

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley** ponders the pursuit of happiness.

**W**hat is happiness? Is it a peak experience of ecstasy, or more akin to a state of relaxed contentment and equanimity? Can it be consciously had? Or is it something that only occurs when we are not actively pursuing it? Or something we can only appreciate in retrospect?

## Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life

Karen Armstrong's book is a practical guide to leading a more compassionate life and thereby achieving a form of happiness both for oneself and for others. In the preface, she sets out the aims of the recently-founded Council of Conscience: to 'restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion'. This flies in the face of a rabidly self-centred capitalist world where the Four F's (feeding, fighting, fleeing and ... reproduction) are central. The rest of the book offers a practical guide to personal action which will achieve a greater degree of compassion. She argues that we cannot expect others to change in this direction unless we ourselves do so. The first step, *Learn about Compassion*, reviews the overwhelming agreement in all world religions and humanistic philosophies on the centrality of the

Golden Rule: 'Behave towards others as you would like them to behave towards you' (and its converse!). In the second step, *Look at your Own World*, we are encouraged to start by reviewing the world closest to us – ourselves, our families and our communities – and to seek out opportunities for compassion. The third step, *Compassion for Yourself*, makes the important point that we need to be kinder to ourselves if we are to be more compassionate to others. We need

we can thoughtlessly inflict? *Action*, the sixth step, offers practical advice about incorporating acts of kindness and consideration into our lives, and describes the benefits which accrue from this. The seventh step, *How Little We Know*, is a plea for scrutinising more carefully the mystery of our existence. Without the humility to admit our own ignorance, we will lack the capacity to feel for others. The eighth step, *How Should We Speak to One Another?*

Is happiness something that only occurs when we are not actively pursuing it?

to be aware of our own frailty and of our strengths, and Armstrong suggests a way of doing this by reflecting on 'the four immeasurable minds' of Buddhist thought, namely: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. The fourth step, *Empathy*, suggests ways of developing this quality – the ability to project oneself imaginatively into the shoes of another. The fifth, *Mindfulness*, is a plea to observe ourselves as we go about even the smallest activities of our daily lives. How can we maximise concern for others and minimise the hurtful words and acts

emphasises the need to develop forms of 'compassionate discourse' where we learn to listen and react in non-confrontational ways, even to views we strongly disagree with. The alternative is continual and escalating conflict. The ninth step, *Concern for Everybody*, suggests the need to move beyond our parochial concerns to a concern with global issues. *Knowledge*, the tenth step, urges us to find out more about issues we are involved with. All too often, our pronouncements are based on a profound ignorance of what we are talking about. The eleventh step,

*Recognition*, directs our attention to those moments of illumination, epiphanies, when we suddenly recognise an issue for what it really is, and then act positively on it. The twelfth and final step, *Love Your Enemies*, returns to the centrality of the Golden Rule. Hatred and war simply breed more of the same. Counter-intuitive it may be, but ultimately only peaceful action proves worthwhile. This is an important book, designed not simply to be read but to be acted upon.

## Happiness: Lessons from a New Science

Richard Layard's book comes at the happiness conundrum from a different direction. He documents and discusses the scientific, economic, sociological and philosophical bases for happiness. Layard is a neo-Benthamite economist who believes that government should be directed to achieving the greatest good for the greatest number. He acknowledges that happiness comes both from within and from without, though the bulk of his book emphasises what governments can do to promote happiness. Part One outlines the problem, namely why, despite huge growth in income and material goods, happiness has not increased (especially in the West). One prime reason is that we constantly compare what we have with what others have and are thereby dissatisfied: the envy factor. Another is that having more leads us to want even more: the greed factor. In Part Two, he looks at what can be done about this. His solutions are provocative, and many of them challenge the current economic credo. Among other things, he advocates raising taxes as a way to rein in the workaholic rat-racing which characterises much of our lives. And not everyone will share his views on the desirability of treating distress with drugs. His final chapter bears careful reading as it helpfully summarises in 'twelve truths' all the arguments he has advanced.

