

**THE  
SUBTLE  
ART OF  
NOT  
GIVING  
A F<sup>!</sup>CK**

*New York  
Times  
Bestseller*

**A COUNTERINTUITIVE APPROACH  
TO LIVING A GOOD LIFE**

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## Happiness Is a Problem

About twenty-five hundred years ago, in the Himalayan foothills of present-day Nepal, there lived in a great palace a king who was going to have a son. For this son the king had a particularly grand idea: he would make the child's life perfect. The child would never know a moment of suffering—every need, every desire, would be accounted for at all times.

The king built high walls around the palace that prevented the prince from knowing the outside world. He spoiled the child, lavishing him with food and gifts, surrounding him with servants who catered to his every whim. And just as planned, the child grew up ignorant of the routine cruelties of human existence.

All of the prince's childhood went on like this. But despite the endless luxury and opulence, the prince became

kind of a pissed-off young man. Soon, every experience felt empty and valueless. The problem was that no matter what his father gave him, it never seemed enough, never *meant* anything.

So late one night, the prince snuck out of the palace to see what was beyond its walls. He had a servant drive him through the local village, and what he saw horrified him.

For the first time in his life, the prince saw human suffering. He saw sick people, old people, homeless people, people in pain, even people dying.

The prince returned to the palace and found himself in a sort of existential crisis. Not knowing how to process what he'd seen, he got all emo about everything and complained a lot. And, as is so typical of young men, the prince ended up blaming his father for the very things his father had tried to do for him. It was the riches, the prince thought, that had made him so miserable, that had made life seem so meaningless. He decided to run away.

But the prince was more like his father than he knew. He had grand ideas too. He wouldn't just run away; he would give up his royalty, his family, and all of his possessions and live in the streets, sleeping in dirt like an animal. There he would starve himself, torture himself, and beg for scraps of food from strangers for the rest of his life.

The next night, the prince snuck out of the palace again, this time never to return. For years he lived as a bum, a discarded and forgotten remnant of society, the dog shit caked to the bottom of the social totem pole. And as planned, the prince suffered greatly. He suffered through disease, hunger,

pain, loneliness, and decay. He confronted the brink of death itself, often limited to eating a single nut each day.

A few years went by. Then a few more. And then . . . nothing happened. The prince began to notice that this life of suffering wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. It wasn't bringing him the insight he had desired. It wasn't revealing any deeper mystery of the world or its ultimate purpose.

In fact, the prince came to know what the rest of us have always kind of known: that suffering totally sucks. And it's not necessarily that meaningful either. As with being rich, there is no value in suffering when it's done without purpose. And soon the prince came to the conclusion that his grand idea, like his father's, was in fact a fucking terrible idea and he should probably go do something else instead.

Totally confused, the prince cleaned himself up and went and found a big tree near a river. He decided that he would sit under that tree and not get up until he came up with another grand idea.

As the legend goes, the confused prince sat under that tree for forty-nine days. We won't delve into the biological viability of sitting in the same spot for forty-nine days, but let's just say that in that time the prince came to a number of profound realizations.

One of those realizations was this: that life itself is a form of suffering. The rich suffer because of their riches. The poor suffer because of their poverty. People without a family suffer because they have no family. People with a family suffer because of their family. People who pursue worldly pleasures suffer because of their worldly pleasures.

People who abstain from worldly pleasures suffer because of their abstention.

This isn't to say that all suffering is equal. Some suffering is certainly more painful than other suffering. But we all must suffer nonetheless.

Years later, the prince would build his own philosophy and share it with the world, and this would be its first and central tenet: that pain and loss are inevitable and we should let go of trying to resist them. The prince would later become known as the Buddha. And in case you haven't heard of him, he was kind of a big deal.

There is a premise that underlies a lot of our assumptions and beliefs. The premise is that happiness is algorithmic, that it can be worked for and earned and achieved as if it were getting accepted to law school or building a really complicated Lego set. If I achieve X, then I can be happy. If I look like Y, then I can be happy. If I can be with a person like Z, then I can be happy.

This premise, though, *is the problem*. Happiness is not a solvable equation. Dissatisfaction and unease are inherent parts of human nature and, as we'll see, necessary components to creating consistent happiness. The Buddha argued this from a theological and philosophical perspective. I will make the same argument in this chapter, but I will make it from a biological perspective, and with pandas.

