

SUMMARY

THE BOOK OF JOY

DALAI LAMA AND DESMOND TUTU



Summary of The Book of Joy by Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu

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The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu discuss how we can find joy despite suffering.

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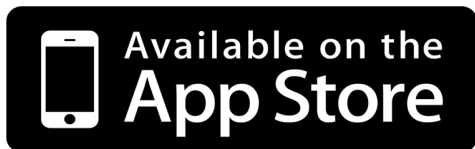


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Introduction

Both the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu are world renowned spiritual leaders, winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, and symbols of peaceful resistance. This book is based on a week-long discussion between them that took place in 2015.

Written in three parts The book of Joy attempts to lay out a path for ordinary people to build a lasting sense of happiness and contentment in life, even while dealing with suffering. The first of the book's three sections is dedicated to understanding the nature of joy and trying to work out a definition of joy as a state of being and not just an emotion.

The second section deals with the obstacles that stand in the way of creating joy. And the third section describes what the authors call the eight pillars of joy, the conclusions and agreements they came to over the course of their seven day meeting in regards to what is necessary to obtain a genuinely joyful state of being.

All Life Involves Suffering

“If you are setting out to be joyful you are not going to end up being joyful. You’re going to find yourself turned in on yourself. It’s like a flower. You open, you blossom, really because of other people. And I think some suffering, maybe even intense suffering, is a necessary ingredient for life, certainly for developing compassion.”

We often operate under the assumption that it is possible to remove all the sources of suffering in life, that in fact the goal in life is to experience as little suffering as possible. That happiness is the endpoint of success and that if we just work hard and do the right things we’ll spend our lives happy.

However, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger pointed out, the very act of being born is traumatic. We go from a state of non-existence to being thrown into a confusing and chaotic state of being in which we have to suddenly try and understand all the stimuli our senses are being bombarded with, while also dealing with the existential question of why it’s happening at all.

The Book of Joy therefore begins with a distinctly Buddhist sentiment, that all life involves suffering and that avoiding any suffering at all is undesirable. Suffering can be a useful learning tool, and joy can not truly be understood or appreciated if you’ve never experienced suffering. Further, suffering helps you understand the importance of empathy, because it allows you to understand how others have suffered as well. And thus the first thing the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu agree upon is that when we suffer we must learn to shift our focus away ourselves and onto others.

The second agreement the authors come to is on the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness, according to them, is a fleeting emotion. Whereas joy is a lasting state of existence.

The first section includes examples of the importance of putting your suffering in perspective, such as a story in which the Dalai Lama was going to cancel a talk because he had terrible stomach pains and felt the need to go to the hospital. On the way though he saw a man on the street, old and feeble and near death. This sight reminded him that in the grand scheme of things what he was going through wasn't so bad, and gave him the strength to tough it out and go through with the scheduled talk.

“You know, when Nelson Mandela went to jail he was young and, you could almost say, bloodthirsty. He was head of the armed wing of the African National Congress, his party. He spent twenty-seven years in jail, and many would say, Twenty-seven years, oh, what a waste. And I think people are surprised when I say no, the twenty-seven years were necessary. They were necessary to remove the dross. The suffering in prison helped him to become more magnanimous, willing to listen to the other side. To discover that the people he regarded as his enemy, they too were human beings who had fears and expectations. And they had been molded by their society. And so without the twenty-seven years I don't think we would have seen the Nelson Mandela with the compassion, the magnanimity, the capacity to put himself in the shoes of the other.”

Choosing How To Cope With Suffering

“Adversity, illness, and death are real and inevitable. We chose whether to add to these unavoidable facts of life with the suffering that we create in our own minds and hearts... the chosen suffering. The more we make a different choice, to heal our own suffering, the more we can turn to others and help to address their suffering with the laughter-filled, tear-stained eyes of the heart. And the more we turn away from our self-regard to wipe the tears from the eyes of another, the more- incredibly- we are able to hear, to heal, and to transcend our own suffering. This is the true secret to joy.”

The first step is to understand that fear and frustration are facets of the mind, not of reality. As such, you don't have to let them control your life and, if you wish to, you can find joy in any situation.

We can't control many, perhaps even most, of the things that will cause suffering in our lives. Disasters, losing loved ones, economic downturns, illnesses, they'll happen to us regardless of what we do. But the one thing we can always control is how we choose to react to these events.

When you see examples of road rage remember that it wasn't the traffic jam that caused people to behave that way, sure you could argue that without the traffic jam it wouldn't have occurred, but ultimately it was the choice of the people involved to react in anger and outburst. You can't choose the traffic jam, but you can choose to either respond to it like a reasonable adult or like an angry child.

Thus while we may not be able to control events that cause suffering, we can certainly contribute to how much or how little those events affect our happiness. You can choose to deal with the traffic jam with minor annoyance, or with major rage, you're not happy in either scenario, but you're choosing to be more unhappy in one rather than in the other.

