

Conscious Being

Reading Five: Is Happiness a Choice?

From Chapter 9 of Conscious Recovery

Choosing Happiness

Our culture tells us that happiness is something to be achieved. Often we act as if our purpose in life is to find happiness, whether it be through achieving what looks like success or freeing ourselves from pain. The trouble with anything we “get” in that way is that we then may believe we need to hang onto it, to fight for it, or we might fear we will lose it. The Dalai Lama says this about happiness: “When you are discontent, you always want more, more, more. Your desire can never be satisfied. But when you practice contentment, you can say to yourself, ‘Oh yes - I already have everything that I really need.’” We might look at happiness as something granted to the lucky few. Our stories, our core beliefs, might tell us that happiness is beyond us, that it’s only for other people. But if we believe that happiness is just the luck of the draw, as it were, if it’s available to some and out of reach for others, that’s a roadmap to despair. Fortunately, we can experience happiness in a different way as we awaken to our true self. We begin to experience happiness as a choice.

For some, this can be hard to imagine or accept. In fact, out of all the discussions I have with people about spiritual awakening, this is the one that results in the most push-back and resistance. “Happiness is a choice? I’m not sure if I can buy that.” “Really? Do you know what you’re saying to people who have depression or are suffering from a debilitating illness?”

So, first let me clarify what I mean by happiness. Happiness in this sense is more than a feeling. It's more than a rush of ecstasy, more than having a great day or even a great year, more than the experience of health or the absence of pain. It's more than the security that comes with external success. Further, happiness is not simply flipping the story, or looking for the good in all things. It's a state of contentment, and a level of satisfaction with what is. We might call it joy.

In the book *How We Choose to Be Happy* by Greg Hicks and R. F. Foster, the authors interviewed people from around the world—both happy people and unhappy people. They found nine basic choices that truly happy people have made. These are not attributes, activities, or feelings. They're choices. You might be surprised to hear that one of the choices happy people make is the choice to feel emotions deeply. Happy people choose to embrace all their feelings. When happy people lose someone, they hurt, they grieve, they feel loss. Loss and sorrow are just as much a part of an authentic, integrated life as feelings of satisfaction and joy. When truly happy people allow themselves to feel deeply, those feelings pass through them, which allows them to return to their natural state of presence and joy.

Choosing Peace

How can you make this kind of choice? How can you choose peace and happiness in every moment, regardless of outer circumstances? It's all about awareness. If you're trapped by your unconscious biases and assumptions, then those things are running the show and making your choices for you. Those mental structures are unconsciously dictating what you feel, and what you push into the shadow. From that level of awareness, you can't seem to

choose happiness. You can't seem to choose because you don't know you can. But as you begin to identify those limiting inner constructs, those deeply held beliefs about yourself and the world, then more possibilities become open to you. As your awareness deepens, so does your experience of freedom, including the freedom to choose peace and happiness. And this comes from a state of consciousness, a way of being in the world. Yes, peace and happiness are both states of being in the world. They are choices. Happiness and peace are decisions we make. We can decide that no matter what happens, we're going to be open-hearted, loving, and connected. Even when we lose touch with that choice and seem to get bumped off track, as when something happens to trigger our fight, flight, or freeze responses, we can still return to this choice. Peace is what makes this happiness choice possible. Peace is the sense that we don't need anything or anyone to change in order to experience a deep sense of contentment and joy. It's the assurance that our freedom is not limited by how things are in the external world.

One might imagine that living in a state of peace and happiness puts us in a state of denial about all the seeming pain and injustice in the world. But choosing peace and happiness doesn't require us to look the other way when we're confronted by its seeming opposite. In fact, it's the confidence of peace and the power of happiness that allows us to infuse every situation with love and forgiveness. It's what makes peaceful resistance so effective, it's what energizes the lives of people like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. When we are grounded in oneness with Source we can approach even the most violent situation without succumbing to the reactive impulse. And when we're free from the impulse to fight back, to fix things, to beat up the "bad guy," our vision expands and we can experience other possibilities. This is what it means to live an awakened life.

Discovering True Freedom

Our culture is all about freedom. People often speak of fighting for freedom or protecting freedom from the enemy. We tend to think about freedom as something to be gained or lost on the outside—something granted to us by external things, like our constitution, government, or lifestyle. And we fear it can be taken from us by external things, like our nation’s enemies, the penal system, our boss, or our addiction. I’d like to look at a different type of freedom—one that is not freedom from anything external. Simply put, this is an inner freedom from duality, from “good” “bad” “right” and “wrong.” It’s freedom from the stories and perspectives that limit our choices and viewpoints. This freedom opens us to the power of authenticity, to the choice of peace and happiness, to awakened living.

This doesn’t mean that in a state of freedom we are not ever going to notice we have opinions or perspectives; it simply means that we are not as deeply entrenched or invested in our opinions and perspectives. We recognize their place in the spectrum of possible options. We see our opinions and perspectives as an expression of who we are and what we are experiencing at this moment, given what we know and what we don’t know. Our opinions and perspectives are not the totality of who and what we are. Furthermore, as we continue on our path of awakening, we can actually raise our consciousness and move beyond opinions and perspectives altogether. Freedom is then possible and we arrive at a place of witnessing life rather than reacting to it. It’s being in a state of awareness of nonresistance and non-judgment that allows us to evaluate our opinions and perspectives and choose from there. Are our opinions causing conflict and division? If they are, our freedom opens us up to the other sides of the story, to possible alternatives. Is our perspective bringing something valuable to a

relationship or situation? If it is, our freedom opens us up to adding further to that perspective, to nurturing it with additional information and deeper nuance.

Inner freedom is living in present moment awareness. It is a level of consciousness that's beyond clinging and aversion, beyond suffering. That to me is what is meant by "Being in the world but not of it." When we're of this world, we are bounced around by life, reacting to what happens to us, imprisoned by the stories we've built up about ourselves and our world. When we're in this world but not of it, we still move through relative reality, but we're grounded in our absolute essence, and this provides unlimited freedom to choose, to feel fully without being manipulated, and to respond rather than react to the fluctuations of the outer world.

Moving toward freedom may seem like a process, and not a one-time event. Things in the outer realm can sometimes pull us back toward old behaviors when we are early in our spiritual practice. Just because we are growing in awareness doesn't mean that daily "challenges" will suddenly stop appearing. Our spiritual practices keep us aware, helping us to return consistently and constantly, moment to moment, back to a state of love and connection. Freedom may take practice, and as things like meditation and mindfulness teach us to become more aware of our reactive self, we become able to witness the reactive self without judgment and then to question it. We can ask what choices we have to make in the situation. There are always deeper levels to freedom; indeed, becoming patient with this process is a kind of freedom in itself. Are you ready to release and let go of the self-imposed prison you have been living within? This is the moment!