### **The Misadventures of Disappointment Panda**

If I could invent a superhero, I would invent one called Disappointment Panda. He'd wear a cheesy eye mask and

a shirt (with a giant capital T on it) that was way too small for his big panda belly, and his superpower would be to tell people harsh truths about themselves that they needed to hear but didn't want to accept.

He would go door-to-door like a Bible salesman and ring doorbells and say things like, "Sure, making a lot of money makes you feel good, but it won't make your kids love you," or "If you have to ask yourself if you trust your wife, then you probably don't," or "What you consider 'friendship' is really just your constant attempts to impress people." Then he'd tell the homeowner to have a nice day and saunter on down to the next house.

It would be awesome. And sick. And sad. And uplifting. And necessary. After all, the greatest truths in life are usually the most unpleasant to hear.

Disappointment Panda would be the hero that none of us would want but all of us would need. He'd be the proverbial vegetables to our mental diet of junk food. He'd make our lives better despite making us feel worse. He'd make us stronger by tearing us down, brighten our future by showing us the darkness. Listening to him would be like watching a movie where the hero dies in the end: you love it even more despite making you feel horrible, because it feels real.

So while we're here, allow me to put on my Disappointment Panda mask and drop another unpleasant truth on you:

We suffer for the simple reason that suffering is biologically useful. It is nature's preferred agent for inspiring change. We have evolved to always live with a certain degree

of dissatisfaction and insecurity, because it's the mildly dissatisfied and insecure creature that's going to do the most work to innovate and survive. We are wired to become dissatisfied with whatever we have and satisfied by only what we do not have. This constant dissatisfaction has kept our species fighting and striving, building and conquering. So no—our own pain and misery aren't a bug of human evolution; they're a feature.

Pain, in all of its forms, is our body's most effective means of spurring action. Take something as simple as stubbing your toe. If you're like me, when you stub your toe you scream enough four-letter words to make Pope Francis cry. You also probably blame some poor inanimate object for your suffering. "Stupid table," you say. Or maybe you even go so far as to question your entire interior design philosophy based on your throbbing foot: "What kind of idiot puts a table there anyway? Seriously?"

But I digress. That horrible stubbed-toe-induced pain, the one you and I and the pope hate so much, exists for an important reason. Physical pain is a product of our nervous system, a feedback mechanism to give us a sense of our own physical proportions—where we can and cannot move and what we can and cannot touch. When we exceed those limits, our nervous system duly punishes us to make sure that we pay attention and never do it again.

And this pain, as much as we hate it, *is* useful. Pain is what teaches us what to pay attention to when we're young or careless. It helps show us what's good for us versus what's bad for us. It helps us understand and adhere to our own

limitations. It teaches us to not fuck around near hot stoves or stick metal objects into electrical sockets. Therefore, it's not always beneficial to avoid pain and seek pleasure, since pain can, at times, be life-or-death important to our well-being.

But pain is not merely physical. As anyone who has had to sit through the first *Star Wars* prequel can tell you, we humans are capable of experiencing acute psychological pain as well. In fact, research has found that our brains don't register much difference between physical pain and psychological pain. So when I tell you that my first girlfriend cheating on me and leaving me felt like having an ice pick slowly inserted into the center of my heart, that's because, well, it hurt so much I might as well have had an ice pick slowly inserted into the center of my heart.

Like physical pain, our psychological pain is an indication of something out of equilibrium, some limitation that has been exceeded. And like our physical pain, our psychological pain is not necessarily always bad or even undesirable. In some cases, experiencing emotional or psychological pain can be healthy or necessary. Just like stubbing our toe teaches us to walk into fewer tables, the emotional pain of rejection or failure teaches us how to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

And this is what's so dangerous about a society that coddles itself more and more from the inevitable discomforts of life: we lose the benefits of experiencing healthy doses of pain, a loss that disconnects us from the reality of the world around us.

You may salivate at the thought of a problem-free life full of everlasting happiness and eternal compassion, but back here on earth the problems never cease. Seriously, problems don't end. Disappointment Panda just dropped by. We had margaritas, and he told me all about it: problems never fucking go away, he said—they just improve. Warren Buffett's got money problems; the drunk hobo down at Kwik-E Mart's got money problems. Buffett's just got *better* money problems than the hobo. All of life is like this.

