

On Happiness

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"No matter what you are doing, keep the undercurrent of happiness. Learn to be secretly happy within your heart in spite of all circumstances." ~ Paramahansa Yogananda, author of Autobiography of a Yogi

How do we become happy? I know what I used to think. I used to think happiness is something that comes to you, much like waking up on the right side of the bed or winning a lottery (the words happiness and happen derive from the Middle English *hap*, which means fortune or chance). In this sense, happiness is something that happens to you. It was a precarious state, dependent on chance.

After a while my view of happiness "matured" slightly. I began to think happiness comes by getting all the things you want: the perfect home, mate, and automobile, maybe even perfect children and pets. The "mature" part here was believing that I had to do something to get happy, or at least get something to be happy; it was not just going to come to me. Some things mature into wine, some into vinegar. This belief of happiness, as with the former, matured into vinegar. My belief was still mired in a fallacy that happiness is conditional, that it depends on some circumstance or thing outside of me.

Twenty or so years later, I began to wake up. I finally began seeing that these concepts of happiness do not hold water (or even vinegar). Some people get it more quickly than I did. Others live their whole lives without getting it. They get a few glimpses of happiness, a few fleeting moments of joy, but like the fish leaping out of the water, they fall back to where they were before. And even if the fish could stay above that water, it does not have the apparatus to breathe up there.

Yoga was the wake up call for me. Yoga presented me with the opportunity to make the greatest, most challenging and rewarding stretch: practicing contentment (*santoshā* in sanskrit). Contentment is not a state that derives from a particular event or circumstance. It's an inner state of being. What's the stretch here? We usually think of yoga practice as being able to bend backward, or touch your toes, or perhaps being able to twist yourself until all your fluids have been wrung out (that last one was an exaggeration, of course). But yoga is much more than what you can do with your body. Ultimately and foremost, yoga is also what you can do for your mind and soul. The disciplined practice of *santoshā* (contentment) benefits all levels: body, mind, and soul.

Contentment is the inner practice that gives the fish that missing apparatus, the ability to breathe above water, or anywhere. Contentment is the breath and spirit of yoga (note that to breathe and to inspire can mean one and the same thing). *Santoshā* is a stretch in that we have to go beyond our usual limits or definitions of happiness. We are challenged to create our happiness rather than wait for it to come or happen to us, and for happiness to endure, we have to continue creating it moment by moment; otherwise, it's only momentary! So, *santoshā* is not an easy practice. It is easy for me to be happy

when everything is going my way, to be sad or happy with the swing of events. It is easy to experience moments of joy and long interludes of sadness or quiet desperation. But it is not so easy to learn to be "happy within your heart inspite of all circumstances." This requires strong spiritual muscles, the strength of which comes from continued, focused PRACTICE.

Being content under all circumstances means I no longer look forward to the weekend or the next vacation so much as enjoy this moment or day. TGIT replaces TGIF: Thank God it is today instead of Thank God it is Friday. Being happy under all circumstances means appreciating I am alive and can own an automobile rather than griping about the traffic jam. Being content under all circumstances means serving my country no matter who wins the presidency. Being content under all circumstances means loving the ones I am with rather than wishing I was with someone I "love." Being content under all circumstances means being love rather than wanting to be loved. (Love is a whole other commentary!) As hard as it might be, being content under all circumstances is the ultimate freedom. Contentment no matter what! Contentment inspite of circumstances! This is quite liberating!

One aspect of contentment is being grateful. Gratitude is both the cause and effect of contentment. When I remember to be grateful, I appreciate what I have, what is now, what is. When I forget to be grateful, I become discontented. I focus on what I do not have, on what I think I am missing, and it is this kind of thinking that creates the missing. Because I am thinking about what I do not have, or what is not right, I am missing what I already have and what is already right. So, practicing gratitude, for all things big and small, helps strengthen those spiritual muscles for contentment. With practice, happiness begins to happen, and it happens continuously. Happiness begins to come to me, and it comes continuously. Happiness abounds, just as if I had won a lottery!

Phil Milgrom teaches Svaroopaa Yoga classes in Massachusetts and a variety of Yoga workshops nationally, including *Yoga for Your Back* and *Laughter Is a Good Stretch, Too!*. He teaches weekly classes in Chelmsford, MA and at The Centered Place Yoga studio of Warren, MA, which he co-directs with his life partner, Nancy Nowak. For more information, call 800 815-7374, or e-mail philmilgrom@comcast.net. Phil is also a stress management consultant, and has a web site at <http://www.philmilgrom.com>. Swami Nirmalananda (formerly Rama Berch) created Svaroopaa yoga and is founder and director of the Master Yoga Academy in Malverne, PA. The Master Yoga Academy can be reached at info@masteryoga.org.