

Happiness, Well-Being, and Reality

by Georg Feuerstein

1. In Search of Wholeness, Health, and Happiness

No one likes to suffer.¹ Everyone is seeking to maximize happiness and minimize unhappiness. Therefore, the pursuit of happiness was written into the American Constitution as a basic human right. However, the Constitution does not offer a clear explanation of what happiness is. Nor does it tell us how to realize happiness.

What, then, is happiness? First of all, we must note that happiness is often confused with pleasure. From the midst of the fountains of pleasure, noted the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), there rises something of bitterness that torments us amid the flowers themselves. Or, as another poet put it, even the sweetest rose has its thorns. The particular sting of pleasure is that it is shortlived. Hence we often hunt after a pleasurable repetition, and in the process run the risk of becoming addicted. Pleasure is inherently addictive, precisely because it is not completely fulfilling. However much the pleasure, we always hunger for more. This can lead to extreme situations, such as in the case of a drug addict who forgoes everything—including propriety and sanity—in order to acquire the substance that gives him pleasure.

Happiness, on the other hand, is deep, full, and enduring. It is satisfying in itself. Therefore it gives us peace and tranquility. Whereas suffering follows in the wake of pleasure, either because the pleasure has ended or because its pursuit has led to painful imbalances, happiness has no untoward repercussions. It gives rise to harmony. The American philosopher George Santayana wrote in *Little Essays* (p. 251), "Happiness is the only sanction of life; where happiness fails, existence remains a mad and lamentable experiment."

Happiness ends all sorrow; it concludes our frantic search for the next injection of pleasure. The person who is happy does not look for greater happiness. But pleasure always spurs us on to experience greater pleasure. It drives us, and in driving us it enslaves us. Happiness, however, sets us free. It is freedom.

When we are happy we are whole. The pleasure-seeker is feeling incomplete and therefore is looking for completion, except his or her search is focused on external means that can never bring true happiness. If pleasure were the same as happiness, our Western consumer society, which provides unparalleled access to pleasures of all kinds, would produce the happiest human beings on earth. Instead, our society is filled with desperate and emotionally disturbed and spiritually unfulfilled individuals. In fact, many mental health authorities think it is the sickest society ever to exist on this planet. According to a recent poll, more than one-third of the American population is thought to suffer from one or the other mental illness—from chronic depression to schizophrenia. This is a scary figure, but not surprising when we look at the preoccupation of the mass media with violence and the shadow side of human existence.

As long as we are spiritually fragmented, we must expect to also be physically, emotionally, and mentally unfit. Spiritual wholeness and psychosomatic well-being go hand in hand. Millions suffer from chronic diseases that are the result of emotional disturbance and wrong attitudes to life, expressed in unwholesome habits.

2. True Philosophy as the Path to Happiness

Clearly, when we speak of wholeness, well-being, and happiness we inevitably touch on issues that exceed psychology, medicine, or morality and that reach into the realm of philosophy. Let us define philosophy—the "love of wisdom"—as the systematic concern with the Big Questions: those questions that demand answers of why rather than how something is the way it is. In particular, philosophy is the study of the meaning of human existence.

The kind of philosophy that we have in mind is not of the academic variety, which exercises the logical mind without necessarily aiming at providing practical guidance in life. We understand philosophy as a practical activity in which both the intellect and the heart (intuition) are employed in order to generate living wisdom that can fruitfully be applied in daily life. The purpose of such philosophy is to show us the path to wholeness, well-being, and happiness.

This type of philosophy is at the heart of the spiritual traditions of the world. It is therefore also an important aspect of Buddhism, which is a tradition that is making inroads in the West. Buddhism can be understood as a pathway to ultimate wholeness, well-being, and happiness. But what do we mean by "ultimate"? To answer this question, we must first consider the nature of reality, because our understanding of happiness depends on our understanding of reality. From the Buddhist perspective, happiness is not merely momentary pleasure but abiding joy. Similarly, wholeness is not merely psychological integration but a comprehensive state of spiritual freedom. And well-being is not merely physical health or even psychological health but the irrevocable realization of a dimension of existence, or reality, that transcends all suffering. We call it the dimension of the spirit, or our intrinsic Buddha nature.

3. Reality is Really Important

That we are alive is an undeniable fact. Beyond this, we can say few things that one or the other person might not wish to contest. But in order to communicate with one other, we must resort to language, however limited and limiting it may be.

One of the long-standing arguments has been over the nature of reality. What is real and what is unreal or illusory? The answer is by no means clear to everyone. But it is important how we respond to this question, because it determines how we relate to ourselves and to other people and situations. Reality, or our understanding of it, matters. It "really" is important for us all.

Ask yourself: How real am I as a human being? This question is worthy of our most careful consideration. How real are your perceptions? One moment you seem to recognize a person a long distance away, the next you realize it is merely a tree trunk.

Or, more significantly, for years you perceived someone as your greatest adversary only to discover that he or she has been quietly supportive of you, without the slightest trace of enmity. Or you perceived situation as a golden opportunity only to be profoundly disappointed by it.

How real are your feelings? At first you felt deeply in love with someone; then, before you knew it, you felt out of love. Or at one point you considered yourself really badly off, but then you heard someone else's story and you realized that you were much better off. Or you had a terrible hangover and thought you were really sick, but then you went on a boat and learned that there are degrees of sickness and that one can get a whole lot sicker.