"Life is essentially an endless series of problems, Mark," the panda told me. He sipped his drink and adjusted the little pink umbrella. "The solution to one problem is merely the creation of the next one."

A moment passed, and then I wondered where the fuck the talking panda came from. And while we're at it, who made these margaritas?

"Don't hope for a life without problems," the panda said. "There's no such thing. Instead, hope for a life full of good problems."

And with that, he set his glass down, adjusted his sombrero, and sauntered off into the sunset.

### **Happiness Comes from Solving Problems**

Problems are a constant in life. When you solve your health problem by buying a gym membership, you create new problems, like having to get up early to get to the gym on time, sweating like a meth-head for thirty minutes on an elliptical, and then getting showered and changed for work so you don't stink up the whole office. When you solve your

problem of not spending enough time with your partner by designating Wednesday night "date night," you generate new problems, such as figuring out what to do every Wednesday that you both won't hate, making sure you have enough money for nice dinners, rediscovering the chemistry and spark you two feel you've lost, and unraveling the logistics of fucking in a small bathtub filled with too many bubbles.

Problems never stop; they merely get exchanged and/or upgraded.

Happiness comes from solving problems. The keyword here is "solving." If you're avoiding your problems or feel like you don't have any problems, then you're going to make yourself miserable. If you feel like you have problems that you can't solve, you will likewise make yourself miserable. The secret sauce is in the *solving* of the problems, not in not having problems in the first place.

To be happy we need something to solve. Happiness is therefore a form of action; it's an activity, not something that is passively bestowed upon you, not something that you magically discover in a top-ten article on the Huffington Post or from any specific guru or teacher. It doesn't magically appear when you finally make enough money to add on that extra room to the house. You don't find it waiting for you in a place, an idea, a job—or even a book, for that matter.

Happiness is a constant work-in-progress, because solving problems is a constant work-in-progress—the solutions to today's problems will lay the foundation for tomorrow's

problems, and so on. True happiness occurs only when you find the problems you enjoy having and enjoy solving.

Sometimes those problems are simple: eating good food, traveling to some new place, winning at the new video game you just bought. Other times those problems are abstract and complicated: fixing your relationship with your mother, finding a career you can feel good about, developing better friendships.

Whatever your problems are, the concept is the same: solve problems; be happy. Unfortunately, for many people, life doesn't feel that simple. That's because they fuck things up in at least one of two ways:

1. *Denial.* Some people deny that their problems exist in the first place. And because they deny reality, they must constantly delude or distract themselves from reality. This may make them feel good in the short term, but it leads to a life of insecurity, neuroticism, and emotional repression.
2. *Victim Mentality.* Some choose to believe that there is nothing they can do to solve their problems, even when they in fact could. Victims seek to blame others for their problems or blame outside circumstances. This may make them feel better in the short term, but it leads to a life of anger, helplessness, and despair.

People deny and blame others for their problems for the simple reason that it's easy and feels good, while solving problems is hard and often feels bad. Forms of blame and

denial give us a quick high. They are a way to temporarily escape our problems, and that escape can provide us a quick rush that makes us feel better.

Highs come in many forms. Whether it's a substance like alcohol, the moral righteousness that comes from blaming others, or the thrill of some new risky adventure, highs are shallow and unproductive ways to go about one's life. Much of the self-help world is predicated on peddling highs to people rather than solving legitimate problems. Many self-help gurus teach you new forms of denial and pump you up with exercises that feel good in the short term, while ignoring the underlying issue. Remember, nobody who is actually happy has to stand in front of a mirror and tell himself that he's happy.

Highs also generate addiction. The more you rely on them to feel better about your underlying problems, the more you will seek them out. In this sense, almost anything can become addictive, depending on the motivation behind using it. We all have our chosen methods to numb the pain of our problems, and in moderate doses there is nothing wrong with this. But the longer we avoid and the longer we numb, the more painful it will be when we finally do confront our issues.

### **Emotions Are Overrated**

Emotions evolved for one specific purpose: to help us live and reproduce a little bit better. That's it. They're feedback mechanisms telling us that something is either likely right or likely wrong for us—nothing more, nothing less.

