



Live on the BRIGHT SIDE

BY BEN JHOTY

Is happiness simply
a matter of choice?
Our writer swallowed
a yellow pill to find out

THE TOP OF A MOUNTAIN seems like an ideal place for an epiphany. Make it a mountaintop in South Korea. Even better.

Not that I knew the significance of the moment at the time. I was 24 and teaching English to businessmen and university students in Seoul.

One chilly Saturday morning in November, we had a training workshop. So far, so not what I wanted to be doing with my Saturday. When the workshop was over, though, one of the teachers asked if anyone wanted to go on a hike. Sure I did. So did six others, and so we set off to a mountain on the outskirts of the city.

Our trip took all day, and as we hiked we shared stories, gossiped about colleagues, joked around with locals, got lost and made plans to get drunk later that night. Around 5pm we finally made it to the summit. There, we all went quiet for a moment as we basked in the late afternoon sunlight and admired the view over the teeming metropolis. I felt as happy as I'd ever been. In fact, looking back now, it may just have been one of the best days of my life.

GETTY IMAGES

Almost a decade later, such moments of pure, unexpected joy have become inexplicably rare. At 33, my life seems to be following a script. A script that I often feel someone else is writing. I've lived in the same city for seven years, been in the same job for five and had the same jeans for six. Along the way I've lost the mixture of spontaneity, optimism and freedom that characterised my adventures overseas and my uni days before that.

Don't get me wrong. It's not like my stock crashed at 29 and I descended into a great depression. I'm just not as happy as I feel I could be. If you're around my age or older, you may have experienced a similar plateau. A mate has probably observed that "it's all downhill from here" – he meant it as a joke, but it stuck in your mind like a burr. What if our best years are behind us? And if they're not, how do we recapture that hopeful spirit that's so tied to youth?

To find out if I can stave off a mental recession and begin to post some positive growth, I've come to see happiness guru and psychologist

Dr Tim Sharp, founder of Sydney-based The Happiness Institute and the author of *100 Ways To Happiness: A Guide for Busy People*. A slightly scruffy-looking fellow with steel-rimmed glasses and moppy hair, Dr Sharp – or Dr Happy as he's often referred to as – doesn't exactly radiate blissful contentment so much as dish out generous dollops of practical wisdom.

He's not overly surprised by my malaise, or by my uncertainty on how to turn things around. "Most people go through life without clear goals, and as a result aren't as happy as they could be," he says, reclining comfortably beside a bookcase displaying a *Mr Happy* children's book. "You'll probably still have a fairly good life, because we live in a bloody good country. The question is, do you want to live an okay life and stumble across happiness every now and then, or do you actually want to create it more often?"

The question is rhetorical, I think, but I answer it anyway. I want to pursue happiness and contentment as much as the next Tibetan monk, I'm just not quite sure how to go about it.

In response, Dr Happy poses the following question: "If I had a magic yellow pill that I could give you to make your life absolutely brilliant, what would it look like?"

I presume he's not actually offering me drugs, so over the next few days I give the question some serious thought. I think back to that day in Korea and try to determine what made it so special. I also think about the things that are holding me back right now. Slowly I formulate an answer, which I plan to use as a framework to refresh my stale routine.

Over the next six weeks, I'm going to try to live in the moment as much as possible, think more optimistically, appreciate what I have, stress less and be less self-absorbed.

Most of all, I hope to rediscover the feeling I had on the mountaintop that day: that anything is possible. That when I wake up in the morning, I won't know exactly how my day will turn out. Does that sound like a quarter-life crusade? A six-week mental challenge? Let's call it taking the yellow pill.



GRATITUDE

I'm a qualifier. No matter how good things might be, I'll usually qualify them with a negative: "I've got a great job, but I've been in it for five years", "I live in a great house, but it needs renovating". Half the time I'm doing it to avoid appearing too smug, or as a kind of mental safeguard against misfortune. Whatever the reason, though, Dr Happy reckons it's not helping me appreciate the good things in my life as much as I should. To try to turn my mental gauge to "grateful", he's got me to record three good things that happen each day.

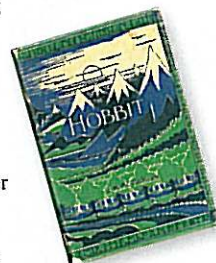
"If you look at the average day for the average person, it involves a whole series of little ups and downs," he explains. "Most of our lives are little bits of good, little bits of bad, little bits of frustration, little bits of joy. So you then have a choice. What do you choose to focus on?"

It's not long before the exercise starts to pay mental dividends. I find that even if I've had a lousy day, by focusing on the positive stuff, my perception of it changes almost immediately. I remember the funny

joke a colleague told, the great sex with my girlfriend, the tasty lasagne I cooked. The bad stuff, the mundane stuff, like missing the bus, being on hold with a call centre, getting cut off in traffic, slips from memory. I look back on my first week and see only good memories. I've had a good week; I just may not have chosen to appreciate such weeks as much before.

