

HOW TO ACHIEVE HAPPINESS AND FULFILLMENT

by

Walter L. Williams last revised March 8, 2006

After years of study in different religions and philosophies, I have tried to develop a philosophy of life by which I can attempt to live. I have especially drawn upon American Indian religion, and the teachings of the Buddha, Jesus, and Nichiren Daishonin. After much thought as to the purpose of life, I have come to the conclusion that there is no higher purpose of life than the effort to understand and seek happiness and fulfillment.

This goal of happiness and fulfillment is at once very simple, but also complex. It is easy to experience happiness on a temporary basis if some good fortune happens. Who would not be happy if they win the lottery, or experience a relaxing massage, or listen to enjoyable and inspiring music, or open a present to find something that they really desire, or receive a message from an admirer? Any of these events that come from outside ourselves can bring joy. Joy is the good feeling that happens to a person when their desires are met. There is nothing wrong with being in the state of joy. But the problem is that this kind of happiness is temporary. Joy is dependent upon good things happening to persons, outside of themselves. No one can feel joy all the time, no matter how many benefits are bestowed upon them. No person, no matter how fortunate, can go through life continually receiving only good things. And so there is always the danger that one will sink out of joy. Every person, the Buddha taught, inevitably experiences suffering. Everyone at some point in their life suffers illness, emotional suffering, the ravages of aging, and eventually death. Suffering is unavoidable.

The problem with seeking happiness in life is to understand that genuine and long-lasting happiness comes not from outside events, but from within ourselves. If we want long-lasting happiness, it involves more than just temporary enjoyment. Certainly it is pleasurable to eat a delicious meal, to touch the body of a loved one, to enjoy looking at beautiful art, to smell the freshness of nature in a pristine forest, to achieve sexual orgasm, or to watch an enjoyable entertainment. Each of these enjoyments can indeed bring great happiness. But it is important to recognize that this kind of pleasure is temporary. The effort to understand and seek true happiness is to develop a happy attitude toward life from within oneself. By focusing on inner happiness, that is not dependent upon events outside oneself, a person can retain a happy attitude toward life even when outside events are not so good.

Psychologists have investigated levels of happiness in people, and study after study has shown that some people have a positive and happy attitude even if their external situation is constrained by poverty, physical disability, illness, or oppression that would lead most people into misery. Other people, who happen to be born into a wealthy family that can supply all of their material whims, and have good health, and are not oppressed, might nevertheless be miserable or gloomy in their attitude. They do not have long-term happiness.

In order to have long-term happiness, I have found that a person needs to strive for a fulfilled life. Reaching fulfillment in life, or as Buddhists call it, enlightenment, is not easy. An enlightened state of being requires consciously striving for a life with meaning. Each person needs to define for oneself what can lead them to fulfillment. Existentialists say that there is no meaning in life except that which each individual creates for themselves. While one may agree or disagree with this statement, it is clear that each individual needs to find their own route toward fulfillment.

If happiness and fulfillment are the ultimate goals of living, the deeper question is how to accomplish these goals. Based especially on the teachings of the Buddha, I have come up with a typology that might be applicable to others who are seeking happiness and fulfillment. Each person has to decide if these ideas apply to their own search for meaning. My typology involves three approaches to living: what negative qualities to minimize, what to focus upon, and what positive qualities to maximize.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE IS TO UNDERSTAND AND SEEK HAPPINESS AND FULFILLMENT.

THE WAY TO ACHIEVE HAPPINESS AND FULFILLMENT IS

- (1) TO MINIMIZE FOUR NEGATIVE QUALITIES OF GREED, ANGER, STUPIDITY, AND CAUSING UNHAPPINESS,
- (2) TO FOCUS UPON THE PRESENT, AND
- (3) TO MAXIMIZE FOUR POSITIVE QUALITIES OF LEARNING, CREATIVITY, HELPING OTHERS, AND CAUSING HAPPINESS.

