago, we need to understand the true nature of happiness.

## Understanding Happiness

The chief obstacle to our happiness is our concept of happiness. Above all, we tend to think certain conditions must be present for us to be happy. We think we can't be happy until we meet certain life goals. All of this future-oriented thinking, instead of making us happy, becomes a reason for us to be unhappy now. And if we aren't happy now, the postponement of our happiness regresses into an infinitely receding future. We chase the horizon in endless anticipation and continual frustration. We never get there, because we always hope to arrive there *someday*. It's as if we are on a beautiful hiking trail, where there are spectacular mountains, lush meadows, cool streams, quiet lakes, and beautiful trees, but we're unhappy because we're caught in the concept that the view around

the next corner will be better, while the one surrounding us now is nothing at all.

Rather than being about fulfilling certain conditions, happiness is about being receptive, about opening to what's good in the present moment—here, now, and this. When we are receptive, we know every moment that wonderful healing and nourishing things surround us. The song of the birds on my walk is nothing less than astonishing, but only if I am present and open. The white rose on the dining-room table is startling in its beauty, but only if I actually see it.

The Declaration of Independence asserts our right to pursue happiness, but the *pursuit* of happiness makes us crazy. We have struggled to be happy all our lives, but struggling is not finding. The idea that happiness is something to chase after deprives us of life and liberty, our other inalienable rights, and deadens us to the wonders of life that are here now. Like a dog chasing its own tail, we run in swift and vicious circles. But no matter how fast we run, we never reach the goal.

Consider a typical weekday morning. The blaring alarm clock jolts you from sleep, causing you to wake up already resisting the day, preferring to pull the covers over your head for just a few more minutes of sleep. Realizing it's a workday, you review all the stuff you have to do that day. As the list lengthens, you resist the day even more. You are barely aware as you go through your morning routine. The warm water of the shower is there, but you're not there for it. The smell of your coffee is there, but you barely notice it. Showering, you're already thinking about getting dressed and what you'll wear. Drinking your coffee, you're already rehearsing your problems, worries, and difficulties. Driving to work, you're struggling with the traffic, missing the beautiful morning sun, the clouds, the trees, and the sky.

Once we get to work, life is even more difficult. If we check in with ourselves at work, often we find ourselves entirely removed from the moment, rushing through each task just to get it done

and get on to the next one. While doing one task, we're already thinking several items ahead on the lengthy list of things to do. We worry. We worry whether we can do it all. We worry whether our work will be appreciated. We worry whether our supervisor and coworkers like us. We can't wait for the day to be over. We become very tired, but it isn't the work that exhausts us. It's the getting ahead of ourselves, pushing impatiently into the future, all the fretting and worrying.

Even while driving home, we're impatient to arrive. Yet when we finally get there, we aren't really present. We're thinking ahead to the evening's activities. Or we're reviewing the workday. All this time is wasted, because in the midst of it all, we are fully awake, alive, and present in few, if any, moments. This kind of habit is strong in us.

The way to be happy in this situation is simple, but we often forget it. The way to be happy is to be fully available to the warm shower water, your coffee, and the birth of the day. You know that your worries are there, but you don't get lost in them. You don't disqualify yourself from life. You take each task one at a time. You allow yourself to be present during the drive home. You enjoy your evening.

As children, we knew how to be in the present moment. We enjoyed our breakfast. We noticed the rain and the puddles. But a parent's voice called out, "Hurry up! You'll be late for school." And while it was necessary for us to learn to be on time, such experiences also created a habit energy that pushed us endlessly into the future—a future that we would also miss. Now, as adults, we don't enjoy our breakfast. The puddles are just obstacles in our path.

In Buddhist cosmology, there's a type of being known as a "hungry ghost" (*preta*). These beings have large bellies, indicating great appetite, and small, pinhole-sized mouths and throats, indicating small capacity. Such beings are a good depiction of how we often live. We want and want and want. We want so much! We want without end and are never satisfied. Even in the abundance

of developed nations, we remain perpetually frantic for more—not because we really lack, but because we have lost the capacity to be open, to receive and to enjoy what’s there.

