

Body & Spirit | BY PHILLIP MOFFITT

Life Dancing

If all your actions are based on the pursuit of happiness, why is it that so many things you do yield anything but happiness?



I AM CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW at a meditation retreat. Seated across from me is a woman in her mid-30s, smart and articulate, but agitated from her experiences on the cushion. Knowing nothing else about her, can you tell me the inner yearning which possesses her and which shapes her behavior moment by moment—the one thing that will be most useful to me in helping her deepen her meditation practice? It's so simple, so obvious, yet it's usually overlooked. Like all human beings, she just wants to be happy.

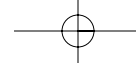
Certainly happiness for her might mean something

that would never bring you joy. But however you define it, each of us wants a happy life. Many people, myself included, find the word “happiness” inadequate for conveying what it is that motivates them. We often substitute different terms—a meaningful or spiritually fulfilling life, one that is peaceful or useful, or a life filled with inner freedom, love, family, creativity, or authenticity. But no matter what term we use, we really mean the same thing—an inner experience that is deeply satisfying. This was one of the insights that the Buddha taught as a cornerstone for understanding why things unfold as they do in each person's life.

The woman in the interview knew she was dissatisfied, but she could not understand why she was unhappy when she was so successful in her life. Sitting in meditation provided her with her first opportunity to actually feel her frustration and had given rise to a question. Maybe her question is the same as yours: If all your actions are based on the pursuit of happiness, why is it that so many things you do seem to yield anything but happiness?

The Buddha spoke to this question in many ways during the 40 years he wandered around India teaching, but his core message was that of clinging and non-clinging. If something good happens, you have a reflexive tendency to try and hold on to it, and if something bad happens, you have a tendency to push it away. Likewise, if you see something you like, you move towards it; or if something is distasteful, you pull away. This clinging response is inevitable if you believe yourself to be the same as or the “owner of” all the desires and fears that arise in you. You become trapped in an endless web of tension and contraction.

The Buddha taught that for most people life is just this way: The good things either go away, lose their appeal, or never happen, while the bad things come despite your best efforts. So when you try to manage your life by clinging and aversion, you are left dissatisfied, uneasy, or without a sense of meaning or wholeness. Moreover, being identified with the clinging Self and its endless wants and fears means that even when things are going well, there is no room to breathe, to experience the spontaneous joy that is the basis of



happiness. Every day becomes a tally sheet of gains and losses; the bountiful mind shrinks, reduced to being an inner bookkeeper huddled over an account ledger of what is to be held and what is to be discarded.

Letting Go of Clinging

“HE WHO UNDERSTANDS clinging and non-clinging understands all the Dharma,” said the Buddha. This is the Dharma of happiness. The alternative to the tyranny of clinging is to fully receive the experiences that arise in your life, knowing them to be pleasant when they are pleasant and unpleasant when they are unpleasant. Certainly you act to avoid the unpleasant and to have the pleasant, but you consciously practice not judging your life by the outcome of your preferences. Instead, you organize and measure your life by how well you follow the intentions that arise out of your values. This is the essence of living the inner life.

The result of living in this manner is a strong sense of inner peace and spontaneity that allows you to better experience the good things in your life and makes the difficult experiences more bearable and meaningful. It's quite a paradox, which is why in so many traditions it's taught in parable, koan, or spiritual poetry. Imagine having this attitude in your job. So much of the tension in work comes from being fixated on an outcome, which in and of itself does not help you achieve that outcome, because your fixation makes you so tense you don't do your best. The same is true in your personal life with your partner or your family. Clinging to your desires to have things a certain way causes endless petty fights, disappointments, and withdrawals.

The woman sitting across from me in the interview reports that her mind seldom stops planning, and when it does, she is overcome with difficult emotions. Her struggle to meditate makes her very irritable, and she finds herself having many negative reactions to others in the room. She feels like a failure. I tell her that she is doing good practice because she is allowing herself to be present for what is true in the moment even though

it is unpleasant for her. It is the beginning—the first step toward freedom from clinging. I give her specific instructions for working with the judging that is arising, but mostly I reflect back to her the clinging that is going on in her mind. She is clinging to ideas about how her meditation experience and emotional state should be. In her moments of clinging, she is lost to the actual experience of being on the cushion. She is also exhausting herself making judgments and comparisons to the point that she considers leaving the retreat. I assure her that the judging is just coming from a reactive mind-state and that it is impersonal, which is why she is able to witness that something is wrong. There is a greater awareness within her which sees things as they are. “Try my suggestions about freeing yourself from judging,” I tell her, “but what matters is that you trust yourself and persevere.”

At the end of the retreat she stops by to report that she'd had a breakthrough. She finally realized that it was okay to be just as she was, even if she would have preferred to be in a different frame of mind. Eventually her agitation had calmed, and for the last part of the retreat she experienced a peacefulness she had not felt since she took her current job three years ago. She was lucky. Inner conflicts don't always reconcile so quickly when you commit to showing up for yourself; many times it requires a prolonged period of living in turmoil.

To practice nonclinging does not mean forsaking what you value—that would be indifference. Instead, it means practicing nonattachment to outcome. There is a subtle distinction between indifference and nonattachment, and it is crucial to understand this distinction if you are to have genuine happiness in your life. If you are indifferent, you have no value base—you literally don't care how life unfolds. This is cynicism disguised as “cool” or karmic apathy. Nonattachment means that you act from your values but are not fixated on the outcome. This perspective is taught in most spiritual traditions.