How real is the world around you? Is it really around you? Or do you really only know it indirectly through nerve impulses traveling from your skin to your brain where they get translated into feelings and thoughts? Or is there something altogether different happening?

What is reality anyway? How real is real? Now, you don't have to become a professional philosopher to answer these questions. In fact, professional philosophers often do not offer satisfying answers that can be used in daily life. For meaningful answers we can more profitably look to the spiritual geniuses who have explored both inner and outer reality.

One such spiritual genius was Gautama the Buddha, whose enlightenment under the bodhi tree two and a half thousand years ago planted the seed for the world religion of Buddhism. But "religion" is the wrong word to describe Buddhism. Buddhism is essentially a spiritual path containing within itself a number of approaches. They are all founded in a practical understanding of what reality is, and how we may relate to it appropriately and fruitfully.

The Buddha (Awakened One) has not supplied us with a ready-made definition of reality. This would only captivate our intellect and leave our emotional being untouched. So, he has given us a comprehensive understanding of reality instead, which, when we have assimilated it, is convincing to the mind and satisfying to the heart, thus stimulating us to appropriate action. However, for the purposes of the present discussion, I would like to offer the following working definition of reality: Reality is that which is when the mind does not introduce any distortions.

4. Reality Is Reality Is Reality

The American writer Gertrude Stein wrote, "A rose is a rose is a rose." This was not meant to be a definition, of course. But it is a very powerful statement nonetheless. Above all, it is a pronouncement that stops us in

our tracks, rather like a Zen koan. When we ponder reality, we make the same experience. Reality is reality is reality. We cannot say more about it. Whatever we could say about it would be mind-made, and we have already said that it is the mind that is responsible for distorting reality. Even saying as much as we have about reality is almost already too much.

But when we know the mind's tricky nature, we can perhaps get away with making some statements about reality that will not be misleading. At least some of the great teachers who understood reality chose not to be silent. In opting to communicate, however, they necessarily had to resort to language: to express the seemingly inexpressible in words. Thus, according to the Mahayana Sutras, the Buddha himself spoke of reality as Suchness (tathatâ), Thusness (tathatva), Emptiness (shûnyatâ), All-Knowledge (sarva-jnâta), Limit of Existence (bhûta-koti), Transcendence (para), Body of Reality (dharma-kâya), Root of Reality (dharma-dhâtu), Realness (dharmatâ), Thus-Gone (tathâgata), Mind Only (citta-mâtra), Enlightenment (bodhi), and Extinction (nirvâna).

5. Reality and Well-Being

Why is it so important that we apprehend reality? To put it in a nutshell: As long as we are attuned to reality, we are well and whole. The moment we are out of sync with reality, we suffer. No one wants to suffer—even masochists seek pleasure in pain—but suffering is very much a part of human experience. Why? Because, with few exceptions, people are confused about reality and are largely out of sync with it—so much so that many are not even aware of it. Unless they are struck by disaster or are suffering from an illness, they might not even be aware that they are suffering in a more fundamental sense. When asked, they will tell you that they are as happy “as can be expected” and “grateful to be alive.” They don't seem to be in touch with the black hole in their hearts, which does not allow them to really trust or love anyone. Nor are they aware of their low-energy relationship to life, which makes them passive and merely reactive. Or else they are so frenetic that they cannot ever sit still and ask themselves why they are rushing through life; what it is they are trying to escape.

6. Mind: A Hall of Mirrors

Why is it so difficult to be attuned to reality? Because of the distorting mirror of the finite human mind, or consciousness, depending on the filters of our brain. We are unable to perceive reality as it truly is. Therefore we are also unable to live in accordance with reality. Our view of things determines our action. If our view is mistaken, our actions are inappropriate. From a spiritual perspective, wrong view leads to actions that are conducive to more wrong view and unhappiness, keeping us trapped in this vicious circle. This is what is known as karma. Karma is the concatenation of action and reaction, or cause and effect, rooted in wrong view or ignorance.

Ignorance is the condition of the unenlightened mind, the mind that perceives reality as other than what it is in itself. Upon enlightenment, ignorance is lifted and the distorting quality of the mental mirror is also removed. The enlightened being realizes reality as it is. Enlightenment and reality are of the same essential quality. No experience is involved, for experience depends on an object that is outside of oneself. The realization called enlightenment is unmediated. It does not depend on the intervention of the finite mind. The enlightened being is reality. Therefore the enlightened being is as indescribable as reality itself.

The enlightened being is essentially happy because the whole karmic cycle has been transcended. For actions based in true knowledge, or enlightenment, are nonbinding and conducive to happiness. Nirvâna is not a dull state of unconsciousness. But neither is it consciousness in the conventional sense. The Buddha himself avoided as much as possible to squeeze it into limited linguistic categories, and he refused to speculate about metaphysics. However, out of compassion for those still lacking his supreme realization, he did occasionally make statements about Nirvâna that help us understand that it is a desirable state. Over the centuries, teachers following the Buddha's footsteps have likewise—and more frequently—allowed themselves to speak of the ultimate realization in more concrete terms for the benefit of their disciples.

Note

1. A masochist takes perverse pleasure in physical or emotional pain in specific situations but otherwise, like everyone else, seeks to reduce or avoid pain and suffering.