Much as the pain of touching a hot stove teaches you not to touch it again, the sadness of being alone teaches you not to do the things that made you feel so alone again. Emotions are simply biological signals designed to nudge you in the direction of beneficial change.

Look, I don't mean to make light of your midlife crisis or the fact that your drunk dad stole your bike when you were eight years old and you still haven't gotten over it, but when it comes down to it, if you feel crappy it's because your brain is telling you that there's a problem that's unaddressed or unresolved. In other words, negative emotions are a *call to action*. When you feel them, it's because you're supposed to *do something*. Positive emotions, on the other hand, are rewards for taking the proper action. When you feel them, life seems simple and there is nothing else to do but enjoy it. Then, like everything else, the positive emotions go away, because more problems inevitably emerge.

Emotions are part of the equation of our lives, but not the *entire* equation. Just because something feels good doesn't mean it *is* good. Just because something feels bad doesn't mean it *is* bad. Emotions are merely signposts, *suggestions* that our neurobiology gives us, not commandments. Therefore, we shouldn't always trust our own emotions. In fact, I believe we should make a habit of questioning them.

Many people are taught to repress their emotions for various personal, social, or cultural reasons—particularly negative emotions. Sadly, to deny one's negative emotions is to deny many of the feedback mechanisms that help a person solve problems. As a result, many of these repressed

individuals struggle to deal with problems throughout their lives. And if they can't solve problems, then they can't be happy. Remember, pain serves a purpose.

But then there are those people who overidentify with their emotions. Everything is justified for no other reason than they *felt* it. "Oh, I broke your windshield, but I was *really* mad; I couldn't help it." Or "I dropped out of school and moved to Alaska just because it *felt* right." Decision-making based on emotional intuition, without the aid of reason to keep it in line, pretty much always sucks. You know who bases their entire lives on their emotions? Three-year-old kids. And dogs. You know what else three-year-olds and dogs do? Shit on the carpet.

An obsession and overinvestment in emotion fails us for the simple reason that emotions never last. Whatever makes us happy today will no longer make us happy tomorrow, because our biology always needs something more. A fixation on happiness inevitably amounts to a never-ending pursuit of "something else"—a new house, a new relationship, another child, another pay raise. And despite all of our sweat and strain, we end up feeling eerily similar to how we started: inadequate.

Psychologists sometimes refer to this concept as the "hedonic treadmill": the idea that we're always working hard to change our life situation, but we actually never feel very different.

This is why our problems are recursive and unavoidable. The person you marry is the person you fight with. The house you buy is the house you repair. The dream job



you take is the job you stress over. Everything comes with an inherent sacrifice—whatever makes us feel good will also inevitably make us feel bad. What we gain is also what we lose. What creates our positive experiences will define our negative experiences.

This is a difficult pill to swallow. We *like* the idea that there's some form of ultimate happiness that can be attained. We *like* the idea that we can alleviate all of our suffering permanently. We *like* the idea that we can feel fulfilled and satisfied with our lives forever.

But we cannot.

### Choose Your Struggle

If I ask you, "What do you want out of life?" and you say something like, "I want to be happy and have a great family and a job I like," your response is so common and expected that it doesn't really mean anything.

Everybody enjoys what feels good. Everyone wants to live a carefree, happy, and easy life, to fall in love and have amazing sex and relationships, to look perfect and make money and be popular and well-respected and admired and a total baller to the point that people part like the Red Sea when they walk into the room.

*Everybody* wants that. It's easy to want that.

A more interesting question, a question that most people never consider, is, "What *pain* do you want in your life? What are you willing to struggle for?" Because that seems to be a greater determinant of how our lives turn out.

For example, most people want to get the corner office and make a boatload of money—but not many people want to suffer through sixty-hour workweeks, long commutes, obnoxious paperwork, and arbitrary corporate hierarchies to escape the confines of an infinite cubicle hell.

Most people want to have great sex and an awesome relationship, but not everyone is willing to go through the tough conversations, the awkward silences, the hurt feelings, and the emotional psychodrama to get there. And so they settle. They settle and wonder, "What if?" for years and years, until the question morphs from "What if?" into "What else?" And when the lawyers go home and the alimony check is in the mail, they say, "What for?" If not for their lowered standards and expectations twenty years prior, then what for?