## The Meditations

Marcus Aurelius wrote his *Meditations* between 170 and 180 AD, and they have remained a touchstone for Stoic philosophy ever since. Arranged in 12 'books' (actually chapters) they put forward recommendations for living the 'good' life – not necessarily what we would understand by the 'happy' life. They are to the modern eye somewhat

rambling and repetitious, yet among the archaic language there are nuggets of concise wisdom and many pithy quotes, some of which are included below. Essentially, the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius is a simple one:

- Life is short; live it well: *'No longer talk about the kind of man that a good man ought to be, but be such.'*
- Nothing lasts for ever; change (and loss) is in the nature of things: *'The perfection of moral character consists in ... passing every day as (if it were) the last ...'* *'Thou art a little soul bearing about a corpse ...'*
- Suffering and pain are natural, so get used to the idea: *'... nature brings nothing which may not be borne by thee.'* *'Nothing happens to any man which he is not formed by nature to bear.'*
- Be content with what you have and appreciate it for what it is: *'Think not so much of what thou hast not as of what thou hast ... of the things thou hast select the best, and then reflect how eagerly they would have been sought, if thou hadst them not.'*
- Be kind to others, but do not expect praise or reward for it: *'... a man, when he has done a good act, does not call out for others to come and see, but he goes on to another act ...'*
- Do not resent malicious acts towards you; it changes nothing: *'When thou art offended with any man's shameless conduct ... ask thyself, Is it possible that shameless men should not be in the world? It is not possible. Do not then require what is not possible.'*
- Avoid show; enjoy simplicity: *'... outward show is a wonderful perverter of the reason ...'*
- Pay no heed to praise (flattery) or blame (carping critics).
- There is an order in the universe; everything is therefore connected. Whatever acts we perform will, therefore, affect others.

*The Meditations* offer a somewhat austere recipe for the way to live the good life, but there are many resonances with the other books reviewed here. What Marcus Aurelius sees as the ideal is not so much 'happiness' but equanimity and self-respect.

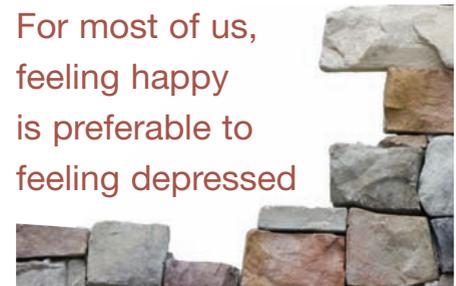


There are of course plenty of other books on issues related to happiness. One I would have reviewed if space had permitted is Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*, which will already be familiar to many readers. Though not specifically directed towards achieving happiness, it explores a form of intelligence without which happiness of any description would be unachievable.

Novelist Margaret Drabble recently remarked, *'... being happy isn't all there is in life'* – but, for most of us, feeling happy (however we define that elusive state) is preferable to feeling depressed. And certainly for teachers, being reasonably happy seems central to their ability to cope with the multiple demands of the job. Yet it would appear to be increasingly difficult for people to find happiness, in a world characterised on the one hand by galloping greed and on the other by desperate need, both of which give rise to unprecedented violence.

We cannot learn happiness from a book, but these titles at least help point us in the right direction! 

For most of us,  
feeling happy  
is preferable to  
feeling depressed

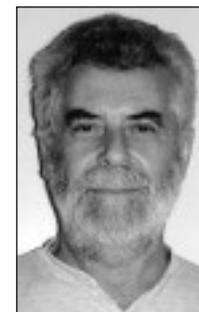


Antoninus, M A *The Meditations* Collins 1950

Armstrong, K *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* The Bodley Head 2011

Goleman, D *Emotional Intelligence* Bloomsbury 1996

Layard, R *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* Penguin 2005



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

yelamoo@yahoo.co.uk