Happiness has less to do with what we have than with our capacity to be present. Happiness is about opening, receiving, learning to relax, letting that tiny mouth and throat open up fully to enjoy everything. Happiness is letting in what’s happening.

## Happiness Is Being Mindful

There are different kinds of happiness. There’s the happiness of going on a special trip. There’s the happiness of accomplishing or creating. And there’s the happiness of achievement. While these can all be good things, the positive feelings that attend them are temporary.

The practice of learning to be happy and aware in the present moment is what the Buddha called “mindfulness” (*smṛti*). It’s a stable kind of happiness, a happiness we can rely on because it contains calmness and contentment. It’s reliable because it depends on our own intention, not conditions and circumstances. Mindfulness is about being awake in the moments of our lives, so that we don’t come to the end of life and realize we missed it, that we missed the whole thing, because we were always somewhere else and some-when else. Some elements in the present moment may be difficult for us, to be sure. But by closing ourselves off to those elements, we miss the miracles around us.

## Happiness Isn’t Excitement

Someone once told me that mindfulness isn’t very exciting. He’s right. For mindfulness is about contentment. It’s about relaxing, calming, opening. Mindfulness is about ending our addiction

to things that, while exciting, leave us empty and dissatisfied in the end. That's why mindfulness is a solid foundation for happiness.

The happiness of the Buddha runs deep and has little to do with exhilarating experiences. It's the happiness of being deeply present and appreciating a flower growing out of a cranny in an old wall. Without the elements of calmness and contentment, of peace and ease, we can't be present. We miss the flower.

The moment you receive a wonderful promotion, get accepted to graduate school, start a wonderful new career, or meet your life partner is a pleasant moment. But because such moments contain the element of excitement, the experience fades quickly. The brain is simply not designed to stay in an excited state very long, but seeks to return us to a state of balance—a process called homeostasis. Whenever something wonderful and exciting happens, if you are mindful, you can enjoy it more fully, but you can also enjoy it when it's not so exciting anymore, when life returns to normal. When you are mindful, normal life contains wonders.

True happiness steals upon you quietly. It arrives when goals and projects have departed. It arrives when both excitement and boredom have left. You turn a corner and notice the sun streaming into the room, and a feeling of well-being and quiet joy arises. Seeing the green leafiness of an ordinary houseplant can give you a deep contentment. Simply eating lunch can be a time of deep happiness if you are really there, present to your food, your surroundings, and the people around you. But if you only talk and think about difficulties during lunch, you miss lunch. You can only enjoy these things if there's some stillness in you, if you aren't preoccupied. You can enjoy the streaming light, the green plant, and your lunch, but only if you are receptive. That's the single prerequisite.

## Being Available to the Flower

One morning, the plant in my garden pond displayed an incredible orange blossom for the first time. This simple thing

caused a feeling of quiet, deep happiness to arise in me. I wasn't seeking anything else as I stood before it, breathed and smiled, and opened myself to the experience of this beautiful and delicate flower. I could be happy in that moment because I was available to happiness.

You can do this. The light and radiance are in you. Happiness and peace are in you. Don't go running after it. Open to it—right now, right where you are. Smile.

## Not Wasting Time

Our culture teaches that we shouldn't waste time. This means we should always be doing something productive; we should always be accomplishing something.

But when we know the nature of deep happiness, the kind of happiness the Buddha offers us, wasting time takes on a different meaning. We waste time when we're not present and open. It matters less what the activity is. Sitting and doing nothing may be valuable if we're open, aware, and alive, whereas reading a book can be a waste of time if we're not present to it, if we're just rushing through the process to finish and be done with it.