“Think about it this way. If your health is strong, when viruses come they will not make you sick. If your overall health is weak, even small viruses will be very dangerous for you. Similarly, if your mental health is sound, then the disturbances come, you will have some distress but recover quicker. If your mental health is not good, then small disturbances, small problems will cause you much pain and suffering. You will have much fear and worry, much sadness and despair, much anger and aggravation.

Expectations Can Cause Anger, Compassion Can Remedy It

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A major element of Buddhist philosophy is that expectations and desires lead to suffering. We’re taught from a very young age to expect a lot of ourselves and our lives, to always be pursuing a big dream and a better life. And while that can be a good motivator, it can also lead to immense uncertainty, fear, anger, and disappointment.

Fear of failure to achieve these goals can be paralyzing, and in turn lead to bitterness and anger. The way to heal yourself from the toxic poison of anger however is to practice compassion.

Whether it’s self-compassion, not being too hard on yourself for mistakes, or compassion for others, anger is easily conquered by something as simple as someone holding your hand and telling you that they care.

Sadness and suffering will always occur, we are all going to experience losing loved ones for instance. But research has shown that when we are sad we also tend to behave with the most generosity and compassion for others. Sadness can feel incredibly lonely but it is also a great chance to practice empathy, and to use your sadness as a motivator to connect with other people. And in doing so, to see the good that can come out of sadness.

“Unfortunately, in our world we tend to be blind to our connection until times of great disaster. We find we start caring about people in Timbuktu, whom we’ve never met and we’re probably never going to meet this side of death. And yet we pour out our hearts. We give resources to help them

because we realize that we are bound up together. We are bound up and can be human only together.”

Loneliness

“Openheartedness—warmheartedness—is the antidote to loneliness. It has often amazed me that one day I can walk down the street feeling judgmental and critical of others, and I will feel separate and lonely, and the next day I can walk down the same street with more openhearted acceptance and compassion and suddenly everyone seems warm and friendly. It is almost as if my inner state of mind and heart changes the physical and social world around me completely.”

One of the biggest epidemics in the western world today is loneliness. Nearly 1 in 3 working adults reports dealing with chronic feelings of loneliness. And loneliness, like many chronic negative feelings, is correlated with high levels of stress and higher instances of heart disease. Loneliness, mistrust, jealousy, and bitterness are all harmful to our health in a very literal, physical way.

The authors put forward that when you feel lonely you should remember that we are all the same, we are all members of the same human family. To combat loneliness, embrace the connection between all humans.

The authors then recount a study performed at Columbia University showing that people who focused on using plural pronouns like “we” and “us” more than singular pronouns like “I” and “me” had noticeably lower rates of heart attacks than people who did the opposite.

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How Accepting Death and Near Death Experiences Impact Joy

It's a well known phenomenon that people who have had near death experiences often come out of them with a deeper appreciation for their lives. It makes sense, it's often only when you almost lose something that you truly see how valuable it is and stop taking it for granted.

Desmond Tutu experienced this first hand as a child, narrowly avoiding death when he was dangerously ill with tuberculosis.

The inverse is also often true. People with terminal diseases often report their final months being happier than any other time in their lives, and many become paradoxically depressed after they make miraculous recoveries.

It seems that acknowledging how fleeting life is, and accepting the inevitability of death, are key elements of lasting joy. Allowing yourself to confront the scary and seemingly depressing subject of death gives you the ability to see the big picture. To see how valuable your life actually is and to see how important it is to enjoy it while it lasts.

Yes it will eventually end, but would prefer a living rose that smelled wonderful but eventually died, or would you prefer a fake rose than was made of plastic? It will never wither and die, but it will also never smell sweet. The rose is valuable because it is finite. Because it doesn't last forever.

Acknowledging and accepting that life is the same way, lets you truly appreciate the sweetness of it.

Perspective and Humility

“If you live with fear and consider yourself as something special then automatically, emotionally, you are distanced from others. You then create the basis for feelings of alienation from others and loneliness. So, I never consider, even when giving a talk to a large crowd, that I am something special, I am 'His Holiness the Dalai Lama' . . . I always emphasize that when I meet people, we are all the same human beings. A thousand people -- same human being. Ten thousand or a hundred thousand -- same human being -- mentally, emotionally, and physically. Then, you see, no barrier. Then my mind remains completely calm and relaxed. If too much emphasis on myself, and I start to think I'm something special, then more anxiety, more nervousness.”

As stated at the beginning, the authors lay out what they call The Eight Pillar of Joy”. two of those pillars are humility and perspective. As stated in the quote, the experience of being told he’s special, divine even, from a very young age led to immense feelings of anxiety and isolation for the Dalai Lama. One could see how that sort of celebrity could lead to things like arrogance and selfishness as well.

