



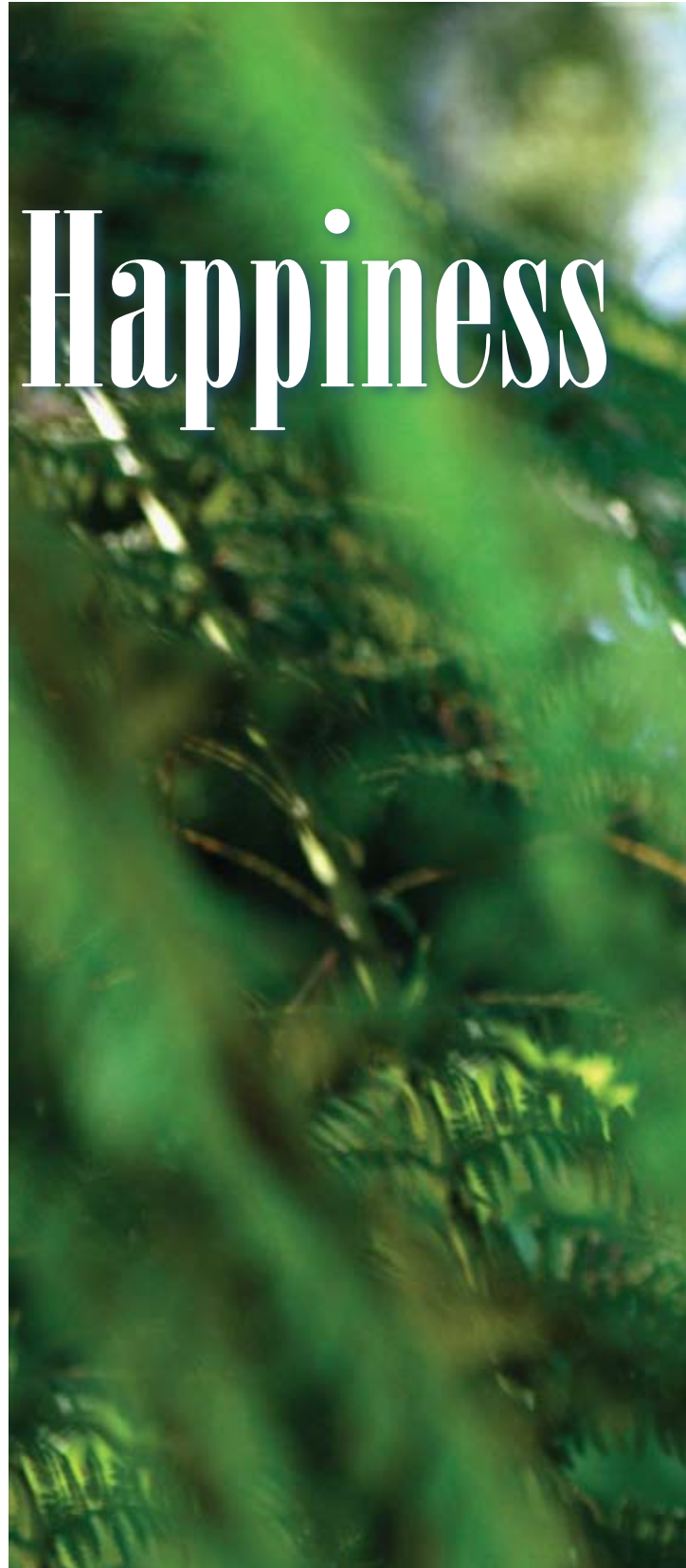
In Search of Happiness

by Vesela Simic

Photography by joSon

WHEN A STUDY PUBLISHED LAST DECEMBER in the *British Medical Journal* announced that happiness is contagious, it became a top news item throughout the U.S. media—alongside lead stories about the auto industry’s plea for a \$34 billion bailout, the Treasury Department’s plan to salvage the nation’s housing market, the Mumbai police’s search for terrorists, and spiraling confrontations in the West Bank. An explosion of interest in happiness has hit our collective consciousness—outnumbered though it may be by headlines on societal collapse. In a variety of popular magazines—*Time*, *Discover*, *Science Now*, *Smithsonian*, *Wired*, *Home*, *Christianity Today*—and books of most genres—*The Geography of Bliss*, *A History of Happiness*, *This Is Your Brain on Joy*, *Exploring Adolescent Happiness*, *The Joy of Retirement*—happiness is telling a multifaceted story. *Psychology Today* reports that 4,000 books on the subject were published in 2008 as compared to 50 in 2000. Although there’s an element of commodification in this trend (you can get a “sustainable happiness makeover” in just three months for \$3,000), it’s also true that part of what’s driving this phenomenon is scientific interest in the investigation, and the findings are news.

