

## **HAPPINESS and ITS CAUSES : Third Annual Conference**

The Vajrayana Institute in association with Terrapin

Sydney 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> May 2007

This was a huge conference held in the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre. Over 3000 delegates attended over the two days. I didn't go to the workshops before or after. It wasn't cheap and these were an additional expense! I went with much curiosity and some trepidation. I was concerned that it would be focused on individual happiness rather than our connectedness with each other. I did know, however that there were some inspiring speakers whose values and approaches I shared.

The two days were well run. We didn't have to choose which of many competing seminars to attend as the entire conference was presented lecture style in the main theatre. Large videos either side of the main stage ensured everyone had a good, close up view of the speakers. Each presentation was between 30 and 40 minutes and interspersed with panel discussions. Scientists across the world were mixed in with Australian superstars telling their stories and of course the presence of the Dalai Lama was the primary incentive for many. The audience was an interesting mix. I spoke with academics, teachers, social workers, people with relationship problems, people who were unwell, psychologists, Buddhists and medics all of varying ages and backgrounds.

It isn't possible to give an outline of everything so I will provide some 'sound bites' which I found the most interesting and worthwhile in relation to our own principles and aims in Wellbeing Australia.

The deliberate cultivation of kindness leads to greater happiness. Howard Cutler cited an experiment in which those who practiced random acts of kindness one day a week increased their feelings of wellbeing and happiness significantly after five weeks. Compassion also has health benefits – the antibodies that fight infection are higher in those who feel compassion for others.

Dr Corey Keyes (co-editor of a book entitled *"Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well Lived"* published in 2003 by the American Psychological Association) talked about different ways of experiencing happiness. Hedonia – the cultivation of pleasure and feeling good and Eudaimonia which is functioning to a standard of excellence. Eudaimonic happiness contributes to social integration and a sense of meaning in life. Keyes says we need both to flourish. The opposite of flourishing is languishing and this leads to both social and personal ills. His research estimates that only 21% of American adults are flourishing.

Ross Gittens came up with the fascinating fact that, despite what we are continually told, rich people are only a bit happier than poorer people. An income of less \$15,000 a year contributes to lack of wellbeing but income above that level does not lead to more lasting happiness. He spoke of the hedonic treadmill in which we are always running to get more (especially more than other people) but that the feeling of pleasure gained is

transitory. ‘The stuff we desire does not mean we enjoy it – people neglect to do the things they like because they are too busy chasing the things they desire.’ The Dalai Lama echoed Ross Gittens when he said that rich people have the same size stomach as anyone else, the same number of fingers for jewellery. Human needs are the same whoever you are. Everything else is a delusion.

Amanda Gordon spoke about meaning, rather than success leading to happiness. She says happiness takes work – it takes thought about what really matters and is effective in bringing us an authentic sense of wellbeing. She spoke about relationships as one of the main meaningful aspects of our lives and how early attachment is crucial. If we don’t get unconditional love from a parent we spend our lives looking for it in other relationships. This is unrealistic and can leave adults feeling anxious, angry and sad

Dr Barbara Pocock Spoke about the work life balance. She said that happiness is often said to be made up of someone to love, something to do and something to look forward to. Her view was that it is not just anything to do and not under just any circumstances. Her concern was that family and social connections are poor forces compared to increasing work demands. She expressed concern that 36.9 Australians do overtime but only one in two get paid, that many workers spend more time in their cars getting to and from work than they spend with their families, that there is an increasing negative impact on the highly developed ethic of work on our social fabric and family life. She comments that this work ethic is not balanced by an ethic of care for our children.

The Dalai Lama spoke of the human mind and its sophistication – the diversity of emotions we can experience, the power of imagination, the extent and influence of our memory. He also spoke of how these human advantages can also be problematic. What is a glittery stone to an animal is a diamond to a human being – with all the connotations that such a mental construction can bring. His Holiness said that we have become focused on material values and need to reconsider how we develop internal values. He expressed a concern about how our negative emotions such as fear, anxiety and hatred are open to manipulation. He asked us to consider what it means to be a person on this earth and about seeing life in terms of responsibility and reciprocity.

Clive Hamilton pointed out that the marketing industry aims at making us unhappy so that we buy things which offer the false promise of happiness. In cultivating materialism we are cultivating a problem. He echoed the Dalai Lama in saying that you are unlikely to achieve happiness if you chase it. We no longer look to religion for answers but research is coming up with the same virtues that lead to a life well lived – gratitude, hope, altruism and not worshipping false gods.

Stephanie Dowrick outlined the practice of forgiveness and what it can do for our own wellbeing. She says that forgiveness is a gift firstly to the self “You don’t have sorrow on your pillow, you don’t have hate for breakfast, you don’t have revenge for lunch’ The process of forgiveness unshackles you from moments of betrayal or loss. It does not trivialise a wrong or say that it is forgotten or that everything is now OK but it means you are not living your life in collusion with someone who has hurt you. “It is a delusion that

my suffering will be relieved if you suffer” By wishing harm on others we are diminishing ourselves and adding to the sum total of human suffering. Dowrick says that forgiveness is more than a good idea, it is transformative.

Richard Eckersley author of *Well and Good, Morality, meaning and happiness*. (Text publishing 2004) spoke of the social and political dimensions of happiness. He said that “...not only are we destroying our bodies by the stresses of life today but we are also tearing our souls and spirits to shreds.’ He says that the empowerment of the individual and excessive materialism has led to decreased concern about others and increased narcissism. Eckersley says that from the mid 1970s we have seen financial success overtake all other meaning in life and that this is damaging collective wellbeing and the mental health of many. We need a renewal of what he terms ‘deep democracy’. He went on to talk about the links between happiness and goodness,. Anger at injustice is good unhappiness and tells us that ethics matters. Sometimes we need our own happiness to be on hold for the benefit of others happiness – such as a mother caring for her baby in the middle of the night.

The next Happiness and its Causes conference is next May 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> 2008 You can register by going to this weblink

<http://www.happinessanditscauses.com.au/>

Sue Roffey 2007