

The Meaning of Life

In 2015, His Holiness the Dalai Lama turned eighty. Archbishop Desmond Tutu made a special trip from South Africa to Dharamsala to be with his old friend and to discuss in depth how to find joy in the face of our daily troubles. The record of this meeting is The Book of Joy. There is a wonderful section about the meaning of life, and excerpts are presented below.

There is perhaps thing more joyous than birth, and yet so much of our life is spent in sadness, stress and suffering.

No dark fate determines the future. We do. Each day and each moment we are able to create and re-create our lives and the very quality of human life on the planet. This is the power we wield.

Lasting happiness cannot be found in pursuit of any goal or achievement. It does not reside in fortune or fame. It resides only in the human mind and heart, and it is here that we must hope to find it.

“Joy,” as Archbishop Tutu said during his momentous week-long meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, “is much bigger than happiness. While happiness is often seen as being dependent on circumstances, joy is not.” This state of mind – and heart – is much closer to both the Dalai Lama’s and the Archbishop Tutu’s understanding of what animates our lives and what ultimately leads to a life of satisfaction and meaning.

Is it really possible to be joyful in the face of our daily troubles? Even when our lives are good, how do we live in joy when so many others are suffering: when crushing poverty robs people of their future, when violence and terror fill our streets, and when ecological devastation endangers the very possibility of life on our planet?

The Archbishop has never claimed sainthood and the Dalai Lama considers himself a simple monk. They offer us the reflection of real lives filled with pain and turmoil in the midst of which they have been able to discover a level of peace, of courage, of joy that we can aspire to in our own lives. Suffering is inevitable, they said, but how we respond to that suffering is our choice. Not even oppression or occupation can take away our freedom to choose our response.

“Discovering more joy does not, I am sorry to say,” added the Archbishop, “save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without becoming broken.”

“One great question underlies our existence,” the Dalai Lama had said before our trip. “What is the purpose of life? After much consideration, I believe the purpose of life is to find happiness. It does not matter whether one is a Buddhist like me, or a Christian like the Archbishop, or any other religion, or no religion at all. From the moment of birth every human being wants to discover happiness and to avoid suffering. No differences in our culture or education or religion affect this. From the very core of our being we simply desire joy and contentment. But so often these feelings are fleeting and hard to find, like a butterfly that lands on us and then flutters away.

“The ultimate source of happiness is within us. Not money, not power, not status. Some of my friends are billionaires but they are very unhappy people. Power and money fail to bring inner peace. Outward attainment will not bring real inner joyfulness. We must look inside.

“Sadly, many of the things that undermine our joy and happiness we create ourselves. Often it comes from the negative tendencies of the mind, emotional reactivity, or from our inability to appreciate and utilize the resources that exist within us. The suffering from a natural disaster we can-not control, but the suffering from our daily disasters we can. We create most of our suffering, so it should be logical that we also have the ability to create more joy. It simply depends on the attitudes, perspectives and the reactions we bring to situations and to our relationships with other people. When it comes to personal happiness there is a lot that we as individuals can do.”

“The problem is that our world and our education remain focused external, materialistic values. We are not concerned enough with our inner values. Those who grow up with this kind of education live a materialistic life and eventually the whole society becomes materialistic. But this culture is not sufficient to tackle our human problems. The real problem is here” the Dalai Lama said, pointing to his head, “and here,” he added pointing to his heart. Mind and heart. Materialistic values cannot give us peace of mind.

“I feel there is a big contradiction,” the Dalai Lama continued. “There are seven billion human beings and nobody wants to have problems or suffering, but there are many problems and much suffering, most of it our own creation. Why?”

“Something is lacking. As one of the seven billion human beings, I believe everyone has the responsibility to develop a happier world. We need, ultimately, to have a greater concern for others’ well-being. In other words, kindness and compassion, which is lacking now. We must pay more attention to our inner values. We must look inside.”

Excerpts from: *The Book of Joy*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, Hutchinson: London 2016, compiled by Len Warren.