We have this valuable human life. Some Buddhists teach that we go through millions of lifetimes in other forms, in the hell realm, the animal realms, the realm of hungry ghosts, and even the realms of gods, all for the opportunity to acquire a human life. Only in a human life can we grow, becoming kind, happy, and wise. Only in this human life can we become awake, become a buddha. To waste this opportunity is to be unaware, to be asleep, closed, and unreceptive to what we're doing and what's going on.

## Everything Is Best

One Zen student was frustrated by his lack of progress. He spent many hours meditating, but nothing happened. He remained unchanged and unhappy. One day he was sent to the market to buy food for the monastery. He told the shopkeeper he wanted only the best quality. "Everything is best!" replied the shopkeeper. And in that moment, the student became enlightened.

Realizing that everything is best means to stop judging everything, to stop focusing on the deficiencies of what's present and simply open to the experience itself. Everything is best when we stop comparing our experience to some imaginary ideal and realize that the experience of being alive is wonderful in itself. It's not that everything we see around us is perfect (which simply means the way we want it to be) but that the act of seeing itself is wonderful. It's not that the sounds around us are always pleasant but that hearing itself is amazing. Seeing, feeling, tasting, touching, smelling, and thinking are intrinsically satisfying and miraculous in their own right. It's not a matter of having everything just so. In fact, the need to have everything just so is what *prevents* us from being happy, prevents us from being fully alive and fully rooted in the moment of our experience. The quest for perfection, whether in our surroundings, our circumstances, or ourselves, wastes our time.

## Not Struggling with Imperfection

As a young child considering a hangnail on my thumb in an otherwise pleasant moment, I saw that in life there always seemed to be something of this sort. Things never seem to be quite the way you want them to be. Maybe you got the birthday present you dreamed of getting, but it came without batteries. Maybe you have a wonderful bicycle to ride, but it has a flat tire. There always seems to be something naggingly imperfect in life. If you become

obsessed with this imperfection, if you focus on it, it can completely dominate your consciousness. Even trying to avoid being aware of it only makes it worse, keeping you caught in the net. You become like someone trying to avoid noticing Cyrano's large nose. In the end, that nose is all you can think about.

The common thread in all of this is the element of resistance and struggle. We struggle with what's not perfect. Then we struggle against our struggling against it, which only multiplies the difficulty. We become sad, angry, or embarrassed, which wouldn't really be so bad, except then we also struggle against these emotional states. Being happy is about being able to relax into the imperfect nature of our experience, not about finally having everything just the way we want it. It's about being okay with imperfection.

## Maybe When I'm Enlightened

Resistance to imperfection isn't just about external things. It's also about ourselves. In fact it's often *primarily* about ourselves, about the struggle between how we are now and how we think we should be. Even our noblest aspirations become just one more thing to interfere with enjoying the present moment. We have the idea that if we could only get it all together, attain some imagined state of complete wholeness and authenticity, everything would be great. Then we'd really be happy. Sometimes this idea isn't totally conscious, but can simmer in the background, influencing what we do and say, secretly creating discontentment and anxiety. Spiritual enlightenment is, for many, the ultimate version of this concept. But all such concepts, including enlightenment, can be obstacles that diminish our capacity to be open, accepting, aware, and alive.

The Buddha made a remarkable statement about his enlightenment. He said, "I obtained not the least thing from unexcelled, complete awakening, and for this very reason, it is called 'unexcelled,

complete awakening” (Watts 1957, 45). What an amazing thing to say. Why would he have said such a thing? There are several different ways we can approach his meaning.

For one thing, the Buddha wants you to know that enlightenment, as an idea or a concept, will only get in the way of your establishing the real thing. The idea you have of enlightenment is just an idea, far from the living reality. *Nirvana*, the term Buddhists use for an enlightened person's state of being, means “extinction.” Rather than being about the extinction of who we are, this is about the extinction of our suffering. It's about the extinction of the concepts and ideas that interfere with our direct perception of the wondrous nature of things as they really are in their amazing reality, what Buddhists call “suchness” (*tathata*).

