



Choose to be Happy

AN INTERVIEW WITH
SWAMI CHETANANANDA
BY MARY NURRIESTEARNS

Swami Chetanananda's philosophical reflections grow out of years of study, teaching, practice, and experience. Chetanananda is abbot of the Nityananda Institute, a spiritual community based in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of "The Breath of God," "The Logic of Love," "Songs from the Center of the Well," "Dynamic Stillness," and "Choose to be Happy." For more information about Swami Chetanananda or his books call Rudra Press at (800)876-7798.

In his wonderful book, "Choose to be Happy", Swami Chetanananda shows us how to be happy in this age of anxiety. While it is impossible to control everything that happens, we have choice in how we respond and the spirit in which we choose to live. Happiness is not an external condition. It is a choice, and the way of happiness is to focus our efforts where the source of happiness resides, inside of ourselves.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION: You say that connecting to the part of us that is truly alive is how we choose to be happy, and you refer to that truly alive part as a still point deep within. What do you mean by still point?

SWAMI CHETANANANDA: First of all, it's experiential. It's a place that you can actually go to and be in. The still point is the place where all experience, subjective and objective, merge into one infinite dynamic stillness. It is the place from which all cognition, perception, and experience unfold themselves. By its very nature, it is completely competent. It is pure potential. You find that place by being quiet.

Is the still point the place where, no matter what, we are happy?

Yes, because it's beyond every kind of experience. It's beyond having and not having, and it's beyond here and there. It is innately full of joy. You've experienced walking down the street, when for no good reason, you begin whistling or humming. The intrinsic joy that you experienced in that moment is ever present within you. For whatever reason, it pops out on its own once in a while. It's possible to live in that place all the time, even if you have a job, a car payment, and a mortgage. Further, it's my contention that if you don't live from that place, the job, the car payment, and the mortgage are terminal.

To be happy we have to accept that we have no control over most of what happens to us. You say that control is the greatest illusion of all. What then do we focus our attention on?

On yourself basically. There are three things that you need to do. First of all, train yourself to be open and then secondly, in that state of openness, be aware of the flow, of the interchange. From this awareness of flow, become aware of the interconnectedness of all of life and realize that the source of interconnectedness is dynamic stillness, that still place. Focus on openness, flow, and stillness. Every bit of it depends on you and not on anything else.

The answers you seek do not lie in the past; they lie precisely in the flow which is inside you now. The answers lie, as always, within you, at this moment, just as you are. The answers are not in the future; they're not in the past: they're here, now. And the moment you choose to embrace and connect to them, to your Self, and live from there, your future is transformed, your past, finished.

Spiritual practice comes down to something very simple: relax and be happy. Love your life. Love the life you have right now, not the life you hope to have or the one that someone else has. Love the life you have because, for starters, if you don't love it, nobody else will. And if you don't love it, it can't grow beyond where it is today.

What is openness?

A great deal of the input coming to us is never picked up by our conscious mind. Our attitudes and opinions of ourselves, of others, and of our potential, limit us and block the input and output that is the essence of the life process that we are. Our life process becomes structured on very limited lines. Openness is a state of mind, but it is also a state of being pure, free of tensions. Openness is a quiet mind and total participation in the moment. Participation in the moment has a physical reality to it, which is the flow. It is the interaction, the life process that we are, that is within us and that we are also within. That life process is bigger than we are. We do have control over something, ourselves. What we can't and don't have control over are the circumstances of our lives and the outcomes of our endeavors.

The fact that we don't have any deep control of outcome doesn't mean that we don't attempt to influence life.

We must. Even though everything is in God, and everything is up to God, we still have to do our duty. It is our life's work.

What kind of attitude do we adopt about effort?

Effort is the way in which we allow our essence to unfold and fulfill itself. Our effort is always focused inside. In everything that we do, we have the attitude that we want to do good work, out of appreciation for the incredible potential which is that power of life within us. If you have something magnificent in yourself, that dazzles and amazes you, you treat it with respect. Its innate nature is to shine out. We simply make it possible. We keep cleaning the lenses so that the light comes through clearly. That's our effort.