FOUR NEGATIVE QUALITIES TO MINIMIZE:

1. GREED

For 97% percent of our history as a species, homo sapiens lived in small-scale hunting-gathering bands. In order to survive, early humans had to work together cooperatively. From the time an infant was first socialized, the emphasis was on sharing and showing generosity. This had an adaptive function, because a person who shared with others in the band, and who showed generosity toward those in need, developed a highly respected reputation. Human beings have a long memory, and they remember who has helped them in the past. A person who did not share food resources and who hoarded their possessions, was looked down upon. Every person eventually suffers misfortune. They might be injured, or become sick, or become incapacitated as they age. If they had a reputation as a generous person, others would share with them out of gratitude. But if they were greedy and had not shared, then others would not share with them. Reciprocity is a strong value in hunting-gathering bands. This strong need to share worked to inhibit greed among hunting-gathering peoples.

Over the last ten thousand years, however, new ways of life emerged as humans domesticated plants and animals. Greedy individuals became wealthy by hoarding their possessions and not sharing what they had with others. In grassland environments, humans

started capturing and breeding animals as their possessions, and measured their wealth by how many animals they owned. In areas with fertile soil farming cultures developed the idea of holding land as private property, which could be inherited. Military elites emerged as gangs of thugs were led by power-hungry individuals to confiscate or tax the lands of others. Those who did the work on the land were reduced to being peasants, under the control of the lord of the realm. As some humans enslaved animals and other humans to become rich on the products of animal or slave labor, they forgot the hunter-gatherer imperative to share. Hierarchical societies emerged, with a small elite wealthy class existing alongside dire poverty among the mass of peasants.

Periodically, revolutionary thinkers emerged who tried to challenge this culture of greed. With his emphasis on sharing everything one had with the poor, Jesus tried to recapture the hunter-gatherer emphasis on sharing and generosity. He strongly condemned greed, and taught that the chance of a rich person reaching heaven was like a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle. Jesus criticized those who spent all their time laying up earthly treasures for themselves, pointing out that they could not take any of that wealth with them when they died. Life is more than just striving for material goods. How much better off the person would be, Jesus said, if they spent some time in trying to be rich in spirit.

Jesus said: "Where your treasure is, there is where your heart will be also. Therefore I say to you, do not give so much thought to your material life. Consider the birds in the air. They do not plant crops, and they do not reap a harvest and store it in a barn. Yet your heavenly Father provides for them. Do you think God loves you less than birds? Consider the lilies of the field. They do not work, nor do they spin cloth. And yet I say to you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as beautifully as one of these. If God so carefully clothes a plant, won't God provide clothes for you? Oh, you people of little faith, don't agonize so much about how to get money to pay for eating or drinking or fancy clothes. Your heavenly Father knows that you need these things. If you will first seek the kingdom of God and be righteous, then everything you need will be provided for you. Take therefore little worry about the future, for the future will take care of itself. Deal with the things you need to deal with today. The challenges that present themselves every day are enough to occupy your attention."

Minimizing greed does not mean negating all desires in life. Desire for things can have positive effects. Without the desire for food, human beings could not survive. Desire -- for status, power, love, or helping others -- has prompted great accomplishments in human history. But if desire is not kept in check it can become greed. Greed is the state of insatiable hunger for more and more. Those who are afflicted by greed are consumed with unlimited desires that can never be satisfied. This is a pitiful state of being that leads people to be controlled by their desires to the point that they become enslaved to them. If they do not reach their goal to accumulate more and more material goods, a greedy person can become quite miserable.

The Buddha taught that the way out of suffering is to liberate oneself from desiring something so much that the desire itself causes suffering. Buddha gave as an example the fact that many people lead their whole life in search of material wealth or power, and when

they cannot gain this wealth or power they feel great suffering as a result. Even a rich powerful man craves ever more wealth and power. When he at last achieves his goal he still feels miserable, because he is filled full of worry that someone else will take it from him. But one who is without riches can still avoid suffering simply by giving up the desire to have those things which are outside one's reach. If one lets go of greed, the Buddha said, an enlightened person can gain acceptance, leading to peace and harmony in life.

One can construct a happy and fulfilled life by being aware of the need to control greed, and to minimize its control over oneself. By recognizing the dangers of materialism, and not being consumed by feelings of greed, a person will ultimately be happier than a person who is never satisfied but always feels the need to accumulate more and more possessions.