Ideas of psychological wholeness and well-being can also get in our way. A depressed person who aims to get rid of all sad thoughts and feelings will only become increasingly caught up in sadness. Checking assiduously to see whether we are meeting this ideal of no sad thoughts makes us attend to them even more. The idea that we can eliminate all sad thoughts is just an idea. It only makes us feel even more like a failure, causing more sad thoughts and depression, continuing the vicious cycle.

The Buddha's statement that he gained nothing from enlightenment reminds us that enlightenment comes from a different realm of experience. “*Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!*” is the mantra of the Heart Sutra (Thich Nhat Hanh 1988, 2), meaning “Gone, gone, gone beyond; gone completely beyond; hail enlightenment!” This kind of consciousness is a crossing over to another shore. What was foreground becomes background, and what was background becomes foreground. Enlightenment is a state of mind where our conditioning, including our goals and dreams, doesn't push us around. Even if our goals and dreams are wonderful, even if they are both healthy and reasonable, they have a downside: they pull us away from the present moment. Making enlightenment our goal (or wholeness, perfect well-being, or anything of

this kind) in the same sense we make a goal of other things just creates another problem. This isn't fundamentally different from concentrating on more mundane goals, and is in some ways worse, for being an unquestioned good makes it even more insidious. We place something else between ourselves and our happiness. Once we do that, we strain after the goal, trying too hard, pushing and forcing.

Searching is not finding. Trying too hard is antithetical to peace, and thus antithetical to enlightenment.

So the Buddha teaches us that if we think of enlightenment as a goal like other goals, or if we take it as a concept without realizing that even the most refined concept is still a concept, we'll get caught. Enlightenment is a *nongoal*. Enlightenment is about what Buddhists call "goallessness" or "aimlessness" (*apranibita*). It has more to do with being present with and accepting things the way they actually are, without distorting them through desire or aversion.

The same is true of happiness. Making happiness a goal only complicates things. Don't practice mindfulness to be happy. Don't set out to become a buddha. Just come back to the present moment, to your body and mind, and let your buddha nature shine forth. Touch the happiness that already is.

## Not Gaining

The Buddha said he gained nothing from total enlightenment because total enlightenment isn't about gaining. It certainly isn't about acquiring some *thing* called enlightenment. Nirvana stands outside the realm of gain and loss. It isn't something to carry in your pocket. It isn't a commodity to trade on the market. You can't put it on your résumé.

The way out of the trap is always about simply relaxing into the present moment. The way out is to realize you already are what you aspire to be. Your aspiration already sets in motion processes

that lead you gently where you intend to go, that in fact already express in the moment what you want to be. Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow said it well: "The human being is simultaneously that which he is and that which he yearns to be" (Maslow 1968, 160). The Buddhist way of saying this is that you already have buddha nature within you. And therefore, spiritual practice isn't about trying to become something you aren't, forcing yourself to be something else, but about removing the obstacles to what you already are.

## Why Your Dog Is Happier Than You Are

When you watch a dog play, it's difficult not to smile. Dogs enjoy everything. Give them their food and water, and they're happy. Pat them on the head, and they're happy. Scratch them behind the ears, they're happy. The merest mention of the word "walk" triggers ecstasy.

Perhaps they're happy because they don't think so much. For us, on the other hand, it's quite different. This large brain costs us so much to own and operate, using something like a third of our metabolism. It's so important to our survival that our bodies protect it with a hard, bony skull. With this big brain, we can create symbols: numbers and words, ideas and metaphors. We can, in turn, manipulate these symbols as though they were the actual things, at times with astounding results.

