

RECOVERING JOY

a mindful life
after addiction

Kevin Griffin

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INTRODUCTION

I'm not really a happiness guy. In my teens, I found myself depressed and started to adopt a self-view as someone who was unhappy. Over the years, I wrote sad songs (which was actually kind of fun), commiserated with other depressives (which was quite comforting), and generally embraced depression and unhappiness as signs of my emotional sensitivity and realistic worldview. Nonetheless, some years ago, one of my Buddhist teachers started to talk about how we can cultivate "positive mind states." This sounded more sophisticated than merely trying to be happy, and since I'd often been in negative mind states and had a distinct distaste for them, I decided to play along.

Next thing I knew I'd been hooked into reading a book called *How We Choose to Be Happy*, just the sort of thing I would normally avoid. And, lo and behold, the thing made sense. It was practical and it resonated with my Buddhist understanding of how things work. Mainly what I got from this book was the idea that I can impact how happy I am by how I live my life. It turns out, I'm not fated to be unhappy; I can actually have an effect on my own mind states.

People in recovery from addictions—people like me—already know that our behavior affects our moods and our overall sense of well-being. If we didn't realize it before we got clean and sober, we certainly saw it afterward. Nonetheless, a recovery path like the Twelve Steps, while it's obviously about ridding ourselves of the things that make us unhappy, doesn't necessarily cultivate "positive mind states." Admitting our powerlessness, writing a moral inventory, trying to abandon character defects, and making amends are very challenging tasks. They often bring up a lot of tough feelings about ourselves. Not surprisingly, after years—and sometimes decades—of addiction, it can be easy to get stuck in judging ourselves as bad people, as people who are flawed and even undeserving of happiness.

I want to help people in recovery avoid or get out of such ways of thinking. I want to help you see that in recovery there are often already many causes for happiness that you simply need to appreciate. And I want to help you see the ways you might still be undermining yourself and to find ways to let go of these negative habits, both behaviors and ways of thinking. Maybe we can't exactly "choose" to be happy, but if we are in recovery or moving toward recovery, I think we can do a lot to make happiness—and joy and freedom—a lot more likely.

Those who know me might be chuckling right now, because I can be pretty negative myself. I sometimes say that I can turn lemonade into lemons. But I've also worked hard at creating a happy life. The elements of happiness that I'm going to describe are integral to my life. I have plenty of bad moods and difficult moments, but fundamentally I'm very contented with my life. And, in fact, remembering how good my life is, despite the moods, is one of the keys to what I define as happiness.

In this book, I want to give you ways to cultivate positive mind states and a happy life, but I don't want to be too prescriptive. In that spirit, I offer you "Reflections" that I hope will help you do a few things: first, to see how you are *already* happy; second, to understand how you get in the way of your own happiness; and third, to imagine ways you can bring more happiness and contentment into your life. I also offer "Practices," which are more active and practical ways of working with the ideas in the book, including different forms of meditation.

Reflections are opportunities to think deeply, contemplatively, and honestly about things. Much of the time in our lives we do things automatically, habitually, and reactively. We do what we've always done; we think what we've always thought or what we've been told to think; we don't engage creatively in our lives. As long as there are no big crises, we just go along thoughtlessly.

Reflection can be done by taking quiet time, whether on a solo walk in nature, a silent meditation, or just sitting back for a few moments in the middle of our day. Reflecting can happen in one of these moments, or over the course of a few days or longer, as some issue or idea keeps

rolling around in our minds. What's important isn't the setting or the amount of time, but the attitude of openness and inquisitiveness. With reflecting, we try to get in touch with our deeper longings and intentions; we try to connect with the most sincere part of ourselves, with our hearts; we try to drop our defenses and fears, our judgments and assumptions. We try to understand what is really true *for us*.

Reflection can also be done with a trusted friend, sponsor, or teacher. We should always take care when we reflect with someone else that we aren't just adopting their view, or, on the other hand, reflexively rejecting their suggestions. Reflecting can be done as we listen to someone share in a Twelve Step meeting or speak in a meditation group.

Be careful, though: reflection isn't spacing out. The key to reflection is that you are *intentionally* thinking, consciously following a stream of inquiry, not just ruminating. The concept of "near enemies" can clarify this difference. A near enemy is something that *looks* similar to something else but is actually quite different. For instance, the near enemy of compassion is pity; the near enemy of equanimity is apathy. In the same way, the near enemy of reflection is rumination, a rambling semiconscious string of familiar, habitual patterns of thought. Reflection gets you somewhere new; rumination just repeats the same old fears, resentments, grievances, and fantasies.

