A Basic Human Approach to Happiness

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I have been asked to explore happiness from "a basic human" point of view. Does this cast me in a role of opposition to these representatives of the great religions? Not at all. It is with the utmost respect that I look at the variety of contributions, and I find myself enriched by each of them in a different way. It is my conviction, however, that the world’s religions spring from a shared root. They are different expressions of one and the same basic religiousness that is common to all human beings throughout history. The more profoundly we understand the specific religious traditions the clearer it becomes that each of them is a different door to one and the same sacred space -- the realm of true happiness.

Digging for common roots will, thus, be our task in this concluding chapter. Our excavation-sites will be located in areas that are of key concern to all the contributors to this book -- happiness, religion, and practical methods for happy living. It will be our task to answer three main questions:

1) Is there in the human psyche one basic condition that accounts for genuine happiness?
2) Is there one seminal experience which gives rise to the religions in all the variety of their forms?
3) Is there one characteristic mental attitude shared by all successful approaches to happy living?

If we can meet the triple challenge to answer these questions, we will have found common ground for our human family in the pursuit of happiness and of religious values. What could be more important than such a “basic human” approach at a time when the very survival of the human race depends on shared values and action?

1 -- Digging for the roots of human happiness
Let us begin by asking: For what kinds of happiness are humans longing? Countless different things make different people happy. But our question concerns genuine happiness: that which lasts. We may be glad when this or that makes us happy for a while, but when we ask our heart what it most deeply and insistently longs for, even in the midst of delights, we hear a surprising answer: “Every delight longs for eternity.” Friedrich Nietzsche put it this way, but every man, woman, and child knows that same longing at the core of their being, even if they cannot put it into words. “Eternity?” the voice of reason may sneer, telling us to be a bit realistic. But Blaise Pascal will reply: “The heart knows reasons that reason cannot fathom.” His approach has the advantage that it allows us to start with personal experience. We will only have to ask: What kind of happiness does my own heart desire?

We are born; we want to be happy; we must die. Is there room in this universal scenario for lasting, let alone “eternal,” happiness? It would hardly seem so -- until we begin to examine “eternity” experientially. All of us think that we know what we mean by “now,” but -- surprising as it may sound -- this now is eternity. We tend to imagine the now as the short stretch of time between past and future. But as long as it is a stretch, we can cut it in half. When we do, half is not, because it is no more, and the other half is not, because it is not yet. Where, then, is the now? The surprising answer is: The now is not in time.

We can even go one step further. “All is always now,” says T. S. Eliot. This statement implies a profound insight: Not only is the now not in time; time is in the now. When the future comes, it will be now, and any past event becomes now as we remember it. There is only one now. It cannot be multiplied; it simply is. The now is the opposite of time. In fact, this is Augustine’s definition: “Eternity is the now that does not pass away.” A happiness anchored in
the now is eternal. This precisely is the happiness our heart desires -- eternal, and unassailable, because it is beyond the reach of “time the destroyer” (as T. S. Eliot calls time).

But how can my happiness be anchored in the eternal now while I live in time? To answer this question, we must pay attention to a distinction we make in everyday language. Sometimes we say “I,” at other times, “I myself.” There is indeed a distinction between I and Self.

Experience tells me that my Self can watch my I. (Again we are building our argument on experience so that you can check it out for yourself.) You can step back and watch what your I is doing, feeling, thinking. The one who watches -- when you step back far enough to be the observer whom no one can observe -- that is your Self. The Self lives in the now; the I lives in time. Shifting your center of awareness from the I to the Self means anchoring your consciousness in the now. At first we can do this only for brief moments. But with practice -- about which we will say more, later -- we can learn to take the temporal happiness of the I lightly and enjoy more and more the “now-happiness” of the Self, the condition that accounts for genuine happiness.