But it's important to remember: these symbols are not the actual things. Forgetting this causes no end of mischief. Because of our tendency to treat the symbol as reality, if someone speaks certain words to us, or even makes certain gestures, it triggers a strong emotional reaction in us. Feelings of sadness, anger, shame,

or other painful states arise. We can get very upset about this, and that feeling can continue for hours or even days. It continues as we then rehearse the same symbols mentally: *He said this to me. She did that to me. How could she do that? How could he say that?* We try to solve the problem by inventing clever rebuttals and comebacks, but this attempt at resolution only feeds the process, further entrapping us.

During the stand-up comedy segment of an episode of *Seinfeld*, Jerry contemplates why displaying the middle finger elicits such strong emotion. By pointing to the arbitrariness of this gesture, he helps us see that this symbol is only a symbol. No actual harm is done to us. Through Jerry's eyes, we see that this situation is actually quite laughable. In the same way, if we confuse our symbols with reality, they will often deepen our suffering and unhappiness.

One time, the Buddha was confronted by someone who cursed him to his face. When the Buddha didn't respond, the person cursed him even more vehemently for not responding. Eventually the man could only give up in frustration. Later, the Buddha's followers asked about the incident. How could he remain calm during such an awful attack? The Buddha only commented that when a gift is not received, the giver must take it back. The Buddha knew there was nothing to get upset about in the symbols and words the man used. Ultimately, they're only sounds. They have no more meaning than the wind.

Manipulating symbols is also part of the process of how we get stuck in thinking about the past or future. Thinking about the past or future is a symbolic process. And while it's one thing to reflect on the past to make sense of it, or anticipate the future to plan for it, it's quite another thing to get lost in the past or future. When we do that, it's like trying to clutch at water. Life itself slips through our grasp.

## Don't Get Caught in Words and Ideas

The Buddha knew that language gets in the way of our being happy. Instead of letting language point to direct experience, we get caught up in the words themselves. He even applied this insight to his own teaching, something unique among spiritual traditions.

In the Sutra on the Better Way to Catch a Snake, the Buddha uses three comparisons to reveal the nature of spiritual teaching: he says his teachings are like a raft, like a finger pointing at the moon, and like picking up a poisonous snake.

First, the teachings are like a raft someone uses to cross a stream. After using it, it makes no sense to then lug the thing around on your head as some kind of prized possession. The raft has accomplished its purpose. Leave it behind. Leave it by the water for someone else to use. The purpose of the teaching, in other words, is to get you across to the other side, from the shore of sorrow to the shore of happiness and well-being. The raft itself isn't to become an object of worship or veneration.

The Buddha also compared his teachings to a finger pointing at the moon. Someone who's pointing to the moon wants you to see the moon, not stare at the pointing finger. The teaching exists to show us how to look, how to have a different and deeper perception of what is. The teaching isn't there to fixate on. Far too often, the world has witnessed the conflict and heat of people who rigidly hold on to teachings—or at least their view of the teachings—defending them aggressively and creating a lot of misery in the world. The Buddha doesn't want us to get caught in this trap.

Finally, the Buddha said his teachings are like picking up a poisonous snake. The right way to pick up a snake is to plant a forked stick down into the ground right behind the snake's head. Then you can pick up the snake in the same place with your hand. In this way, no matter how much it writhes and wriggles, the snake

can't bite you. But if you pick it up by the tail, you get bitten. What's the right way to pick up the teachings of the Buddha? The right way is to learn so you can put them into practice, not to acquire knowledge to show off to others. The right way is to practice them as happiness.

Teachings can be dangerous. Invariably, given the structure of human thought and language, the teachings give the impression that there's a goal to reach. Buddhist teachings about different stages of practice, for example, can give us some idea of what may come along on the road ahead so that we know the path has been traveled by others. But unfortunately, talking about stages can make us anxious to reach the next stage, and then the next. It can make us dissatisfied with how we are now, and cause discouragement. This is the opposite of present-moment awareness. This is the opposite of happiness.