With Practices, you are usually asked to do something more specific. Many of these are meditations or at least meditative. The meditation practices in this book are based on the Buddhist teachings on mindfulness. These teachings are especially useful in looking at your own mental activity, your thoughts and feelings, your prejudices and opinions, your reactions and impulses. In tracking these patterns, we begin to free ourselves from habitual behaviors and to make more conscious choices in our lives. Mindfulness is also a key to doing the Reflections, because we need to be able to keep our minds on track and focused, not drifting off into daydreams and ruminative thought in order to reflect clearly.

This book follows what the Buddha called a "gradual path," as I build on the main elements of our lives that need to be addressed to bring happiness: integrity, relationships, work, inner life, play, health,

and money. Mindfulness is addressed early on as the key tool for this work. The final chapter brings all the elements together to help you build a plan for your own happiness. At any point, you can jump to that last chapter to look at how to address any of these elements.

NOT UNHAPPY



When you hear the word *happiness*, you probably have your own sense of its meaning. Before I got sober, I thought it meant something like being in a good mood all the time or having loads of fun with no responsibilities. That's not how I define happiness now. In fact, several years ago when stuck in a long period of difficult moods, depression, and irritability, I found myself saying, "I'm depressed, but I'm not unhappy." What did that mean?

What I was saying was that nothing was wrong with my life. I was healthy, had a loving family that I adored, and found great satisfaction in my work. I understood by that time that troubling moods seemed to be a persistent, if intermittent, part of my life, but that they didn't impinge on the essential value and meaning of my life or the satisfaction I derived from it. I think it has partly been this attitude toward moods that has allowed me to be less controlled by them.

So, obviously, I'm saying that happiness isn't just a mood. That doesn't mean we can be happy without ever being in a good mood. Certainly having access to joyful and uplifting feelings on a fairly regular basis is part of what I'd call happiness. But happiness is more than that. I think it includes and depends upon the following elements, which are also the main chapters of this book:

- Integration of values and behavior; that is, we live up to our own moral and ethical standards without “shadow” behaviors. We’re not hiding any part of our lives from those close to us.
- Satisfying interpersonal relationships, be they with a partner, friends, family, or coworkers; our spiritual community; and our teachers, sponsors, and other healers.
- Satisfying work that both challenges us and allows us to use our intelligence and creativity to their fullest extent.
- A rich inner life that includes a sense of connection to something greater than ourselves, be that a religious or spiritual connection, or simply a sense of connection with the human race, other beings, or just nature. This may include meditation or a creative practice.
- An element of fun in our lives. As adults, many of us neglect this vital element of happiness.
- A healthy relationship to money and basic financial security, and good self-care of our bodies, including diet and healing.
- A sense of purpose and our own value. This may express itself through our work and how we see ourselves contributing to the world, or it may express itself in our relationships—the way we help and care for others.

For addicts in recovery, this list in some sense provides a parallel process to the Twelve Steps. The Steps require us to face our moral and ethical lapses, and they also show us how living with integrity is so much more easeful than otherwise; certainly most of us have had to do a lot of work repairing interpersonal relationships; many of us have

to spend years getting our work lives sorted out and straightening out our finances; as addicts, we often neglect our bodies, and need to learn how to care for them in recovery; spiritual connection is an essential part of the groundwork of recovery in the Twelve Steps; and learning how to have fun and play without intoxicants is one of the first challenges of recovery.

The Buddha defines happiness in many different ways. First, he acknowledges that there is a certain pleasure to be found in the sense life: taste, touch, smell, sight, and sound. In our culture, this is usually depicted as the beginning and end of the source of happiness, but the Buddha characterizes sense pleasure as “coarse,” lacking subtlety, and ultimately unsatisfying, *dukkha* (a word often translated as “suffering,” but which has no exact English equivalent). While it’s true that sense pleasures are all impermanent, I don’t think lay people have to be so quick to write them off. Most of us need a certain amount of this comfort to maintain positive mind states. These pleasures can come from all the senses: seeing a beautiful sunset or stunning painting; getting carried away listening to a singer who moves us deeply; letting go into the bliss of orgasm; or soaking in a flood of endorphins at the end of a workout. It can come from tasting a good cup of coffee or savoring a piece of chocolate. The Buddha said there was “gratification, danger, and escape” with these pleasures: the gratification is the actual pleasure; the danger is that we get attached to that pleasure, because no matter what, it can’t last, so if we’re attached we’ll always end up disappointed; the escape is letting go of that attachment. The point is, enjoy sense pleasures, but don’t see them as the ultimate source of your happiness or freedom. Unfortunately, as addicts, that’s exactly how we did see them, trying to find and hold onto happiness in a bottle, a pill, a line of powder, or a puff of smoke.