Perspective and humility go hand in hand. When you’re dealing with stress or sadness, keep the big picture in mind and realizing how small the thing you’re dealing with actually is can be a very powerful coping tool. As can humility; by remembering that your problems aren’t unique, that they’re something millions of people deal with everyday, can either make you feel foolish or it could help you feel like you’re not alone. Being humble in this manner, reminding yourself that you’re just one of many, also reminds you that we’re all in this together. And can even be used as a motivator to get out there and help others.

Humor and Acceptance

The third and fourth pillars are humor and acceptance. Humor in dark times is a universal human coping tool. “Gallows humor” can be heard in warzones, in emergency rooms, among firefighters, and during natural disasters. By making jokes about the terrible things happening to us, we take their power to frighten us away, if only for a moment.

The book describes a story in which Desmond Tutu spoke to a group of Tutsis and Hutus, the two ethnic groups at war during the Rwandan civil war and genocide. It might seem surprising, but Tutu chose to address this group by telling a joke that attempted to highlight how ridiculous their hatred of one another actually was.

While you might think something as serious as genocide should never be joked about, what he did connected the audience via one of most uniquely human qualities. Humor and jokes are unique to us as a species, and it seems to be a very instinctual thing to use humor as a means of gaining acceptance, as well as a means of accepting difficult realities.

Problems can never be solved unless we acknowledge there is in fact a problem. Acceptance that life is full of suffering is the only way we’ll ever be liberated from suffering.

Forgiveness and Gratitude

“When you are grateful,' Brother Steindl-Rast explained, 'you are not fearful, and when you are not fearful, you are not violent. When you are grateful, you act out of a sense of enough and not out of a sense of scarcity, and you are willing to share. If you are grateful, you are enjoying the differences between people and respectful to all people. The grateful world is a world of joyful people. Grateful people are joyful people. A grateful world is a happy world.”

The fifth and sixth pillars are forgiveness and gratitude. A mistake people often make is to act as though because there are others suffering worse than them, they're not allowed to feel sad. This is nonsense, yes there is always someone that has it worse, but that doesn't discount what you're going through.

However the knowledge that others have it worse should be used as a tool. Because being grateful, itself an element of having proper perspective, helps you avoid unnecessary suffering. It helps you avoid taking what you have for granted, and hopefully helps you have the perspective to see how small many problems you have are. The point isn't to make yourself feel bad for worrying about your small problems, but rather to see that maybe you don't need to worry as much as you are about them.

Forgiveness is an inverse of gratitude. It's understanding that holding onto anger doesn't solve anything, it doesn't hurt anyone except for you. This is demonstrated by examples we have of the parents of murder victims protesting against their child's killer getting the death penalty. They know killing that person won't bring their child back, and that holding onto anger towards them will only prevent them from being able to appreciate what they have left in life.

Compassion and Generosity

“I’ve sometimes joked and said God doesn’t know very much math, because when you give to others, it should be that you are subtracting from yourself. But in this incredible kind of way—I’ve certainly found that to be the case so many times—you gave and it then seems like in fact you are making space for more to be given to you.”

Probably the two largest pillars of joy are the final two, compassion and generosity. More so than any other concept, these are the two most often repeated in the book. The authors seem to agree wholeheartedly with each other that the true and most abundant source of lasting joy in life is to give to others. As the Dalai Lama puts it:

“Joy is the reward, really, of seeking to give joy to others. When you show compassion, when you show caring, when you show love to others, do things for others, in a wonderful way you have a deep joy that you can get in no other way. You can’t buy it with money. You can be the richest person on Earth, but if you care only about yourself, I can bet my bottom dollar you will not be happy and joyful. But when you are caring, compassionate, more concerned about the welfare of others than about your own, wonderfully, wonderfully, you suddenly feel a warm glow in your heart, because you have, in fact, wiped the tears from the eyes of another.”

The Dalai Lama often references scientific research demonstrating that acts of altruism and self-sacrifice are genetically predisposed in humans and other social species. Because evolution doesn’t care about the survival of individuals, only of populations. So in species that require cooperation to survive, like humans or dogs or dolphins etc, there is a basic biological drive to help each other, even if to the detriment of ourselves. People don’t need to think about jumping in front of a car to push someone out of the way, they do it instinctually. Children are shown demonstrating compassion and empathy from the moment they’re old enough to start interacting with others. And research shows that helping other people results in endorphin

rushes in the brain, which is to say that we as humans literally find pleasure in being helpful and generous.

Final Summary

Joy can occur in spite of suffering, in fact it might even require suffering to exist. While happiness can be fleeting, joy can be a sustaining long term state of being, and the key to obtaining joy comes in maintaining proper perspective and humility, and dedicating our lives to helping our fellow humans.

Focus on caring for others, avoid worrying about material desires, and remember that while you can't always control what happens in your life, you can always control how you choose to respond.



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