

the pursuit of HAPPINESS

*Happiness is vital to our mind, body and soul's well-being. So, how do we obtain it? The formula is simple, we just need to stop striving to find it says **Fiona Hoban***

How many times have you yearned for a bit of peace and quiet; a bit of time to sit and relax and yet when that time comes you struggle to embrace and enjoy it? A sense of unease, boredom or anxiety often arises within and off you go again; checking your mobile phone, flicking through brain-dead TV channels, raiding the fridge for something chocolaty (or boozy). The existential philosophers call this the existential vacuum or void – a deep inner sense of emptiness, isolation, meaninglessness and anxiety. Much of what we do with our time is an attempt to distract ourselves from this inner void or sense of lack. We do things, go places, meet people, buy stuff, wear stuff, collect stuff, and then buy more stuff. All in an attempt to fill that void; all in an attempt to find happiness because we (mistakenly) believe that finding happiness will take care of this inner lack and make us feel complete. Ask yourself, “how much of what I do truly brings me happiness?” - “how much of it is merely providing temporary relief from a feeling of inner lack?”

Consumerism thrives on this existential inner lack. It takes advantage of our pursuit to fill the inner void by offering us all sorts of, well pretty much everything, as a solution. Fill the void and then you'll be happy. Oliver James in his book *The Selfish Capitalist* quotes social economist Eric Fromm: “What the economy needs most of all for its own operation is that people buy, buy and buy again, since there is otherwise no constantly growing demand for goods that industry can produce and must produce to an ever-growing degree if it wants to multiply its capital. For that reason, industry compels people by all means of temptation to consume more.” And whilst most of us acknowledge that a particular brand of tights or shampoo cannot deliver happiness, we consume them as if they could. Oliver James goes on to say: “Materialistic psychology is driven by a desire for extrinsic rewards and praise nurtured in materialists by parents and wider social forces. These are eventually ‘introjected’, taken to be part of oneself, creating guilt or anxiety if disobeyed, and experienced as an instruction to conform – compulsively so.”

In that sense, happiness in Western consumerist cultures is often seen as something that must be pursued and attained. (I'll be happy when I lose 10lbs; I'll be happy when I get a good job; I'll be happy when I meet my soul-mate). One way or another, happiness is seen as the end result; it is dependent on something external and is invariably something that will happen in the future. And when we do lose that 10lbs or get that good job or find our soul-mate, this indeed delivers a sort of happiness. A sort that, if we're honest, is ultimately short-lived. It's not long before we return again to a sense of lack; a return to our seemingly endless search for happiness. As U2 sang back in the 1980s... “I still haven't found what I'm looking for.”

So what's the answer? Is it that old cliché that true happiness comes from within? Not necessarily. This too can be misleading because it assumes that happiness can be found somewhere, albeit from an inner source. This merely shifts our search from an outer one to an inner one. But it's still a search! Spiritualism claims that there is no source of happiness (either inner or outer) and therefore any search is ultimately futile. True happiness simply exists and is unconditional; it is achieved when we go beyond the self-orientation and possessiveness of the mind; when we enter

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the direct experience for ourselves and the Universe; when we have the perception that we are the Universe.

An important part of tapping into this unconditional happiness is letting go of an expectation of finding happiness. It is often said that the main thing that blocks us from experiencing unconditional happiness is our relentless pursuit of it. Did you ever go to a party with zero expectations? You're not expecting it to be a good night; you're not expecting to meet your soul mate. You're just open to going with the flow. Isn't it true that those nights are often the best nights? It's one of life's paradoxes: the minute you let go of your expectation of something, that's the time it's manifested. Letting go of an expectation to be happy, ironically, brings its own happiness.

Some would say then that the key to happiness is to stop wasting time searching for happiness. If we are no longer to search for happiness, what do we do with ourselves? We simply feel all that comes our way and decide to express happiness through whatever activity or relationship we're experiencing in this moment. We use relationships and possessions to express our happiness, rather than depend on them to find our happiness. In that sense, happiness must ensue and not be pursued.

Think about it: if you decided to stop searching for happiness, if you decided to give up any expectation of finding happiness in what you do, in the relationships you have etc.; if you made your peace with that sense of inner lack and stopped masking it with various activities and acquisitions – wouldn't all this bring about a state of inner calm and peace? And from this inner calm and peace springs a happiness that is not dependent on any internal or external condition; this is called love.



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