

YOGA RESEARCH

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The Secrets of Happiness

excerpted from *The Happiness Project* by Ron Leifer, M.D.

*Only our searching
for happiness
prevents us from seeing it.*

Ven. Gendun Rinpoche

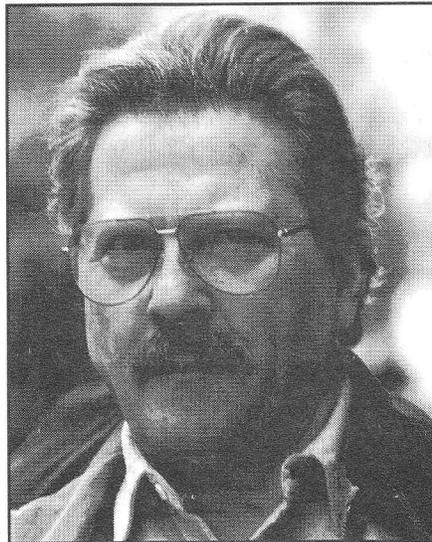
Many seekers of esoteric spiritual knowledge mistakenly believe that the source of this secret knowledge is outside themselves. They believe it is to be found in the words, books, and teachings which are possessed and closely guarded by an elite priesthood of knowing insiders. Or they regard it as a body of potent knowledge which is inaccessible or too difficult for ordinary mortals to understand. They tend, then, to worship the word, the texts, the teachers, and the image of God, looking to these for salvation, much as the esoteric believer does.

The irony is that, from the Buddhist point of view, esoteric, or secret, knowledge is not to be found in an outside power or agency. On the contrary, Buddha kept no secrets. He taught that "secrecy is the hallmark of false doctrine."

From the Buddhist point of view, esoteric wisdom means "self-secret." It consists of knowledge we hide from ourselves. No one is keeping secrets from us. Nor is esoteric wisdom too complex for us to understand. Esoteric wisdom consists of truths about ourselves and the nature of reality that we hide from ourselves. We also hide the fact that we hide them from ourselves, thus converting them into "secrets."

We hide from them because they are not what we want them to be. The world is not what we want it to be. Life is not what we want it to be. Others are not what we want them to be. We are not what we want ourselves to be.

We hide from these truths because they mystify and terrify us. The terror of reality is expressed in the Old Testament story of God refusing to show his face to Moses because it would drive him mad. This story is a metaphor for the fact that, actually, it is reality that drives us mad. We cannot face it and so we struggle to



put it out of mind, to repress and forget it.

But reality is more powerful than we are. It bursts and leaks through our defenses and returns to haunt us in our nightmares, our neuroses, and our everyday worries.

From the Buddhist point of view, the unwillingness or failure to see the facts of life as they are, to see ourselves as we are, and to conduct ourselves in harmony with these realities, is the chief cause of our self-inflicted suffering and, therefore, the chief obstacle to our happiness.

This state of denial, or lack of realization of the facts of existence, is called *avidya* in Sanskrit – literally, "the failure to see, or know" – translated

as "ignorance."

One of the great contributions of Gautama Buddha was the realization that ignorance is the primary cause of the sufferings we impose on ourselves and others.

If ignorance is the underlying cause of our self-inflicted suffering, then it follows that knowledge, or wisdom, is the remedy. The keys to the kingdom of happiness lie in wisdom.

Wisdom does not mean mere intellectual understanding, however. Intellectual understanding alone is not sufficient to enlighten the darkness of *avidya*. A mere intellectual understanding of the facts of existence will not change our habitual negative patterns of thought, speech, and action. The reason for this is that the intellect serves the ego, and the ego is a trickster who is continually the victim of its own trickery.

The ego is a trickster in the sense that, as the discursive thinker and speaker in the name of the person, it is also the locus of the lies we tell ourselves. Ego can rationalize and justify both selfish desires and self-denial. We are all clever enough to be selfish and deny it, or hide it, or disguise it as love or generosity. We can repress and isolate our feelings of fear while justifying the accompanying inhibitions as prudence or caution.

People often say that "life is tricky." True, but not because life is trying to trick us. We trick ourselves. We cannot achieve wisdom without seeing through the trickery of the ego which denies truths it does not wish to see.

This requires changing our habitual patterns of thought and action. These



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A man is happy so long as
he chooses to be happy.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

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HEALING YOGA

habitual patterns, which have been developed unconsciously, out of the ignorance of pure selfishness, so to speak, create the rebounding *karmic* ripples which cause our sufferings. To be truly wise, our understanding of the facts of existence must penetrate to the "heart which fully realizes."

This means that in order to *realize*—as opposed to merely understanding—the truths about ourselves and the facts of existence, we must undergo a personal transformation. The time it takes for any particular person to do this varies widely. Some people are transformed by one radical experience. For others, the process may take a lifetime or, as some Buddhists

like to say, *lifetimes*.

The price of *avidya*, or ignorance, is high. The price is pain and suffering. The habitual denial and repression of the facts of existence results in the suffering of negative emotions. These negative emotions motivate negative actions which create negative situations.

Realizing the "secret" truths that yield the harvest of inner peace and equanimity requires a journey within. This means a journey into our own minds in order to understand and transform our negative thinking, negative emotions, and negative actions. Like every mission into the unknown, the spiritual journey requires

courage. We must be brave enough to look at what we do not want to see. As we progress spiritually, we begin to see how we, ourselves, are the primary and ultimate cause of our own sorrows. Paradoxically, this is good news! It means that we can also be the cause of our relief, our release, and our happiness.

**Dr. Leifer will be a featured speaker at
the Yoga Research Society Conference
(October 23-25, 1998)**

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