More pleasurable than sense experience, according to the Buddha, is the joy of calm, abiding, meditative peace. Because this state is one where there’s no sense of lack, and thus no craving for things to be different from how they are, the Buddha sees this as a greater form of happiness than more excited states where craving is present. I think

that for many of us, it was the promise of such peace that drew us to meditation in the first place. For me, calm abiding continues to be a great source of happiness and gratification. But don't be fooled: Cultivating rich meditative states requires real dedication. In order to access and maintain them, most people need to go on regular silent retreats. It's much easier to pop a pill or roll a joint than it is to develop calm abiding, so naturally a lot more people take the easy route. Again, for addicts, we know the futility of the quick approach to finding happiness, and that's one of the reasons we are willing to do challenging Twelve Step work. It's this same hard-won wisdom that brings people to Buddhist recovery work, the recognition that the promise of happiness in money, sex, fame, or success is empty.

In the Buddha's hierarchy of happiness, insight tops even peaceful meditation for bringing happiness, because it frees us from clinging. The ultimate insight is the ultimate letting-go: nirvana, the ultimate happiness. And while this ultimate insight may have eluded me, I've certainly had many moments of nonultimate insight, revealing truths about my own psychology and behavior, all the places where I get stuck; my practice has also opened me to the universal truths of suffering, impermanence, and corelessness that the Buddha said underlie all experience. A great sense of ease comes with these insights, as we see the truth clearly and are able, at least for a moment, to step out of our personal drama into a broad view of reality. Here the suffering of the headlines and the confusion of our inner lives are both seen as an expression of the same fundamental patterns of life, and, even though nothing may change on the outside, with these insights our whole perspective can shift, like watching a movie and suddenly remembering that it's all just a projection of pictures and sound, actors reciting a script, lighting and costumes and sets.

In some fundamental way, it's balancing this ultimate view with the practical realities of life that I see as the Buddhist path to wisdom and happiness. I have to take care of the practical world and commit fully to living skillfully, while at the same time holding a broad, impersonal view so that this world of pleasure and pain doesn't hypnotize me with craving or swamp me with despair.

In talking about these stages or levels of happiness, the Buddha gives instruction for each level. Like my own list, he lays down morality as a fundamental necessity for building a happy and beneficial life; whether for monastics or laypeople, he tells us that maintaining loving, supportive, and responsible relationships and a strong community is central to our spiritual development; he describes skillful forms of livelihood and the importance of generosity and service; and of course he teaches a wide range of contemplative and meditative practices to cultivate skillful mind states and openheartedness.

What the Buddha is pointing to, just like the Twelve Steps and other recovery programs, is that our happiness isn't just dependent on our life circumstances or emotional tendencies. While these certainly have a part, it is our own choices and actions that can swing the pendulum toward happiness. Happiness may not be our birthright, but for most of us, it's within reach if we are willing to do the work.

REFLECTION **What Is Happiness?**

Before you do this exercise, ask yourself what you would add to the list of elements of happiness below. Then include any additional aspects in this reflection.

Take some time to review the list of elements of happiness:

- Integrity
- Healthy relationships
- Gratifying work
- Spiritual practice
- Fun
- Healthy relationship to body and to money
- Other

Notice where you already have these things in your life and where you don't. Where you don't have these things, consider actions you can take to achieve them. Make the

commitment today to begin to bring these things into your life. Remember, “One day at a time.” Happiness doesn’t come overnight. Begin to lay the foundation today, and try to maintain the long view. ■

REFLECTION **What Is My Happiness?**

Begin by reflecting on how you define happiness. I’ve found that many people don’t even like the term *happy*, or feel that it’s not a realistic goal. I, too, had to find my own way of understanding what it meant to be happy. Maybe you’re more comfortable with a different word: *joy* or *contentment* or *well-being*. See what works for you. I believe we all want some version of happiness or okayness, some sense of enjoying or feeling good about our lives and ourselves.

Now take some time to ask yourself what you really want from your life. This isn’t about money or fame or even, really, about worldly success of any kind. It’s more about how we live.

Think back over the moments in your life that brought you great joy; consider periods of time when you felt most contented or engaged in your life; and remember those times when you were *unhappy*, so that you can gain some perspective over causes and conditions for your own happiness. Are you doing the things that make you happy? Could you restart some past activity that brought you happiness?

Of course, you may not be able to go back to specific activities you used to do. For instance, you might love kids but be past the child-bearing age, so perhaps you could volunteer at a preschool or teach kindergarten. Maybe your knees won’t let you run anymore, so you could take up bicycle riding or hiking. Bringing this kind of joy into our lives may take a certain amount of creativity, but that too can be some of the pleasure of the process, just reflecting on what makes us happy. ■