For most of its history, psychology has focused on our pathologies, making this shift to positive psychology a refreshing change. It’s also a fertile field. “Between 1980 and 1985, only 2,125 articles were published on happiness,” in academic publications, “compared with





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10,553 on depression,” according to the *Los Angeles Times*. By 2005, the number of articles on happiness had increased sixteen-fold. Reflecting the multidisciplinary research and discussion under way, a recent conference in San Francisco titled “Happiness and Its Causes” brought together experts in psychology, neuroscience, neurobiology, internal medicine, and integrative medicine. They joined educators; public activists; artists represented by film, song, dance, drum, and judo; and scholars of philosophy and religion to shed light on the subject.

What is meant by *happiness*, anyway? The ancient Greeks were guided by the term *eudaimonia*, which translates to “human flourishing.” Eastern traditions, such as the philosophies of Buddhism and Yoga, speak of happiness as the “cessation of suffering.” From these perspectives, what is sought in happiness is not transient pleasure but rather a deep sense of serenity and fulfillment. So, where can we find it? How do we get it? “Happiness is a skill,” says the happiest man in the world, Matthieu Ricard. A Buddhist monk and close associate of the Dalai Lama, Ricard was pronounced “happiest man in the world” when extensive neuroimaging of his brain at the University of Wisconsin registered the highest level ever recorded (off the scale) in the area of the brain associated with positive emotions.

The science bears out Ricard’s understanding of happiness with its findings that 50 percent of our happiness is genetic, 10 percent circumstantial, and 40 percent in our hands to skillfully cultivate. Studies have also identified a variety of intentional activities that boost our well-being: nurturing social connections; expressing gratitude; positive thinking; forgiveness; acts of kindness; living in the present as well as working to achieve meaningful goals that put us in the flow; physical activities to nurture the body; mind training, or meditation (the skill Ricard has mastered and recommends); and belief in a higher power or purpose.

Money, however, doesn’t buy true happiness; this is no longer just an adage but the empirical outcome of

researchers’ studies. Once our security needs (food, shelter, and safety) have been met, more material wealth doesn’t guarantee more happiness. In fact, studies show that materialistic values are a strong predictor of *unhappiness*. Similarly, studies show that physical beauty also does not ensure greater happiness.

Researchers have also observed something they’ve named “hedonic adaptation.” Human beings adapt to favorable changes; for example, getting married, more wealth, a better job, good health, and beautiful housing only temporarily boost happiness levels. The familiar example of this phenomenon is the lottery winner. Studies show that winners’ levels of happiness jump up when the money is first won but return to baseline less than a year later. Hedonic adaptation often works the other way, as well. Although most people’s baseline levels of happiness drop when they experience a debilitating accident or illness, with time most people recover the baseline levels they had before the event. “We cannot and will not adapt to everything,” says Sonja Lyubomirsky, professor of psychology at University of California, Riverside, “but the evidence for hedonic adaptation, especially with regard to positive events, is very strong.” The implication is that positive changes in our circumstances cannot be counted on to lead to enduring happiness. Like Ricard, Lyubomirsky emphasizes that it’s ongoing intentional activities that make a sustainable difference.

Ed Diener, professor of psychology at the University of Illinois and one of the leading and earliest researchers on happiness, has a list of important things science has learned about “subjective well-being” (SWB, or happiness). He notes, for example, the following:

- *The components of SWB can be measured with some scientific validity.*
- *Temperament is an important predictor of a person’s SWB, but some conditions (such as unemployment or living in a poor nation) have long-lasting effects.*

- Happiness correlates with desirable consequences, such as sociability, creativity, better marriages, better work performance, stronger physical immunity, and resilience in the face of adversity.
- Some cultures have higher levels of happiness than other cultures. One reason seems to be that in some cultures happiness is valued more.
- People in unstable and very poor societies avow lower levels of happiness.
- Most people are at least slightly happy, but everyone has up and down moods; no one is happy every moment. Even the happiest people sometimes get unhappy.
- Enduring happiness comes not from running the hedonic treadmill but from working for goals that are consistent with our cherished values.