So we need to reset our priorities on these things that we can affect.

That's the point. When you live in a balanced place within yourself, from that still point in which balance is intrinsic, you're not entangled in tensions, and you see worldliness for what it is. It is tension and trauma, and at the same time a symphony that we are a part of. When you don't get overly focused on any particular event, you enjoy the flow of the whole.

If we don't want to be carried by the sway of events, we have to live from a deeper place.

If you want to live an authentic life, if you want to be alive, you can't get caught up in individual kinds of experiences. You have to have a big perspective; otherwise, you allow yourself to become a very small person. Trying to

become a big person is what we should be doing with our lives.

The way we become bigger persons is through inner work. Discuss inner work.

The inner work is to become open, which means opening your heart to everything you are and everything you see. You cultivate openness so that various tensions unwind from within you and rise up within the field of your experience. You remain open within yourself throughout.

It doesn't mean to negate certain experience.

No, I do not accept the idea that we strive for detachment. I don't think detachment is possible. We are in God; God is in us. There is nothing we can do to become separate. We want to see, seek, feel, and be aware of the fabric of life, not as an intellectual construct, but as a palpable experience. In this state of awareness, we are completely full, because the power of life which creates the whole universe is the power that is within us. This power is always within us, but people become entangled in tensions and biochemistry and forget.

In the book you said that most of our feelings are an expression of our biochemistry. What do you mean?

Hormones. Most of our attractions and our repulsions have to do with two things. Basically, human beings exist to do two things, eat and reproduce. We work on strategies that enable us to do so. A human's personality is an amorphous changeable event that forms up within the person in response to the needs to eat and reproduce. Much psychological analysis that we bring to bear on ourselves and on others has nothing to do with anything. Seeing the simplicity of our behaviors, we can take care of those things in simple ways. This eliminates confusion from our brains, which frees us to make better choices. The first and most important choice that you have to make is the choice to be happy, no matter what. After committing yourself to living a happy life, your thoughts and feelings, and the opportunities presenting themselves for these thoughts and feelings to be expressed are amazing.

Discuss further your concept of feelings as hormones.

I am more than the sum total of the chemicals that function in my body. But I do find that my reactions to my circumstances are in two simple categories—opportunities and threats to my needs to eat and reproduce, the basic themes of human response. What powers those responses is biochemical. What powers the biochemistry is creative potential. I want to go beyond the chemistry. I want to tame that chemistry and put it to work for me. I don't want to be the slave to it. I want it to serve me. I go to the core of feelings and reactions which is energetic. I pay attention to the energy, the channels by which the energy moves, and the place from which that energy arises within me that powers those feelings, that give them impulse, magnitude, and frequency.

What do we do with our feelings?

We transcend them. I don't think it's possible to be detached, so I am not saying that we should suppress or repress feelings. Whatever we suppress or repress comes back later. If we have a higher goal for our life, if we have a bigger perspective, we see our feelings in a broader context; we experience our reactions and focus our attention on a higher state of being. We transform those feelings into finer expressions of that higher state of being. Feelings become much more expansive. Instead of desires, we feel compassion; instead of boundaries, obligations, and responsibilities, we feel charity. You want to move from one domain to a finer one, establishing yourself in an experience of fullness and peace from within.

Struggling with feelings is normal, but you can be open and accept your feelings, and still have the goal of remaining established in that higher state. Those feelings get in step with the state you are identified with, change their own shape, and become a self-reinforcing part of that higher state, which is self-expressing.

Does this process alter the biochemistry of feelings?

In the process, feelings lose their power, and that biochemistry becomes like a flavor, not like a slave-driver. Feelings are no longer a hammer of force that drive you. They become flavor or texture, which blends itself into the whole field of your

experience. Because you are a finer person, those textures and flavors are a part of the joy of your life, not circumstances that toss you from one thing to the next.

That's the transformation that reduces anxiety and depression.