Continually assessing your progress is like pulling the beautiful flower in your garden out by the roots to see how it's doing. So while we may track our "progress," feel encouraged to realize that our capacity has grown and that we can now do something we couldn't do before, we need a lot of wisdom about this. Don't get bit! Remember that enlightenment isn't about gaining and that the practice is nonpractice. A goal orientation strangles the life out of spiritual practice. It strangles our happiness.

## The Way We Search Prevents Us from Finding

It's good practice to count our blessings. It's good to be in touch with what's positive in our lives. The problem is, we can go about this practice in a forced, mechanical way, like a child doing arithmetic homework, devoid of energy and enthusiasm. When we approach this practice this way, is it any wonder that its effectiveness is

limited, if it has any effect at all? The way we're going about it doesn't serve what we want to accomplish, unless it's done with joy.

Sitting at the dinner table as a child, you may have been admonished to finish your dinner because there were children starving in India. The intention behind such parental injunctions is good, but the effect often isn't. Instead of feeling grateful for your food, you probably just felt manipulated. So instead of coming to a deeper appreciation of your food, you may have only rebelled against the pressure. After all, quite young children can see that eating their lima beans ("Yuck!") won't help anyone far away. And rather than feeling grateful to have food to eat, they just become distressed.

If we bully ourselves like this, trying to be happy by forcing a sense of gratitude, is it any wonder we don't succeed? Sometimes people in psychotherapy treat themselves this way. They experience difficulties that they know are minor compared to the difficulties other people encounter: "What's my divorce compared to the suffering in Darfur?" "What's my unemployment compared to someone's terminal illness?"

Please be careful with this. It's good to take perspective on the size of our suffering, for this might serve to open our compassion. But include yourself in the circle of compassion too. Often we use this insight in a self-punishing way. Not only am I unhappy, but I'm also a terrible person for being unhappy since others have it so much worse! Use this insight, but not to treat yourself as though you yourself don't deserve kindness. Your suffering matters. Don't dismiss it. This won't give you happiness. It will only increase your pain.

When we think of these and other methods commonly used to find happiness, we have the chance to understand why the Buddha said his practice is nonpractice. By this, he means not going about practices like meditating, following precepts, and living mindfully as if they're something to get done as quickly as possible so you can get to the good stuff that comes later. Practicing gratitude for the good things in our lives, appreciating our food, and practicing

meditation are all good things, but if we go about them in a joyless manner, the result won't somehow mysteriously become joyful.

## The Way Things Really Are

The Buddha taught that we aren't happy because we have some profound misconceptions about the way the world is. Viewing ourselves as separate from the rest of life, we feel alienated and alone. Feeling separate from others makes it seem acceptable to treat others unkindly. Only when we release such distorted views can we see that the underlying nature of things is joy.

You're not isolated. You are profoundly interconnected with other human beings; with nonhuman beings; with the earth, the sun, and the whole universe. Everything in the universe has come together so you can be here, alive, present, and aware. In chapter 2 we explore this insight more fully.

## Training in Happiness (Mindfulness)

Can we train ourselves to be happier? We can. But we must go about doing so with wisdom. If we go about it in a heavy-handed way, with a strict and rigid discipline, how can joy result from that? The means must resemble the ends. The ways we go about becoming happier must already contain happiness, or we won't succeed. The Buddha said that his way is pleasant in the beginning, pleasant in the middle, and pleasant in the end. The way to practice is to make the path pleasant.

Mindfulness is the practice of being happy in the present moment. Mindfulness means being aware of what's going on in an accepting way, opening ourselves to our experience. We stay in

touch with what's good around us. When we practice mindfulness, we are practicing happiness in a simple, direct, and powerful way. Force, rigidity, and obsession won't help us.

Being mindful means to see things with the eyes of a poet to discover what's interesting and wonderful in the present moment. It isn't so much about seeing the flower as a botanist might, using cold intellect to dissect the different parts and their functions, but seeing the flower with the heart. Mindfulness sees the world as warm and alive. Mindfulness sees with kindness, insight, and compassion—for ourselves and for others.