So crucial is this point that a few more words about the relationship of Self and I may be helpful. We can become aware that the Self is one. We share it with all humans, indeed with all living beings. Our innermost Self is the Spirit that fills the universe and holds all things together. This Self is so inexhaustible that it finds ever new ways to express itself. My I is one such expression. The I is the mask which the Self puts on for a time to play a particular part on the stage of time. But the I tends to forget that it is merely a temporal mask of the Self; it likes to think that it is all that matters. By this error the I becomes the “ego,” estranged from the Self and entangled in time. But when my I serves the Self as means to express itself, as a mask serves the actor, not even death can affect my happiness.
When my time is up, my Self takes off the I-mask and retains that eternal-now happiness which, as we saw, is the genuine happiness humans long for. But we do not have to wait for the moment of death to experience this. “The moment of death is every moment,” says T. S. Eliot. “The point of intersection of the timeless with time,” he calls it, but also “the unattended moment;” unattended, because we typically pay little attention to what really matters. Once in a while, however, we cannot help but pay attention. The great psychiatrist Abraham Maslow called such moments “Peak Experiences.” He insisted that Peak Experiences cannot be distinguished from the experiences described by the great mystics. Thus, in digging for the deepest root of happiness we have touched upon mysticism, a basic religious phenomenon, and can proceed to our second task:

2 -- Digging for the common root of the religions

In T. S. Eliot’s “moment in and out of time,” we experience the condition of the human psyche that accounts for genuine happiness. By following Abraham Maslow’s lead we shall discover that this is at the same time the basic religious experience that gives rise to the religions in all their variety. Again, I invite you to pay attention to your own experience as starting point for our investigation. See what resonates in the following with your own memories: Now and then, often early in life, many people experience memorable, though sometimes very brief, moments that transcend our ordinary level of awareness like peaks towering above the fog below. The content of this awareness cannot be put into words, try as we may. We feel that we are one with all there is and this sense of limitless belonging fills us with awe, with profound gratitude, and with the deepest happiness we can imagine. Eliot speaks of:

… happiness -- not the sense of well-being,
Fruition, fulfillment, security or affection,
… but the sudden illumination—“
The great religious traditions recount events in the lives of their founders that might have been such sudden illuminations: Moses at the Burning Bush, the Buddha’s Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan, Muhammad’s Illumination in a cave on Mt. Hira. Many ordinary people say of their Peak Moments: Only through this experience did it dawn on me what religion is all about. What dawns on us is a basic human religiousness. We may prefer to call it spirituality, and this, too, is fitting, for we become aware of the divine Spirit as animating our innermost Self. But “religion” rightly understood is an excellent term. Derived from the Latin “re-ligare” it denotes a mending of broken bonds -- our bonds to the Spirit, to our Self, and to all other beings. To ask if such Peak Experiences are “for real” makes no sense psychologically, as Maslow points out, for these glimpses provide our standard for determining what is “really real.”

How, then, shall we imagine the religions to grow out of this basic religiousness, or Religion (with a capital R)? Again we can use an experiential approach by remembering one of our own Peak Experiences. At the very peak of that event there is mere awareness beyond thought and concepts --“the mind is conscious, but conscious of nothing” (Eliot). But immediately afterwards our intellect clicks in; asks, “What was that?”; and answers its own question, explaining the unknown in terms of the already known. Some people start writing poetry to express their extraordinary experience. Ordinary language finds no words for it, and yet, the intellect will not rest until it makes some statement about our encounter with an actuality that transcends concepts. Here we touch upon one feature of every religious tradition: doctrine.

Not only our intellect, but also our will -- our willingness as distinct from willfulness -- is aroused by the bliss we enjoy in Peak Moments through our sense of limitless belonging. This happiness that our intellect finds undeniably real, our willingness finds supremely desirable. The
desire of the will moves us to action. Our will says, as it were, “If it makes us that happy to be one with all, we must live in a way that expresses our sense of belonging.” And here we touch upon another feature of every religious tradition: ethics. The bottom line of every moral code in the world is the same: This is how one must act towards those with whom one belongs together. Differences result merely from how wide one draws the circle of belonging. What characterizes our time is that we have begun to speak of World Ethics and realize that belonging must be all-inclusive.

The seed for a third and last constituent element of all religious traditions is also accessible to each of us through a Peak Experience. Not only is our intellect aroused by its truth, and our will by its goodness, but our emotions respond to its beauty. And what do the emotions say? “Let’s celebrate!” The response to this invitation is ritual in all its forms. A personal ritual may be for example our periodic return to some place where we experienced a mystical moment -- a pilgrimage to a spot that has become for us a sacred place. Thus we know the origin of doctrine, ethics, and ritual, three pillars of every religious tradition “from within,” as it were, and we know it from an experience of which Abraham Maslow claims that -- to the extent to which we are allowed to generalize in psychology -- all human beings seem to have it.