Because happiness requires struggle. It grows from problems. Joy doesn't just sprout out of the ground like daisies and rainbows. Real, serious, lifelong fulfillment and meaning have to be earned through the choosing and managing of our struggles. Whether you suffer from anxiety or loneliness or obsessive-compulsive disorder or a dickhead boss who ruins half of your waking hours every day, the solution lies in the acceptance and active engagement of that negative experience—not the avoidance of it, not the salvation from it.

People want an amazing physique. But you don't end up with one unless you legitimately appreciate the pain and physical stress that come with living inside a gym for

hour upon hour, unless you love calculating and calibrating the food you eat, planning your life out in tiny plate-sized portions.

People want to start their own business. But you don't end up a successful entrepreneur unless you find a way to appreciate the risk, the uncertainty, the repeated failures, the insane hours devoted to something that may earn absolutely nothing.

People want a partner, a spouse. But you don't end up attracting someone amazing without appreciating the emotional turbulence that comes with weathering rejections, building the sexual tension that never gets released, and staring blankly at a phone that never rings. It's part of the game of love. You can't win if you don't play.

What determines your success isn't, "What do you want to enjoy?" The relevant question is, "What pain do you want to sustain?" The path to happiness is a path full of shit-heaps and shame.

You have to choose something. You can't have a pain-free life. It can't all be roses and unicorns all the time. Pleasure is the easy question. And pretty much all of us have a similar answer.

The more interesting question is the pain. What is the pain that you want to sustain? That's the hard question that matters, the question that will actually get you somewhere. It's the question that can change a perspective, a life. It's what makes me, me, and you, you. It's what defines us and separates us and ultimately brings us together.

For most of my adolescence and young adulthood, I

fantasized about being a musician—a rock star, in particular. Any badass guitar song I heard, I would always close my eyes and envision myself up on stage, playing it to the screams of the crowd, people absolutely losing their minds to my sweet finger-noodling glory. This fantasy could keep me occupied for hours on end. For me, it was never a question of *if* I'd ever be up playing in front of screaming crowds, but *when*. I had it all planned out. I was simply biding my time before I could invest the proper amount of energy and effort into getting out there and making my mark. First I needed to finish school. Then I needed to make some extra money to buy gear. Then I needed to find enough free time to practice. Then I had to network and plan my first project. Then . . . and then nothing.

Despite my fantasizing about this for over half my lifetime, the reality never came to fruition. And it took me a long time and a lot of struggle to finally figure out why: *I didn't actually want it.*

I was in love with the result—the image of me on stage, people cheering, me rocking out, pouring my heart into what I was playing—but I wasn't in love with the process. And because of that, I failed at it. Repeatedly. Hell, I didn't even try hard enough to fail at it. I hardly tried at all. The daily drudgery of practicing, the logistics of finding a group and rehearsing, the pain of finding gigs and actually getting people to show up and give a shit, the broken strings, the blown tube amp, hauling forty pounds of gear to and from rehearsals with no car. It's a mountain of a dream and a mile-high climb to the top. And what it took me a long time

to discover is that I didn't like to climb much. I just liked to imagine the summit.

The common cultural narratives would tell me that I somehow failed myself, that I'm a quitter or a loser, that I just didn't "have it," that I gave up on my dream and that maybe I let myself succumb to the pressures of society.

But the truth is far less interesting than any of these explanations. The truth is, I thought I wanted something, but it turns out I didn't. End of story.

I wanted the reward and not the struggle. I wanted the result and not the process. I was in love with not the fight but only the victory.

And life doesn't work that way.

Who you are is defined by what you're willing to struggle for. People who *enjoy* the struggles of a gym are the ones who run triathlons and have chiseled abs and can bench-press a small house. People who *enjoy* long workweeks and the politics of the corporate ladder are the ones who fly to the top of it. People who *enjoy* the stresses and uncertainties of the starving artist lifestyle are ultimately the ones who live it and make it.

This is not about willpower or grit. This is not another admonishment of "no pain, no gain." This is the most simple and basic component of life: our struggles determine our successes. Our problems birth our happiness, along with slightly better, slightly upgraded problems.

See: it's a never-ending upward spiral. And if you think at any point you're allowed to stop climbing, I'm afraid you're missing the point. Because the joy is in the climb itself.