In short, there seems to be no single key to happiness; a variety of factors are at play for us all. “We have learned some important things about subjective well-being, but there is much that is still uncertain,” says Diener.

Feeling What Is Real

Despite all the feel-good research on happiness, there has also been a backlash to the scrutiny and preoccupation. In his book *Against Happiness*, Eric Wilson, a professor of English at Wake Forest University, makes a case for our more sober emotions and their “integral place in the great rhythm of the cosmos.” Melancholia, for example, is the source of much of our great art, poetry, and music. “The blues can be a catalyst for a special kind of genius,” Wilson points out, “a genius for exploring dark boundaries between opposites.” And as Aldous Huxley’s hero John the Savage put it when he recoiled from the monotonously cheery, pleasure-principled, soma-treated society in *Brave New World*: “I don’t want comfort. I want God. I want poetry. I want real danger. I want freedom. I want goodness.”

In their 2007 book, *The Loss of Sadness*, Jerome Wakefield and Allan Horwitz examine “how psychiatry has transformed normal sorrow into depressive disorder.” Wakefield, professor of social work at New York University, and Horwitz, dean of social and behavioral sciences at Rutgers University, argue that the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* defines major depression in

terms that, except for the death of a loved one, do not contextualize the differences between dysfunctional states of depression and those brought about by hardship and stress. Their critique of the pathologizing of legitimate sadness—“the normal range of human emotion is not being tolerated”—includes discussion of “the middle-class hypochondria that the drug companies have so assiduously encouraged and exploited.” Pharmaceutical research developments and the industry’s marketing machine further inform and complicate our endeavor to be happy.

According to large-scale, data-heavy studies from Ed Diener and his colleagues Shigehiro Oishi, associate professor of psychology at University of Virginia, and Richard E. Lucas, associate professor of psychology at Michigan State University, there is a measured trade-off when we become too shiny and happy. Summarizing the data from a study published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (December 2007), Lucas says, “Once a moderate level of happiness is achieved, further increases can sometimes be detrimental” to income and career, educational advancement, and political participation. A measure of discontent motivates us to improve, where we can, not only ourselves and our circumstances but also the welfare of others and our larger communities.

The panel of scientists and experts at the Happiness Conference in San Francisco agreed with this assessment of the relative place happiness holds among the full range of human emotions and values. “Happiness is not the absence of sadness,” said David Spiegel, medical director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at Stanford University, whose award-winning work with cancer patients has shown the healing benefits of “feeling what is real” and actively coping with distress. Bringing different areas of expertise, research, and experience to the discussion, the scientific panel, one by one, affirmed commonly held philosophical wisdom: *Accept suffering. Confidence is the result of understanding your emotions and knowing how to navigate through them. Happiness is a process, not a goal—a means, not an end. Prioritize for meaning, not happiness.*

Measuring Collective Happiness

An individual’s pursuit of happiness may be as natural and self-evident an inalienable right as life and liberty, but how are we faring as a group? A 2003 Pew Research

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Global Attitudes Survey indicates that the happiest men and women among the countries it surveyed live in Canada and the United States; the people least satisfied with their lives are in Eastern Europe and parts of Africa. But using findings from the World Values Survey, political scientist and lead author Ronald Inglehart reports in a recent article in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (July 2008) that during a sixty-year span from 1946 to 2006, happiness levels in the United States have remain unchanged. In another study from the World Health Organization and Harvard Medical School last year measuring depression, the United States was at the top of the list of 14 countries. So, which is most accurate? The United States is either among the happiest countries, holding steady, or the most depressed country. People in most countries around the world are happier, however, according to Inglehart; the data from 1981 to 2007 reveal that the happiness index rose in a majority of the 97 nations surveyed, representing 90 percent of the world's population. This growth in global personal well-being is attributed to economic growth, democratization, and rising social tolerance. How the global economic downturn in recent months may affect the numbers of all such reports, though, remains to be seen.

Although the picture of our global happiness isn't entirely clear, what is clear is that all this emphasis on happiness has not adequately reached an important part of the population, our children. In 2007, UNICEF released a report on children's well-being in nations with the most advanced economies. Children's welfare was evaluated along six dimensions: material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviors and risks, and subjective well-being. The Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark are taking the best care of their young, while the United States and the United Kingdom scored the lowest. Although UNICEF acknowledges that the survey is "a work in progress

in need of improved definitions and data," the report nonetheless highlights the need to take better care of our children's well-being—arguably placing them at the top of our list. How would levels of societal happiness be affected if children's well-being were the only standard of measure?