Mystic communion with the Ultimate is, by their own account, the core of every religious tradition. How this seed grows in a given case into doctrine, ethics, and ritual depends on the widely different historic conditions under which a given tradition originates and develops. Unfortunately, in the course of its history each tradition tends to get rigid. At the start, the function of doctrine is to point to the inexpressible. But soon it takes on a life of its own and, through comment upon comment, hardens into dogmatism. Ethical precepts originally want to foster a sense of belonging, but they, too, tend to become rigid, exclusive, and moralistic. With
ritual, the emphasis shifts from celebration of the mystic event to ritualistic preoccupation with traditional forms. The living water of every tradition runs the risk of freezing to rigid ice in the cold climate of religious institutions and, thus, their innate happiness is lost.

At this point the question arises: Can religions recover their religiousness? Can they again become doors to that mystic happiness from which they spring? The answer is given by mystics. They thaw the ice of dogmatism, moralism, and ritualism by fiery joy in their own hearts. Ultimately this is the task of everyone who stands in a given religious tradition. Any tradition is as alive as the mystic happiness in the hearts of its members. And this mystic fervor melts also the barriers between traditions -- celebrating their variety, but strengthening their unity with each other.

It can be done, because mystics are not special human beings; rather, every human being is a special mystic. What distinguishes the great mystics is that they let their lives be transformed by mystic happiness and radiate this happiness into the world. Could all of us learn to do this? Since we have found a common root for genuine happiness -- the experience of the Self living in the Now -- and since we have found this to characterize the mystic experience that is the shared root of religions, it may well be that we can also find one characteristic shared by all successful approaches to happy living.

3 -- Digging for the common roots of spiritual practice

Spiritual practices in all their variety have -- as spiritual teachers tell us -- the same goal: lasting happiness. And all of them achieve this by the same characteristic approach: the effort to bring us into the present moment and, thus, to being anchored in what we have called the “now-joy” of the Self. Since we are looking for a “basic human” approach to happiness, we must pay attention to a universal phenomenon that leads to this goal of all spiritual practices: Gratefulness.
Rarely recognized as such, gratefulness is, as it were, the natural way to true happiness, cultivated in different ways by the different religious traditions. For countless people who have no formal spiritual practice gratefulness takes its place; and for people who have other practices gratefulness remains formative, as the wild rose remains the basic form of all cultivated roses.

Understood and valued by all human beings, gratefulness is a most realistic approach. Grateful people recognize that we live in a given world, at a given moment, under given circumstances: everything is gift. They appreciate the given for what it is, and celebrate the gift by creatively doing something with it. This simple practice anchors us in the moment and so in the “Now-Joy” of the Self. Grateful living frees us from the trap of time, for one can be grateful only now and now and now.

But can one be grateful for everything that happens? Certainly not. One cannot be grateful for war, violence, oppression, exploitation, betrayal, and many other calamities. Yet, one can be grateful in every moment for the opportunity it offers. Opportunity is the key word. The gift within every gift is opportunity -- to enjoy the gift or to make something of it. Many things for which we cannot be grateful as such do give us an opportunity to learn, to re-consider, and to grow. Only years later do we sometimes realize that an event that seemed an unmitigated disaster turned out to be an opportunity for life-changing growth and so was a great gift, after all.

Grateful living starts with stopping to look for the unique opportunity that every moment offers us and leads to making full use of this opportunity. It can be summed up in the advice we give children about to cross the street: “Stop, look, go!” Stop -- break out of the rush of time into the now. Look -- for the opportunity this moment offers you. Go -- and avail yourself of this opportunity to find happiness. This basic three-step is common to all spiritual practices. Awareness of this will help us to see how deeply our striving for happiness unites us
The common factors among us all

By digging for the roots of happiness, of religion, and of spiritual practice we have arrived at answers to our three initial questions:

1) The one basic condition of the human psyche that accounts for genuine happiness is living in the now.
2) The one seminal experience that gives rise to the great variety of religions is the mystic experience.
3) The one characteristic mental attitude shared by all successful approaches to happiness is gratefulness.

Our answers can be tested by the reader’s own experience, as we have shown. They hinge on awareness of the now: Only lasting happiness can be called genuine, and only the now lasts beyond time. In our mystic moments we experience this now and find in it both supreme happiness and the seeds from which religions develop. By bringing us again and again into the now, spiritual practices (epitomized by grateful living) provide access to lasting happiness.

By drawing life and strength from this shared root system we shall find joy -- the happiness that does not depend on what happens -- and we shall find that deep understanding of religions that sees them as different doors to a shared happiness.