It dissolves anxiety and depression. If you experience tremendous power within yourself, what's to be anxious about? Anxiety is nothing but a mantra that most people practice all the time. I call it the mantra of stupidity. The mantra is, "What is going to happen to me?" The moment you ask the question, you shrink your perspective to the smallest possible framework. Whatever state that you live from becomes a self-reinforcing dynamic system. The particular state that you're in has energetic vibrations. All the vibrations in that state become feelings. Those feelings become thoughts, and those thoughts become actions. Those actions become self-reinforcing, interacting with others who put energy into it. The whole dynamic system constantly sustains itself.

Another aspect of inner work is allowing our inner vision to emerge. How do we discover our vision?

Through the same process that we are talking about. If we are more than the flesh that we drag around, if the power that animates us is what we really are, and if that power is amazing, then we want to develop the ability to feel that power, rather than living on the surface, responding to tensions and stupidity. We want to live from that power within us and allow that power to grow and express itself. Then the vision—who we are, what we need to do, where we need to go, what we need to say—starts to come out and we know. When we really contact life, we know.

We need virtue in order to follow our vision. What is virtue, and how do we develop it?

Virtue is the extension of our vision by giving of ourselves through service. Virtue is being there for the people we share our lives with, in whatever form is required.

Is this the arena where we practice honesty, keep our commitments, and become responsible for our emotions?

Yes. Discipline is key. Discipline enables us to enter to this complete state of openness.

In order to be virtuous, do we have to hold in our mind higher ideals, in order to act for the highest best interest of all concerned?

Yes. We don't live for ourselves alone. We have to live for the benefit of all human beings. We begin with our loved ones and our immediate family. When we walk through life with this idea, we don't get lost in pettiness. Virtue is having the discipline to live every day of your life for the benefit of all human beings.

How important is it for us to have a spiritual teacher?

If it were easy to be in that completely open state and you could do it on your own, why wouldn't everybody? The idea that you can be your own teacher is a delusion. He who has himself for a student has a fool for a teacher. Having a teacher is important. It is impossible for us to pry ourselves out of our own limited perspective. We cannot break out of our self-perpetuating negative feedback loops. It is impossible for us to generate the energy from within to experience that change of state. This isn't a change of intellectual perspective; this is an authentic change of state. To transform an ice cube into water, and then steam, involves a lot of energy. The sun is necessary for life on earth, and a teacher is necessary for spiritual growth in human beings.

You say that you don't talk about personal problems with your students.

There are about eighty people in residence here and another one hundred and fifty in the neighborhood. Because we live together on a daily basis, I'm in touch with people's problems, but I do not deal with people on the basis of their problems. I do not respond to problems in people. I relate to the deepest part of every person I share my life with. I do that, knowing that if we are both true in this process, I don't have to think about problems at all. The energy itself will heal the person, dissolve the tensions, and resolve the problems. The restrictions of today will not be the tensions six months from now. Why should I become entangled in something when I have total confidence in the process? I know

their problems will not be there later.

You also say that love and devotion to your spiritual teacher is important.

Not because the spiritual teacher needs to be loved or devoted to. We practice love and devotion for our teachers because that's the kind of person we need to be in order to grow as a human being. We need to be loyal. We need to be dedicated. We have to take our stand and be true to it. If we do that, deep roots from within us will begin to connect to our self and the total environment. From that, we draw great sustenance and transcend our little self. If you can't practice love and devotion, you will never be loyal to anybody or anything. Most importantly, you won't be true to yourself.

The experience of love and devotion beats us up.

Indeed, it's an essential part of the alchemy. When you aspire to a higher state, you are going to pass through the unraveling of traumas and tensions that you have accumulated or that have been dumped upon you. As that shell breaks from you, you have to keep going and remain connected to that highest part, which is love and devotion.

Mantras are valuable to inner work. What makes mantras useful, and which mantras do you recommend?

