

I am happy. No, really. I am.

Why do I so often start my blog posts with a personal confession? I guess I want to illustrate that this is a living practice for me. Anyway. **I was not always a happy person.** In fact, I was once actively UNhappy. It was active in that I was annoyed by those who *were* happy. A moment that stands out to me is when I went to a therapist for help with my oft-debilitating anxiety and depression. He was attractive, put together, smiley, friendly, and he had this coffee mug that was always affixed to his hand that read, in big letters, ***LIFE IS GOOD.*** That mug was the undoing of our time together. I sat and stared at it as I rambled on about how unhappy I was, how clearly NOT GOOD my life currently was, his big toothy smile nodding and bobbing sympathetically. *He doesn't get it.* One channel of my brain was in therapy with him, seeking help authentically. One channel was repeating, as if on a loop. *It should say FOR YOU. Life is good FOR YOU. Not for me.* I had destructive thoughts about that mug. My relationship with Dr. Smiley ended soon after. I pretended to be cured. *All that positive thinking really did help!*

When I first started practicing yoga, I entered a phase where I *pretended* to be happy all the time. I wrangled gratitude out of myself. I professed to not care about postures while secretly berating myself for not getting into certain postures. I sat in meditation and became better and distracting and entertaining myself and slapping my thoughts over the head. As my teacher says, "A jerk can walk into a meditation hall and become a more focused jerk." I did this for a while, out of a genuine lack of understanding of how to be nice to myself. I was learning.

But I kept practicing. I kept up with my daily meditation practice. I kept learning from people who really "walk the walk." I surrounded myself with those who inspire me and limited time with those who drain me. I kept going to therapy (not with Dr. Smiley; I have my limits). Years later, I was being introduced by a friend and mentor to a couple of fellow yogis. As part of summarizing who I am, she said, "You can tell Serena really *loves life*." I opened my mouth to correct her, some old part of me objecting reflexively. But then I stopped. It's true. **The realization nearly knocked me over.** I do. I really, really do enjoy life. No, it's not always perfect. Yes, there is pain and disappointment. Sure, I still struggle with my demons. But I am happy to be alive to it all. I'm happy to be alive. I love and enjoy life. LIFE IS GOOD! THAT MUG HAS COME TRUE?! What? Rewind, please.



The simple answer of how I became really, truly happy is a combination of the brilliant, ancient science of yoga and modern advances in psychological care and well-being. I believe both matter. I'm a yoga teacher, so I'll address the former. Here are three things yoga taught me about how to be happy. Really happy.

1. Denying emotions makes me unhappy. Allowing emotions to flow makes me happier in the long run. I remember very well when certain emotions were off-limits. The truth is, bottling up my emotions, outlawing certain emotions, berating myself for certain emotions... it made me really, really unhappy. As I learned to be in the present moment with what arises, authentically and without judgement, I learned to tolerate the "slings and arrows" life throws out constantly. As I learned to flow with my breath, I learned that feelings, sensations, and emotions are constantly changing and evolving. These feelings can become hardened in the body ([brilliant clip on how that happens](#)) or they can be allowed to move with the breath. Simplest thing in the world, but it takes practice. "Let everything happen to you. Beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final." Yoga taught me how to do this.

2. It is really, really (really!) hard to be happy when someone is mean to you all the time. Someone used to be really, really mean to me. All the time. Day and night. You know who. Me. Oof did I berate myself. I've never been as mean to anyone as I was to myself nearly constantly. In yoga, the VERY first instruction we are given is *ahimsa*. Be nice. Don't do harm. This starts with oneself. As I learned through my practice to listen to the "tone of voice of the inner monologue" (pretty sure that's my teacher Gary Kraftsow's phrase), I realized how unkind I was being in my thoughts. As I started to practice *ahimsa*, I got happier. But this took serious practice. A lot of practice.

3. External circumstances matter less than you think they do. Want to have your mind blown in 20 minutes? Watch this video where Harvard-scientist [Dan Gilbert explains what really makes us happy](#). I know, I know. You're busy. I'm here for you. The gist is that it doesn't really matter what happens TO YOU. Gilbert studied two groups of people. Those who won the lottery (event A) and those who lost the use of their legs (event B). After a year, the event had *no bearing* on an individual's happiness. Yogis have known this for thousands of years, and this is why the practices of *santosha* (contentment) and gratitude are so much a part of the yoga practice. Yoga taught me that the bad always comes with a little good. Yoga taught me that the most challenging people and situations are my greatest teachers. Yoga philosophy also consistently makes a distinction between ***pain and suffering***. Pain is inevitable if you plan to live life. It will come up. Suffering is compounding pain by resisting it, denying it, telling stories about it, and so forth ([more on that from Pema Chodron here](#)). Pain cannot be avoided, it is part of the human experience. Suffering can be avoided. It takes practice.