Learning to detach oneself from this greed, to realize that one does not actually need that many possessions to be happy, is a great liberating release from the stress caused by the desire to become rich, powerful, or famous. Learning to live simply, to partake of the joys of daily life without greed, is one of the great accomplishments of life.

2. ANGER

Extreme hatred for one's surroundings can lead a person to be consumed by agony and misery. Frustration over a loss of control over one's life can doom a person to a hellish existence in which the person can do nothing except wallow in their rage. Getting angry at someone else, or at the misfortunes of life, does nothing to relieve this misery but only adds to our suffering. Driven by destructive impulses, those who are consumed by anger seek to destroy others and also themselves. War, which brings about indescribable human suffering, is a perfect example of the manifestation of anger.

Those trapped in anger attempt to enhance their self-esteem by disparaging others whom they consider inferior. They refuse to acknowledge their own inferiority in areas where others excel them, but are jealous and hostile toward anyone who is in a better state of mind. They harbor hostility and animosity toward others. They are trapped in a fundamental delusion that by feeling anger they can better their own condition. In reality, just the opposite is true. One who holds anger is hurting oneself most of all.

Jesus said that those who are angry with someone without cause, or who insult others, will put themselves in danger of judgment. He emphasized that one needs to be reconciled with others, and not let one's mind be poisoned by bad feelings toward others. He challenged the traditional idea that "You should love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, that you should love your enemies. Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.... If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then how can you expect your Father to forgive you?"

3. STUPIDITY

We all do stupid things as we go through life. It is impossible to always choose the right way, but it is important to try to minimize stupidity. Stupidity is most commonly caused by ignorance. If we do not have a knowledgeable basis on which we form our opinions, then

we could end up with a stupid conclusion because of our ignorance of the factual evidence. Because ignorant people often make stupid choices, it is important as we go through life to try to learn as much factual knowledge as possible. As we become educated, we are less likely to do stupid things or believe stupid things because we are empowered with knowledge.

Beyond ignorance, however, there is still stupidity. For example, let's say that a person knows the factual evidence that smoking tobacco will lead to cancer and many other serious diseases. Despite their knowledge, this person might decide to start smoking because they think smoking will make them seem more sophisticated, or cool. That is a stupid decision. We cannot blame all stupidity on ignorance. Some people may be uneducated and ignorant, but they still can minimize their stupidity by thinking clearly. Others who are aware of the life-threatening health dangers of smoking still act with stupidity if they start smoking. They may know that tobacco is a highly addictive substance, and thus act stupidly by subjecting their body to the high risk of addiction.

It is difficult to have a fulfilled life if one is addicted to something. If we make the stupid choice to indulge in highly addictive chemicals like tobacco, crack cocaine, or crystal meth, then we take a great chance that we will not be able to stop. But a person can become addicted to anything. The behavior itself is not necessarily harmful if done in moderation, but if done to an extreme it can throw a person's life into turmoil. For example, shopping is a constructive activity that most people do to locate the things they need in life. We may shop for groceries, clothes, shoes, books, furniture, and even collectibles that might increase in value and make a profit. Few would claim that shopping, in and of itself, is bad. However, if done to an extreme, where it becomes compulsive, where a person spends all their time shopping, and runs up debts that throw them into bankruptcy, then shopping could turn out to be a very harmful addiction.

Most people can enjoy drinking beer, wine, liquor, and other forms of alcohol. They enjoy the taste, the relaxed mood, the lowered inhibitions, and the intoxicating high that alcoholic beverages provide. Many if not most people enjoy the excitement of playing games of chance, and they may have a pleasurable vacation visiting a casino. Most people enjoy sex, and feel great pleasure out of connecting body-to-body and soul-to-soul with another person in the intimacy of erotic behaviors.

There is nothing wrong with any of these things. But for some people, they cannot control their impulses, and they may end up spending so much of their time, energy and financial resources in drinking, in gambling, or in sexual activities that they become addicted. Their life is thrown out of balance. At that point a positive pleasurable activity could become a negative force leading to great misery. The addiction is what makes this positive thing become destructive and harmful. The Buddha taught long ago that the source of suffering in the world is due to unbridled desire. Our desires can lead to wonderful experiences in life. But if we do not keep our desires in check, then they may turn out to lead to terrible suffering.