## Rebalancing Negative Perception

Evolution teaches us that living organisms evolve to survive and pass on their genes. The human brain also evolved that way. It evolved because it helps us survive. Because of its tendency to facilitate survival, the brain focuses more attention on what's wrong in our surroundings than on what's right. In terms of survival, it's more important to remember where the bear lives than to remember that sitting on a certain cliff at a certain time of day brings you a great view of the setting sun.

For this reason, the brain has a bad attitude. It's always scanning for what's wrong. But fortunately, we now know that the brain is *plastic*, meaning it can change. The human brain contains about a hundred billion neurons, while each neuron has something like ten thousand connections with other neurons. It's a living and dynamic process, not a static structure. It continually reshapes itself, making new connections between nerve cells. This is why we can learn to modify the negative, survival-based nature of our brains.

When we are mindful, we notice the wonders around us. Everything becomes clear and deep. And this is possible because we can learn to attend to what we want to attend to, instead of

letting our genes or our conditioning compel us to continue in old patterns.

What we focus on becomes real. So while the news may reveal sad developments in the world or you may contend with sad developments in your own life, and you must remain in touch with these difficulties, through mindfulness you can also stay in touch with the positive, healing, and nurturing aspects of life. Attending to these gives you not only happiness but also the capacity to deal with your difficulties. Rather than being a matter of trying to force inflated feelings of happiness, it's about opening more to the happiness that's all around and within us, noticing what we normally don't notice. And there's so much there to notice!

## Man on an Island

The Buddha always stressed that he was a human being. As a human being, he shows what human beings can do. He wants you to know that if he can do it, you can do it. Indeed, if he were a god, it would mean much less for our lives, since we live the life of human beings, not the life of gods. The humanity of the Buddha shows that it's possible for you to become someone who's happy, peaceful, kind, and wise.

In the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, you can see Michelangelo's astounding statue *David*. Though we've all seen photographs of it, standing before it is an experience. I'm not the only one I know whose eyes welled with tears at seeing it. But along the sides of the hall leading up to the *David* are a number of unfinished Michelangelo figures that are equally amazing in their own way. Each figure is incomplete. Each seems to be struggling to emerge from the stone that imprisons it.

That's exactly how Michelangelo understood his work as a sculptor. He didn't see himself as inventing a figure, bringing something to birth that didn't previously exist, but as *freeing* the figure

already present in the marble. In the same way, you are already a buddha. It's possible to free the buddha within you—to be a happy person, a wise person, a kind person—because this is your essential nature. You need only remove the hindrances. You need only remove the stone that's in the way. In the words of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, "There is no one who does not have the capacity to be a Buddha.... Stop being like the man...who looked all over the world for the gem that was already in his pocket. Come back and receive your true inheritance. Don't look outside yourself for happiness. Let go of the idea that you don't have it. It is available within you" (Thich Nhat Hanh 1998, 175).

Enlightenment is like being on an island. You search frantically for something you lost, looking and looking and looking. You get desperate and frustrated. Then one day, you pause, relax a bit, and look around you. For the first time, you see that the island is beautiful.

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## Practice:

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# Open to Happiness

Take a long, deep look at a beautiful flower. As you breathe, be aware of each breath in and out. Without trying to grasp or analyze, simply see about opening yourself to the flower. As you look at it, breathe in and out a few times, saying to yourself, “calm,” then “open,” and then “beautiful.” See if you can feel a sense of connection with the flower, a sense of oneness.

Repeat this exercise as often as you like. Notice how one time you may be more receptive, and another time, less so. You can also try this with other beautiful objects, like a tree, a mountain, a green leaf, or the blue sky. Practice in the spirit of nonpractice, remembering that the point is not to accomplish anything but just to be happy in the present moment, enjoying the flower, enjoying your own presence, awareness, and aliveness.

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