Mantra means to protect the mind. The repetition of a mantra overrides the mind. It is a conscious choice to focus on a set of syllables that have an intentional vibration, different from the vibration we carry within us ordinarily, which has symbolic meaning relating to the highest best interest of the whole. The vibration of a mantra is interconnected with the creative energy that is the essence of all form and experience. The value of using a mantra is that it is better to sit in meditation and be aware of the mantra you are repeating and its vibration, than it is to have your mind wander. It develops capacity to focus, and the extended repetition of some mantras literally changes the vibration of what you are. Think of the difference in the vibrations of anger, happiness, and sadness. By repeating a mantra, we can elevate the energy of any state of mind or emotion. Through the repetition of a mantra, we can literally become established in that higher state.

Which mantras do you recommend?

There are a number of mantras. One of the easiest to remember, as you're going about your day, is Om Namah Shivaya. This mantra works easily with the "in" breath and the "out" breath. It's not long and doesn't take a lot of concentration.

Your life becomes a temple of that which is sacred when you choose to live with love in this moment. You make your life sacred when you open yourself up and create, an environment in which Spirit can exist and become powerful and strong in you. And then the reason you meditate every day, is first to find the Spirit, the love in you that you live from every day, and then to find the love in every moment of every day.

The real issue is the degree to which we live in contemplation of the fundamental power of Life within us. This is the guiding principle. If we live from the Self, we will always be rich in what matters. If we live from the Self, what we do in the world will always be an expression of what it's productive for us to do, of that for which our Creative Energy was intended. When we're guided by love, what we do in the world is simply what we do. Then what we do in the world, and what we want from the world, involves balance, calmness, and virtue, rather than some type of quantifiable gain.

The highest discrimination is to become fully aware of the life processes that are within you and you are within. The essential dynamic stillness of the whole process becomes apparent. When you experience palpably that you are a manifestation of that highest creative power, which has made the whole universe, how is it possible that you can worry about anything? How is it possible that you can feel inadequate, when you see that you have that power within yourself?

In your book, you discuss the importance of surrender: What do we surrender?

Your thoughts, your feelings. You surrender the shell, in order that the depth in you can emerge and express itself. You surrender the little person inside of you so that the big person can step out.

Is the surrendering all within self? Do we surrender to life, circumstances, or other people?

We surrender all of the above. What is inside you and what is outside you is ultimately the same energy field. You accept your circumstances and rise to the highest state that is available to you as a human being at that moment.

We also surrender into uncertainty.

That's very important. I practice and teach Kundalini yoga. Kundalini yoga is at the core of Shakti philosophy. The goddess is Kali. Kali is complete uncertainty. Any spiritual practice is about coming to terms with the total uncertainty that is life.

Surrendering to uncertainty is a tall order.

Because we're always worried about "what is going to happen to me."

Life and change and uncertainty are all the same thing, and it is forever a positive thing. As a truly living human being, we are creating our life as we go along. That creation is our constant reaching into uncertainty, from a place of balance and stillness within, which allows uncertainty to express itself in a harmonious fashion.

You say that we best serve life by growing and that we grow by making our life an expression of real love. What is real love, and how is it manifested?

Real love is giving of yourself without expectation of any return. The simplest analogy is having children. Parents easily and naturally, in most cases, love their children and will do almost anything for them. Life constantly gives of itself. Life gives us our lives and doesn't require anything back. That giving is love. Love manifests in our lives through loyalty, service, and devotion, by being honest, having integrity, and taking responsibility for our own actions.

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As we continue to grow, you say that we become purposeless, and that a purposeless life is inspired life.

When you are not limited by your own personal direction and the obvious egotism involved in that, you are free to allow that growth taking place within you to manifest fully its own fruit. That fruit is an internal state of equanimity and joy that is unsurpassable, and it is a real power to do good for other human beings.

Purposeless life is not a passive condition.

Purposelessness is not an inert condition. There is vitality and action in it as well. It is not an action which is ego-driven or self-serving. It is action which is compassionate. It is an action which is a manifestation of love. To become purposeless, we focus on allowing that deepest state from within us to manifest its own power and guide us in our life, so that our vision of our life is not limited by our past history, our ego, or tensions. An inspired life comes from a place within us, which is the finest and most powerful place in a human being. •

McClintock

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