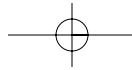
When Jesus said, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and render unto God

what is God's,” his words contained this wisdom of acting according to your values. Jesus made this statement in response to a question intended to trick him into giving an answer that would result in him being charged with sedition. Instead, he used the question as an opportunity for spiritual teaching. There are people and responsibilities in your life that you care about. Render unto these people and responsibilities your best efforts, but do so without identifying with the results of your actions on their behalf. In Jesus's teaching results are God's business, not yours. Certainly you must learn to be skillful and alert to what works and what doesn't; however, this is different from judging yourself by the results. Your sense of self, of meaning, arises from your values and intentions. To experience life in this way is to know inner happiness. The mystics tell us that to live in this fashion is to know a harmony with life that is beyond description.

Don't Take It Personally

HAVING BEEN UNAVAILABLE for communication because of the retreat, I spent the following Saturday receiving calls from individuals with whom I work. For hours I listened, mostly silently, to stories of fatal cancer and illness, betrayal, miraculous healing, loneliness, and despair. The last phone call came from someone who had just received a big lesson in how unreliable it is to cling to the good things in life. Something he cherished and relied upon had unexpectedly and unfairly been taken away. He was so distressed, and at the end of the conversation when he was feeling less fearful, he asked, “But what does this mean about me?” “It's only life dancing,” I said. “It's not personal; it isn't about you.”

Life dances and you have to dance with it, whether it is taking you on a wonderful ride or is stepping on your toes. This is the necessary price and transcendent gift of being incarnate—alive in a body. But it is just life dancing. Life will move you in the rhythm and direction of its own nature. Each moment is a fresh moment in the dance, and if you are lost in clinging to the past or clinging to your hopes or



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fears of the future, you are not present for the dance.

The concept of nonclinging almost always draws two protests. One is from entrepreneur types who irately point out that they have to measure their lives by the outcome because it's their job to produce results. I always smile when I hear this—parents say it, doctors too, even elected officials say it as though they are the only ones feeling this pressure. If life really worked in this manner, if you could control outcomes, then why don't things turn out just the way you want them? It isn't that you shouldn't work to accomplish your responsibilities; people should be able to count on you to do so with honesty and your best effort. But it is sheer hubris to think that the outcome is entirely dependent on your efforts or that you can be sure of what is the best outcome. Life dances with you, and when you are fortunate, your perseverance and good work meet with receptiveness and you succeed; if not, it doesn't work out.

A few years ago *Forbes* magazine quoted the real estate developer Donald Trump referring to Conrad Hilton as "just a member of the lucky sperm club" because Hilton's father owned the successful hotel chain. It was a classic statement of someone whose ego clings to winning and trembles in fear of losing. Trump is himself a member of the lucky sperm club; some would say having a wealthy, supportive father and personal good health makes him the result of particularly lucky sperm. But you and I are also members of the lucky sperm club. Life danced and you were the result. Likewise, when death comes, it will come of its own bidding; life will dance, and you will be gone. The Buddha taught that there is nothing you can successfully cling to in between the moment of conception and the moment of death.

Certainly it is possible to affect the course of your life. Hard work, discipline, and development of your talents enable you to be a better partner when life comes to dance, just as you can learn to be a better swimmer in the ocean. But in life, like swimming in the ocean, when the strong currents and big waves come, they

overwhelm all human action. Is it not your experience that every human being is swimming in the ocean of life?

The second objection to nonclinging comes from people who say it's a passive or negative approach to life. This objection comes from confusing words and actions, which you have control over, with results, which you do not. How you hold yourself when dancing with life involves a balancing process. If you hold too tight, you squeeze the life out of the moment. If you hold too loosely, you are not really engaging in the moment, and you offer life a mere rag doll with whom to dance.

Clinging occurs not just in regard to what you want now; you may also cling to memories of something bad that happened to you or cling to regret over some action you took. Bad memories or deep sorrow do not have to lead to clinging. In his book, *The Art of Happiness* (Riverhead Books, 1998), the Dalai Lama speaks of a regret from his own life: "It's still there. But even though that feeling of regret is still there, it isn't associated with a feeling of heaviness or a quality of pulling me back." When you experience that quality of heaviness or being pulled back, it is a symptom indicating that you are clinging to something in the past. Living life in the spiritual dimension means letting go equally of past and future and being present for each moment as it arises. It serves no purpose to judge yourself or to wish to undo that which has been written in the sands of time.

Herein lies the paradox common to mystical teachings in most spiritual traditions: In order to be fully alive, you also have to die. When you cling to the past or future, believing you are holding onto something precious, you are denying what is sacred about life. Your life, with its unique pains and joys, can only be reconciled in your surrender to the truth of your experiences as they arise one moment after another, never fixed, always moving. A beautiful sunrise, a baby's smile, a broken heart, cancer, the loss of love—open fully to the experiences of your life in all their mysterious manifestations. Meet each of these moments

with compassion, loving-kindness, and your very best response. Then let loose of each in turn, for however beguiling in their beauty or their horror, they are truly only life dancing. ■

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