The Buddha counseled that the best way to approach life is not to deny ourselves

completely from the pleasures of life. Instead, we should follow what he called The Middle Way. What he meant by this is the need to stay away from the extremes of denial on the one hand and overindulgence on the other hand. Practice moderation in all things, said the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, and your life will be happier. If we deny ourselves adequate food we will eventually starve to death, but if we gorge ourselves on fatty meats, greasy fried foods, and sugary soft drinks and desserts, then we are likely to die from diseases associated with obesity. In food as in many other things, the extremes lead to death, the Middle Way leads to life.

We cannot go through life making stupid decisions, without suffering the consequences. Addictions are particularly dangerous because they lead a person to overindulge in something, to the point that this overindulgence can take over a person's life and become harmful. If you can avoid addictions as you go through life, if you can keep your good health, if you can minimize greed, anger and stupidity, you will probably be able to succeed.

Stupidity, whether based in ignorance or not, leads to unhappiness. Foolishness is the prime characteristic of those who act without rationality. They cannot distinguish between right and wrong, but behave according to base instincts. Those trapped in the state of stupidity are devoid of all reason and have no conscience. In order to gain their own immediate self-interest, they are willing to harm others. They are blinded by everything but their own immediate concerns. In doing stupid things, people are incapable of considering the welfare of others. Unable to recognize the consequences of their actions, they bring ruin upon themselves.

4. CAUSING UNHAPPINESS TO ONESELF AND TO OTHERS

If happiness is the purpose of life, causing unhappiness is the antithesis of life. If one oppresses others, or internalizes self-hatred to the point of oppressing oneself, this is an evil state of being.

It is impossible to go through life without experiencing feelings of greed, anger, and stupidity. It is impossible to avoid causing unhappiness to others, and by feeling guilt or shame in causing unhappiness to oneself. But what is important is to try to MINIMIZE these negative states of being.

FOCUS ON THE PRESENT

By minimizing the four negative states of being, one can set the stage for a happy and fulfilled life. But one needs to do more than avoid the negatives.

Life without negatives could just be a bland existence, passing each day with no purpose and achieving no happiness. One way to create a happy life is to focus on the present. All too often, we are consumed with unhappiness by reflecting on past mistakes that we made. Again, no one can go through life without making mistakes. Some things are beyond our control, and sometimes we experience pain and suffering that we did not deserve. But wallowing in self-pity, or in turning over and over again in our mind about the wrong choices that we made, after a point does not do a bit of good. It is important to learn from our mistakes, so that we do not have to make the same mistake over again, but torturing

ourselves endlessly is pointless. The past is the past, and it cannot be undone. It has become part of my negative karma that will follow me.

What can be done is to focus on the present. I can take a constructive action to overcome my negative karma from the past. If I did a wrong to cause someone else unhappiness, I cannot change that wrong. But I can make an effort to apologize to the person I wronged, and to provide restitution by helping them in a positive way. I can vow that I will not intentionally do similar harm to anyone else in the future. If I made a mistake that cost me dearly, I can try to overcome that mistake by making present actions that will overcome the negative effects of the past. By focusing on the present, I can take constructive efforts to create good karma that will counterbalance the negative karma from the past.

The other part of focusing on the present is not to let worry about the future overtake one's life. Of course, there is nothing wrong with having dreams for the future, or making plans for the future. That is a good thing. But if concerns for the future disrupt one's enjoyment of one's present daily life, then it becomes a negative. All too often, I have a tendency to worry about terrible scenarios that might happen. "What if such and such happens, or what if this or that occurs?" Worrying about the future too much can take away from one's enjoyment of the here and now.

Buddhism stresses the need for "mindfulness." This is the practice of focusing on the immediate thing that one is engaged in during the present moment. For example, if one is eating, to be mindful of the pleasure of eating, of the deliciousness of a morsel of food as it is being chewed in the mouth and as it goes down the throat. If one is riding on a bus, to be mindful of the passing scenery and of the living beings and the wonders of nature that one sees along the journey. Mindfulness is to be attuned to the pleasure of every mundane activity that one engages in during the course of the day. Mindfulness means being aware of the joys of waking up, walking to the bathroom, urinating and defecating, showering, brushing teeth, and everything else one does right on through the entire day to nighttime, when one lies down on clean sheets and drifts off to sleep.

