

# Happiness and Joy

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Do you also have the experience at times of going back and forth between short bursts of happiness (when things seem to go our way in our career, family situation, finances, health etc.) and longer stretches of frustration and negativity (when we run into disappointments)? Even when we experience a peak of happiness, we know that it will be short-lived because the thing that triggered our happiness quickly loses its appeal, and we start looking for something else to feel happy again. As somebody once said: "Being happy is what happens just before you are unhappy." And so, we are often like a boat in a storm, tossed around by the waves of disappointment.

However, it does not have to be that way. When we take a step back from the daily ups and downs, we can feel in our hearts that there is a deeper level that allows us to connect with a deep sense of joy, regardless of what circumstances we find ourselves in. The miracle of being alive, the twinkle in the eye of a child, the beauty of a sunset, the life-giving nourishment of the rain, .... We can tap into this sense of joy, even in the most painful of circumstances or during these times of crisis, not as an easy escape from suffering, but as an awareness that, at the end of the day, the negativity and upheaval we experience or the trauma that was inflicted on us does not define us.

In a way, when we focus on the sources of joy, we are like fish swimming in the deep end of the ocean. Regardless of how strong the storms rage at the surface, the waters in the deep stay calm and allow the fish to follow its course undisturbed.

So, what, then, is the difference between happiness and joy?

- To achieve happiness requires effort, hard work, and a lot of good luck. Joy is free: We don't need to do anything to achieve or receive it.
- Happiness is fleeting. It only lasts as long as the thing that gives us happiness is new. Joy is eternal. With time, the depth of joy only increases.
- Happiness is rooted in scarcity: there is not enough to go around for everybody, and only the efforts of the happy few can be rewarded. Joy is rooted in abundance: the more it is shared, the deeper it becomes. It never runs out, and there is always more than anybody can take.
- Happiness hungers for more: to keep us on the same "happiness high" we need ever stronger inputs. (Today, one beer can make me happy. Tomorrow, I will need two beers to reach the same level of happiness.) Joy is content with what is and leads to rest and peace. There is no need to add anything.
- Happiness happens *to* the body. We experience it through the gratification of our senses: the taste of the ice cream, the sound of the music, the scent of our lover, or the touch of his/her skin... We also experience happiness through the gratification of our ego-needs for safety, approval, and control. Joy does not happen to the body but *in* the body. It is embodied. It wells up from the felt sense of Self. We experience it in our bodies as an upsurge of energy, as a glow around the heart, or as a relaxing of the points in our bodies where tension tends to build up.

- Both happiness and joy give a sense of expansion. However, when the source of happiness expires, the expansion reverses into contraction, which triggers a craving for more. When the well of joy diminishes, the intensity of the joy may decrease, but the expansion remains and is deepened, becoming a place to rest and re-source.

So, if all this is true, does this mean that joy is “good”, and happiness is “bad”?

Not at all! While joy is blissful, healing, rejuvenating, and empowering, happiness can reflect the concrete way we express our joy. The bread we break and the wine we drink to celebrate companionship with friends, the love we make to celebrate the union with our partner, the dance we dance to celebrate life... joy spills over and wants to be manifested in our lives.

However, a shift occurs when happiness is no longer just the manifestation of the joy in our lives. Happiness (or the lack thereof) can then become our cue to know whether or not our basic needs in life – the need to belong, to be safe, to be loved, to have control, and to have agency – are fulfilled. When this shift occurs, we look at our paycheck to tell us we are (financially) secure. We believe that whether or not we get a promotion tells us whether we are esteemed and have approval (of authorities in our lives). We find reassurance in the obedience of our dog which tells us we have some control. Etc. When we look to the world, to the people around us, and to our circumstances to provide us with the confirmation that our basic needs are fulfilled, we are bound to run into frustration and, ultimately, fail. After all, the world or our circumstances are not geared towards satisfying our needs.

Is this what Jesus meant when he said that we are invited to be in the world, but not of the world?

Focusing on our joy, instead of just on our happiness, allows us to tap into a deep well of gratitude. Joy is always available to us – right here and right now, regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in. Nothing can separate us from that joy... if we choose to go there.