

# Happiness: How to Cultivate Joy

## 1 John 5:12-13

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Spirit means joy! Awakening is joyful. Life is a miracle to be celebrated and loved.

It's important for all of us to find ourselves and follow our “joy path.” When we are joyful, when we are happy, we spontaneously share love. So think about what makes your heart sing. What do you do to make yourself happy? What feeds your spirit and vivifies the love in your heart? Remember that the spiritual life is vibrant, not dull; ecstatic, not static. Finding ways to bring more joy into your life helps spread it around.

Not only does joy light up our faces, it heals our ills....The path of joy is the path of open-heartedness—the path of a heart filled with love. So smile. Make somebody happy. Make yourself happy. Learn to love. Spread love. Be love. You'll love it.

### **“Prayer of Intent ”**

Heavenly Father of Love and Life

I am intending to awaken to my deep self

I am intending to bless the world and open myself to *be* blessed

I am intending to be free

I am intending to be joyful

I am intending to be loving and to be loved

I am intending to make a difference

I am intending to serve with gladness

I am intending to be rich with resources

I am intending to be wise

I am intending to be healthy

I am intending to spread peace and light

I am intending to be grateful for the gifts in my life and their richness

I am intending to be grateful for the family, friends, and communities that enrich my life

We will each speak into the silence our individual intending or we will just Be or Listen. In Jesus name . . . **AMEN**

At the end of a prayer, it is good to remain silent and just *be* or listen. This advice comes to us from spiritual teachers ancient and modern.

Are you happy? You would probably need a definition of happiness to answer that question! It used to be that hundreds of studies were done on *depression* because psychologists were interested in understanding how to help their clients. Now there are hundreds of studies done a year on *happiness* because the American Psychological Association is now interested in the “enabling conditions that make human beings flourish”

Psychologists define happiness as *a general sense of satisfaction and well being*. Dr. Edward Diener gives us a set of five statements which are now used all over the world to measure happiness, and which we are asked to rank from 1 to 7. Here are the

statements. You might like to add up your score:

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
3. I am satisfied with my life.
4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

How did you score? (31-35, extremely satisfied, 26-30, very satisfied, 21-25, slightly satisfied, 20 is the neutral point, below that—let’s not go there!) I just squeaked into the “extremely satisfied” category! (Dear Reader, If you did score below 20, I do so hope you will engage with friends and/or a counselor to help increase your enjoyment of your life—even a clergy person would be a good start.)

Studies that ask people about the number *one* thing that makes them happy gives a skewed idea about the person’s level of happiness because they could be very happy about *one* thing and yet not have an overall sense of satisfaction and well being.

Now, pop psychologists want to give you quick solutions to how you can improve your happiness score. Many studies show that *these* eight steps can improve your level of happiness:

1. Count your blessings once a week and write them down.
2. Practice random acts of kindness.
3. Savor life’s *small joys*, like your garden or your pet.
4. Thank a mentor or someone to whom you are grateful for

moving your life along in a positive direction.

5. Learn to forgive (or let go).
6. Invest time and energy in friends and family.
7. Take care of your body. Getting exercise not only improves your health, it increases your joy through increased endorphins.
8. Develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships. Make up sayings like, “This too shall pass” or “That which doesn’t kill me makes me stronger!”

Interestingly, more *money* does not increase happiness once *basic needs* are met. One thing that can stand in the way of happiness is never being satisfied with what we have. Counting our blessings in earnest can help counter dissatisfaction. In countries that have greater income equality, there is a far greater satisfaction rate than in countries like the U.S. where income disparities are very great indeed.

This is all very nice information and perhaps it is well known, but we want to look more deeply. Psychologist Martin Seligman, who has written a book called *Authentic Happiness*, has identified three components of happiness. The first is ***pleasure***. This is the superficial level expressed by the consumerism in our society. It cannot satisfy us for long. This is the eating chocolate, going shopping, etc. Of course, these can *add* to deeper levels of happiness but they cannot *substitute* for it. The *second* level is ***depth of engagement*** with family, friends, work, church, and so on.

At this level, we exchange relationship and effort and open ourselves up to creativity and vulnerability. The third level is **meaning** where we turn our lives towards greater purpose and meaning—*serving others*. *Cultivating happiness* is enhanced at the levels of *engagement* and *meaning*. But we should remind ourselves that loss of a life partner or loss of a job or a business are called “**happiness robbers**.” Grief can go on for eight or more years to come, long after a person has gotten another job or has remarried. These are devastating losses and the glass can seem to be only half *empty*, not half *full*. Let us remember that community and friend support can be critical at these times. We need to work at being happy rather than sitting back and alone and just waiting for happiness to come to us without any initiative or effort on our part.

Religious communities and religious beliefs can and do help people cultivate happiness. It is well known that people who attend church are happier and healthier than those who do not. Experts say that the guidelines of religion help to narrow and simplify life’s choices while also providing spiritual practices and community. (As an aside, survey results find that people who believe in an afterlife are happier than those who do *not*. Protestants are happier than Catholics and Jews! I wonder why? Actually, Protestants generally believe in an afterlife and they’re all going to heaven!)

If we look to the Bible to see what it says about happiness, we will see advice, especially in the Psalms, to put your faith in the Lord—make a joyful noise unto the Lord. The idea is that if you

worship, you will be happy. In the Gospel accounts, we read the Beatitudes: Blessed are the peacemakers, Blessed are the poor, Blessed are the meek, which indicate that they will be happy but that implies that they are God-connected.

It is my humble opinion that spiritual practices add a great depth and richness to life, whether it is attending church once a week and participating in something besides at the church or a spiritual group or an individual practice. It gives us *something* and perhaps *someone* to fall back on when the *slings and arrows* of life are *overwhelming*. But what about when we want to overtly *cultivate happiness* because we feel we are not living fully or are a bit depressed?

Some of the practices we've mentioned such as counting blessings, keeping a gratitude journal, and doing random acts of kindness, are certainly helpful. How about something *inward*, and also something *playful*? The first quiet and easy thing is the “inner smile.” The Buddha demonstrates this for us. Let us say we are feeling sad, Lama Surya Das advises us to cast down our eyes but not close them, sit quietly, take some deep breaths of course, acknowledge our *sadness* and say to ourselves, and now I want to smile inwardly. We then smile outwardly with a smile like that of the Mona Lisa, and then wait while that smile is reflected and felt *inwardly*. We might like to stay in the place of being-ness for as long as possible. When we open our eyes, we can remind ourselves to smile outwardly to reflect the inward smile. Little by little our mood

will change to one of quiet happiness. This is an intentional happiness prayer and practice.

Spend time laughing. Read good things that make you laugh. What funny things that make you laugh. Watch TV programs that make you laugh. Laughter can help you feel a sense of touch real life again. Laughter has so many benefits. Laughter is “like internal jogging!”

Into all this, to cultivate happiness, I would add prayer and meditation. You can take the prayer we said today and change it to something specific for yourself.

May we cultivate happiness with creativity and joy.

## **Lord’s Plan for Salvation**