Mindfulness can help us to reach a calm and tranquil state of being. This is a good thing. Avoiding the four negative states of being and focusing on the present are a major accomplishment. It might even result in some degree of happiness. But, by themselves, these things are not enough to build a truly fulfilled life. A life lived in idleness or passive existence, not accomplishing anything, is not a fulfilled life. In order to achieve fulfillment it is also necessary to cultivate four positive qualities. Only through continual efforts toward self-improvement can we reach the goal of a happy and fulfilled life.

FOUR POSITIVE QUALITIES TO MAXIMIZE

1. LEARNING

Buddhism says that the nature of life is learning. From the time that we are infants we are absorbing knowledge from our surroundings. We learn the heartbeat and the smell of our mother as she holds us. We learn the pleasure of touch, of bare skin to bare skin, as we suckle at our mother's breast. We learn to recognize shapes and colors and the faces of

diverse individuals. . We learn language to communicate. We cannot become fully human without these basic forms of learning.

As we get older we need to apply ourselves earnestly to learning, in order to attain lasting happiness. Those who remain ignorant of their surroundings, of their society, and of the larger world miss out on many of the wonders of life. By learning the geologic history of the earth, we can see that humans are a quite recent species, and we gain a perspective that shows us how small a part of the earth's environment we really are. By learning the evolutionary history of humankind, from our first emergence as a species about 300,000 years ago, to the point that *Homo sapiens* almost became extinct 70,000 years ago, and to our subsequent spread from Africa to all continents of the world, we can gain an appreciation for how we are all related. By learning about the development of different cultures and civilizations from ancient times to the present, we can see how our way of life is the result of a heritage of many traditions passed down from generation to generation. We can also come to understand that nothing is permanent, that everything changes, that impermanence is the nature of the universe.

Learning that all things in this world are transient, that everything is in constant transition, appearing and then disappearing with each passing moment, we learn the importance of not getting too attached to any one thing. Part of wisdom is the move to relinquish or transcend attachment to temporary things. We may feel love toward a loved one, but that person may change in their feeling of love toward us. And eventually, all living things die, so their love can be taken away from us quite unexpectedly. If we are not educated to the impermanence of all things, we may become severely depressed due to these changes in our lifetime. That depression would surely destroy our happiness and our fulfillment, and might lead to our own death. The goal of learning is to be aware of the realities of the world, and not to let them destroy us.

Everyone who wishes to attain a fulfilled life must learn everything they can, and should consider their schooling as an opportunity to improve their life condition. The complexity of the universe is beyond the capabilities of human understanding, but people should strive to learn all the discoveries of science and the humanities. Science and learning is not an enemy of true spiritual enlightenment, but provides the basis for it to grow. The best society is one in which people of all races and genders, and no matter what their class background, are provided an equally good education. Parents and friends of children should encourage their charges to learn as much as possible as they grow.

Learning is a good thing, as long as those who are educated do not become arrogant but retain an appreciation for how much they still do not understand. Only by having this understanding will education be converted into wisdom. Learning is wonderful, and necessary for the attainment of a fulfilled life. But it is not enough. If one spends all one's time learning, without being concerned about making a positive contribution to the world and about others' welfare, then it is an incomplete life.

2. CREATIVITY

Even more important than learning is the positive quality of creativity. This is the realm of

the artist. Creators of music, dance, and the arts are given high prestige among Buddhists, but anyone who creates something positive is contributing to the happiness of existence. A writer of beneficial books, a craftsperson who makes a comfortable piece of furniture, a chemist who creates a formula for a beneficial medicine, a poet or songwriter, a bulldozer operator who constructs a pond for fish to thrive in and for people to enjoy, or a chef who produces a delicious meal, are all producing the high quality of creativity. Creativity is valued so highly because it produces something of benefit to others.

