“Although everyone wants happiness, most people suffer from tragically mistaken ideas about what brings it.”
- Roger Walsh

“If I ever go looking for my heart’s desire again, I won’t look any further than my own backyard; because if it isn’t there, I never really lost it to begin with.”
- ‘Dorothy’ in The Wizard of Oz

Interesting, isn’t it, that the American Declaration of Independence names as “unalienable rights” life and liberty, but not happiness? The “pursuit of happiness,” sure, but not happiness itself. A recognition, it would seem, that no one has an unalienable right to happiness, only to spending one’s life and liberty chasing after it. Sounds like a certain frustration factor built in there, doesn’t it?

This matter of happiness turns out to be very, very simple.

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Happiness is your natural state. The only reason it is not always experienced is because of the layers and barriers that are erected and constantly maintained. It is simply a matter of letting go of these, not of gaining anything new. That is the secret: the “pursuit of happiness” is looking for that something new that will ‘make’ you happy, and is doomed to eternal frustration because it is looking in the wrong direction.

“Why are you unhappy? Because 99.9 percent of everything you think, and everything you do, is for your self - and there isn’t one!” (Wei Wu Wei)

As always, there is fuzzy thinking around this subject which makes any understanding that much more difficult. Although ‘happiness’ has a strongly positive connotation among spiritual seekers and ‘pleasure’ a more negative one, the dictionary definitions of the words suggest that similar sensations underlie both. For our purposes it may be useful to define these concepts with a little more clarity.

Pleasure is part of the cycle of desire. Pleasure is the sensation that occurs when a desire is satisfied. It is the experience of release, the “ahh...” experienced at the moment when there is satisfaction of the desire and the desiring stops. This pleasure is itself very desirable, very addictive. There is the restlessness, irritation, and anxiety that accompany desire, followed by the brief moment of pleasure at the moment of satisfaction. Every body/mind organism is programmed and conditioned differently, and so the particulars will be different in each case; but basically whatever is found to lead to that sensation of release and pleasure will be what is desired, because ultimately it is the pleasure at the release of the desire being satisfied that is desired.
The nature of pleasure is that it is a momentary release; the sensation of pleasure is lost almost as soon as it is found, as the cycle of desire, once satisfied, immediately repeats itself. As many have found, there is no way out of the cycle on its own terms. That is why Buddhist teaching has always stressed the cessation of desire itself. But how can the body/mind just stop desiring, and what does that have to do with happiness?

Most "pursuit of happiness" is based on the subliminal idea that happiness is pleasure that doesn’t end, at least not so quickly. This leads to the ‘if only’ method of seeking happiness, which is really only a matter of upping the ante on desire: if only I had this, or if only this happened, then I would be happy. This is a glorified version of the desire/pleasure cycle, and is doomed to the same fate. Lasting happiness can only occur when there is a re-orientation, a stepping out of the desire/pleasure cycle entirely.

“All you want is to be happy. All your desires, whatever they may be, are of longing for happiness. Basically, you wish yourself well. Desire by itself is not wrong. It is life itself, the urge to grow in knowledge and experience. It is the choices you make that are wrong. To imagine that some little thing – food, sex, power, fame – will make you happy is to deceive yourself. Only something as vast and deep as your real Self can make you truly and lastingly happy.” (Nisargadatta Maharaj)

At some point in each of our lives we have all had the experience of being happy. It may be hard to describe, but we all somewhere, somehow know the experience, however fleeting, however rare. Otherwise we wouldn’t know what it was like, and we wouldn’t be striving for it. Remember a time when you were truly happy. It could have been a
period of your life, years maybe: or it could have been just a passing moment when you felt the surge, the bliss, the peace, of real happiness. At that moment, whatever else happiness might have felt like, wasn’t there a part of it, a component of that experience of being happy, that felt like, “This is perfect. Nothing has to be any different. Everything is just right, just the way it is.”

This is an essential component of the experience of happiness, and it is what we only catch a glimpse of in the momentary pleasure of a satisfied desire, before that satisfaction turns to desire again; the experience that nothing has to be changed, nothing has to be different. This, here, now, is perfect. How many times, when someone experiences happiness, do they spontaneously declare, “Oh, this is perfect.” Even the popular phrase, “This is as good as it gets,” implies that nothing need be added, nothing need be different than this, now.

This is where the subject of happiness becomes very simple, a matter not of acquiring anything new but simply of letting drop the barrier we constantly erect with the pursuit. If there can be a simple turning it around; a coming at it the other way, an opting out of the desire/pleasure cycle, with a simple knowing that this is perfect, now, here, the way things are, and nothing has to be any different: if there can be more than just saying that, more than just believing it, but truly knowing it in the heart; then, simply, there is happiness.

When this occurs, there is a transformation of life from an experience of misery or irritation or incompleteness or frustration to an experience of happiness. And it is found that this happiness is unshakable. It is not dependent on
anything being attained, or anything changing or being in any way different from how it is; it is also not shakable by the fear of something changing; because either way, it is the acceptance of what is.

The literal meaning of the Greek word metanoesis (which in the Christian Bible gets translated as 'conversion') is 'changing the mind.' The English language expression, 'I changed my mind' doesn't mean the same thing. It means, the thoughts changed; 'I did think this, but now I think something else.' Same mind, different thoughts. Metanoesis, transformation of mind, is different. The Sanskrit word is parauritti, and means the same: a turning over or a turning around in the deepest level of the heartmind.

"There is only a looking in the right direction, an orientation of mind. Parauritti, metanoesis, is, doubtless, just that. And no one does it, nor is anything done; it is pure doing." (Wei Wu Wei)

That is where happiness lies: in the re-orientation of mind which allows looking in the right direction; acceptance of what is. Your natural state.

Desires, then, still arise: they are part of the dream, part of the functioning of the body/mind. There is no need for desires themselves to cease as such. But since it is known that nothing need be any different from what is, the desires are not pursued. Pleasure, like pain, will happen from time to time. But since nothing need be any different, there is no attempt to either seek out or avoid these experiences. And so the desire is not taken on, not claimed or owned. It is simply there, experienced as part of the dream.
And through it all there is the constant sense of well being, this unshakable happiness, this deep knowing that all is well. This is perfect, this is just right; nothing need be any different from this, now.