In Bhutan, children's well-being is a factor in the country's Gross National Happiness (GNH) policy. "The dogma of limitless productivity and growth in a finite world is unsustainable and unfair for future generations," says Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigme Thinley. "Happiness is a very serious business." Bhutan's unique and increasingly popular economic policy, introduced in 1972, is based on Buddhist principles. True development is not merely economic or material but spiritual as well. What this translates to in Bhutan's policy development is an emphasis on four guiding principles: promotion of equitable and sustainable socioeconomic development; preservation and promotion of cultural values; conservation of the environment; and good governance. Although Bhutan has fallen short of its own ideals—using "preservation of culture," for example, to justify expelling more than 100,000 Nepalese from its borders in the early 1990s—the country's new-found democracy reflects its evolving commitment to progressive growth. And other nations are taking note. At the close of 2008, economists and public policy consultants from both developed and developing nations attended the fourth annual Gross National Happiness Conference in Bhutan. GNH principles are being implemented in Brazil, India, Haiti, and, most recently, France.

Expanding Beyond Self

A vital component to genuine, sustainable happiness that has not yet been widely addressed is our relationship to the natural world. "It is not a man's nature to be too much indoors," observed Ishi, one of the last Native


Americans to have lived most of his life outside the European-American culture. When our disposition and thinking are severed from the balancing and restorative powers of earth's natural systems, says ecopsychologist Michael J. Cohen, we suffer. Frances E. Kuo, a cognitive and environmental psychologist at the University of Illinois, has been examining the impacts of green spaces on human functioning. Her award-winning studies with women living in a housing project in Chicago's inner city showed that those whose apartments gave them a view of a courtyard filled with trees and flowerbeds scored significantly higher on tests of attention and in surveys on handling life challenges. Kuo's work is making a difference with policymakers; for example, it has led to a \$10 million tree planting in Chicago, an urban forestry resolution at the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and a national research agenda on community design and health with the Center for Disease Control. A recent study led by cognitive psychologist Marc Berman of the University of Michigan further demonstrates the restorative effects of natural environments on our mental abilities. Research participants who walked in a park and later simply viewed photos of nature showed significant improvements in memory and attention tasks when compared with participants who instead walked downtown and later viewed photos of city life (*Psychological Science*, December 2008).

In *Born to Be Good* (see review on page 44), Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at University of California, Berkeley, explores nature's power to elicit the transformative effects of awe, another form of human happiness. He draws in part upon the inspirational writings of naturalist John Muir, such as the following: "We are now in the mountains, and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems as transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it." The experience of awe gives us a sense of our rightful place in the natural world, as it moves us beyond self-interest to an awareness of collective well-being. "A Darwinian study of awe," writes Keltner, "is documenting the physiological underpinnings of our capacity to devote ourselves to the collective . . . [Awe] transforms self-representation from that which separates to that which unites."

Extending our understanding of happiness beyond

the individual to the collective is what is needed now. Cycles of destabilization throughout evolution create new demands on selection for survival, and our response to the many crises we now face as individuals, societies, and a planet converge in the area of cooperative relationships and collective well-being. Writing on the evolution of happiness, David Buss, professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin, notes that, "Evolutionists have identified one of the key conditions that promote cooperation—shared fate." This is where research on happiness could now take us as we reckon with our global interdependence.

"Our circumstances are always tenuous," says neurosurgeon James R. Doty, founder of Project Compassion at Stanford University, "but an abiding concern for others mitigates powerfully against attitudes of hopelessness and despair." The project draws together neuroscientists, neuroeconomists, psychologists, scholars, and contemplative experts to develop an interdisciplinary research agenda that examines the neural, moral, and social bases for compassion and altruism. The goal is to bring compassion not only into the mainstream of scientific discourse but also into public life, as the research identifies secular tools to share with the public.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has given Project Compassion the largest personal financial donation he has ever given—but then, when it comes to finding happiness, it is the Dalai Lama who says, "If you want to be happy, practice compassion. If you want others to be happy, practice compassion." Ricard, that happiest man in the world, frames it this way: "If you have a society of selfish people, combined one-to-one with altruistic people, theoretically the altruists should be wiped out. But altruists can cooperate, which gives them a strong advantage. That is the cause of hope." 



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