3. HELPING OTHERS

Above the quality of creativity is the positive quality of showing compassion for others and helping others improve their life. This includes not only helping other humans, but also all living beings. A person who shows compassion for animals, helping them avoid suffering, is creating just as much good karma as one who helps a fellow human. Buddhists call such a person a bodhisattva, that is a person who is less concerned about their own interests and who devotes themselves unselfishly to helping other sentient beings. This is why Buddhism gives such high prestige to professions like teachers, nurses, doctors, therapists, and veterinarians. Someone who cares for others so much that they will go against their own short-term good, will surely reap positive karma in the future.

4. CREATING HAPPINESS FOR ONESELF AND FOR OTHERS

If creating unhappiness for oneself and for others is a negative quality, then the positive quality is to bring as much happiness into life as possible. This effort to give happiness could be as simple as making sure a sexual partner experiences pleasure, or telling jokes to an old person, or playing a ball game with a youngster or a pet. Bringing happiness on a larger scale, whether by sharing one's wealth with others or by doing things that will make a more pleasant physical or social environment, is a major goal in life.

If someone feels self-hatred or shame, it is hard to experience happiness. One of the lessons of life is the need to practice forgiveness, and this may mean the need to forgive oneself as well as to forgive others. It may mean the need to bring happiness into one's life by doing things that one enjoys, even if this means going against social conventions. A century ago the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde was imprisoned for engaging in homosexual acts with young men. After having his reputation destroyed, his wealth confiscated, and his health broken by being confined to a damp prison cell, he was asked by a newspaper reporter if he regretted doing those things. The famous writer replied that the only thing he regretted in life were the things he had NOT done. In other words, his message is to live life to the fullest, and not to deny oneself those things which bring personal happiness.

But even more important than seeking happiness for oneself is the goal of bringing happiness to others. For, ironically, by giving happiness to others we can achieve happiness for ourselves. In 1992 I published a book *JAVANESE LIVES*, that was based on my study of elderly people in Indonesia. In my interviews with numerous older women and men, I found that some of them were very happy and fulfilled while others were bitter and lonely. I tried to figure out what made the difference in these states of life. As I did more research a pattern emerged: those who were the happiest were those who were doing something to help others. They might be helping their grandchildren, or volunteering at an orphanage, or

tutoring students, or serving as a mentor for a younger colleague, or counseling battered wives. Whatever they were doing, they had created a sense of purpose in their old age that they felt useful and needed. One elderly lady in her 90s was so frail that she could do no work at all, but she occupied her time in giving prayers for the benefit of her relatives and acquaintances. She became so noted for the power of her prayers that people came from miles around to get her to pray for them. Even though she had no strength to do physical things, because she devoted herself to helping others she felt a sense of usefulness and a great happiness in her old age. In contrast, those people who expressed unhappiness in their life were those who were completely self-absorbed and were doing nothing to help others. They were so focused on their own problems that they never reached out to others. As a direct result of their self-centeredness, they were isolated and uncared for. These old people had literally created their own negative or positive karma, and their mood of unhappiness or happiness was the direct result.

CONCLUSION

By focusing on the present, by minimizing the negative qualities of greed, anger, stupidity, and causing unhappiness, and maximizing the positive qualities of learning, creativity, helping others, and bringing happiness, a person can more likely attain a happy and fulfilled life. No one can reach enlightenment without devoting themselves to these positive qualities of human existence. But every individual, Nichiren Daishonin emphasized from the Lotus Sutra, has the potential for Buddhahood within them. No matter how lowly, no matter what their race or gender, each person who lives has the ability to attain enlightenment within their lifetime. It does not matter how terrible their situation when they begin the effort, but how diligently they strive to improve. Just as the beautiful lotus flower can emerge from the ugly mud at the bottom of a pond, so a person has the ability to change poison into medicine. They can make this effort for the benefit of themselves and for the benefit of others. Enlightenment is the ultimate wisdom, the end to be reached in order to achieve true happiness and fulfillment in life.

My goal is not only to try to incorporate these teachings into my own life, but also to communicate these ideas to you the reader, so that you may have the benefit of what I have learned. This essay is my gift to you, and I hope that you will in turn communicate these ideas to spread peace and happiness to all beings.