

Are You As Happy As You Want to Be?

We all want to be happy and don't want to suffer. That's true not only for us humans, but for dogs, cats, mice, and their fleas. Yet try as we might, we can't seem to work it out to always be completely happy. In the West it was long thought that you were born either a happy person or not. Even scientists held the firm conviction that the brain changed very little after early childhood. Many recent scientific studies, particularly in brain plasticity, have turned that conviction, well, on its head.

Many of these studies compared longtime Buddhist practitioners of various nationalities with novices or non-practitioners and found positive changes of all sorts in the brain. The longtime practitioners' readings were such as had never before been recorded in a laboratory. Scientists also found that the longer the subjects had practiced, the more extraordinary the readings. Among the positive changes recorded in the experiments were improved ability to focus on a task, increased size in desirable parts of the brain, off-the-charts readings in gamma waves (which are a good thing), evidence of ongoing improved mood, and improved longevity factors. The clear trend was that the longer a person had been practicing these techniques, the more marked these positive changes were.

The Buddha had set out to provide humanity with methods to achieve ultimate, lasting happiness. Had he really found the secret to happiness, after all? Could his methods work for everyone?

If we don't have a choice that offers 100% happiness, we settle for the best we can get. We pick one choice because we think it will make us relatively happier than any alternatives we see.

Since Rinpoche took me on as his first American "guinea pig," he spent a great deal of time teaching me these methods so that I too could be happy in nearly any circumstance. (I think he was also sometimes thinking, "Let's see how this American does with THIS practice!") I tried the methods for myself and found that they really worked. Though I'm nowhere near perfecting the practices, I'm already much happier, and live with much more skill and aplomb—especially in life's most challenging times—than I did before. I've continued to make steady progress over the years, and I want nothing more than to pass these gems of wisdom and techniques on to anyone interested ... you.