The next step in becoming more grateful is to keep a "gratitude journal". This involves writing down one thing each night that I'm grateful for in my life as a whole. I begin with the things that are most important to me - my parents, my girlfriend, my health. This is fine, but greater reward lies in digging a little deeper, advises Dr Happy.

So I go back 13 years to the Mexican gardener I practised my Spanish with at uni, who gradually became a friend. The time when I was five years old and my mum read me a passage from *The Hobbit*, which triggered a life-long interest in words and writing. The fact that I grew up in



I think about all the things that could go wrong. What am I letting myself in for?

the country, where there was a strong sense of community. Six weeks on and I'm still finding things to be grateful for. It turns out I've got a gratitude goldmine buried deep within the recesses of my mind. The yellow pill is sitting on my tongue.

OPTIMISM

I'm looking at an ad for a drummer on the Gumtree website. The words that jump out at me are "would suit a good-skilled beginner". That's me. I've been taking lessons for three years, though I've never had the courage to audition.

I decide to answer the ad, but as my finger hovers over the mouse to hit send on my email, I hesitate, as I've done so many times before, whether it's asking out a girl or applying for a job. I stop and think. More specifically, I think about all the things that could go wrong. What am I letting myself in for? What if I'm not good enough?

This is obviously not helpful, so I try to recall some advice Dr Happy has given me to prepare for these types of situations. "At the very least, withhold judgment," he advised me. "Nine times out of 10 you don't know what the outcome is going to be. You've got a choice: assume the worst or predict the best."

I hit send and instantly feel a rush of excitement.

Two weeks later, I'm sitting behind a drum kit in a stranger's lounge room, quietly shitting myself. The band, a six-piece that plays guitar-driven folk, are making small talk as they set up their equipment. I'm pretending to examine the drum kit, but really I'm focusing on my game plan - straight beats with a couple of high-hat variations. If I'm feeling really brave, I might throw in a four-stroke roll on the snare drum.

1, 2, 3, 4... BOOM, CHK, BAH, CHK... BOOM, CHK, BAH, CHK, BOOM...

"Ah, that's probably a little fast, Ben," says James, the band's founder. I swallow and start over at a slower clip, falling into rhythm with the bass guitarist. The lead guitars are starting to hit their stride and when the singer

launches into the chorus, I'm almost overcome by the moment. We're making MUSIC!

Unfortunately, my momentary bout of reverie causes me to lose concentration and, with it, the beat. I start to grimace. I look at the lead and rhythm guitarists. They're grimacing as well. We slowly grind to a halt. I wait for some kind of admonishment, but none comes. We just start over. The afternoon follows a similar pattern. I'll nail one song, then murder the next. Overall, though, I'm succeeding more than I'm failing, and messing up is not the calamity I had imagined it would be.

Still, I'm not overly hopeful of a call back, so I'm delighted when I get an email from James a few days later. "Heya, Ben, the more I listen to the songs we recorded, the more I really like the sound! You hold a great rhythm and once you get to know the songs you'll get better."

The yellow pill is sliding down my throat.

SELFLESSNESS

I am sitting with my mate Justin out the front of the Nugacity homeless shelter run by St Canice's Church in Sydney's Kings Cross, when a bloke who we'll call "Manny" comes bounding down the steps, crouches in a martial arts stance, and kicks a wall. He then sits down next to me and proceeds to tell us all about his life. Originally from Boston, he came over here to be with his wife, but when the relationship went pear-shaped, he ended up on the streets, dealing drugs and smoking pot.

He's one of just seven people who have turned up to Nugacity (which means trifling talk or behaviour) looking for a bed tonight, and as the night wears on we speak, or rather

listen, to most of them. There's a couple from Tasmania who came to Sydney for the warmer weather and better services. Then there's Leon from Melbourne, who politely informs us that he's just washed his feet as he doesn't want anyone to complain

about the smell. To illustrate the point he takes off his shoes and it's all I can do not to dry-retch and look the other way as he brings his wretched hooves up to his face.

Later, when we're not busy helping out, I quiz Justin, who's been volunteering at the shelter for seven years, on what he gets out of coming here. "It's kind of like jogging," he says as we

watch a woman with a deformed arm try to light a cigarette. "You don't really look forward to going for a jog, but afterwards you're glad you did it. I know I'll feel good about myself tomorrow."

His experience, commonly known as "helper's high", has been widely reported. In the book *The Healing Power of Doing Good*, authors Allan Luks and Peggy Payne studied more than 3000 Americans involved in volunteer services. They found the participants reported feelings of exhilaration similar to that generated by intense exercise, followed by a period of calmness and serenity.

It gets me thinking about my own motivation for being here. As I later tell Dr Happy, it feels more



SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

Caught in a rut? Use these tips, from happiness guru and psychologist Dr Tim Sharp - Dr Happy - to fire up your daily routine

PLAN TO BE SPONTANEOUS

"Make a commitment to set aside time to do something new every week. It may sound like an oxymoron, but the more you do it, the more likely you are to become naturally spontaneous."

BE A "YES MAN"

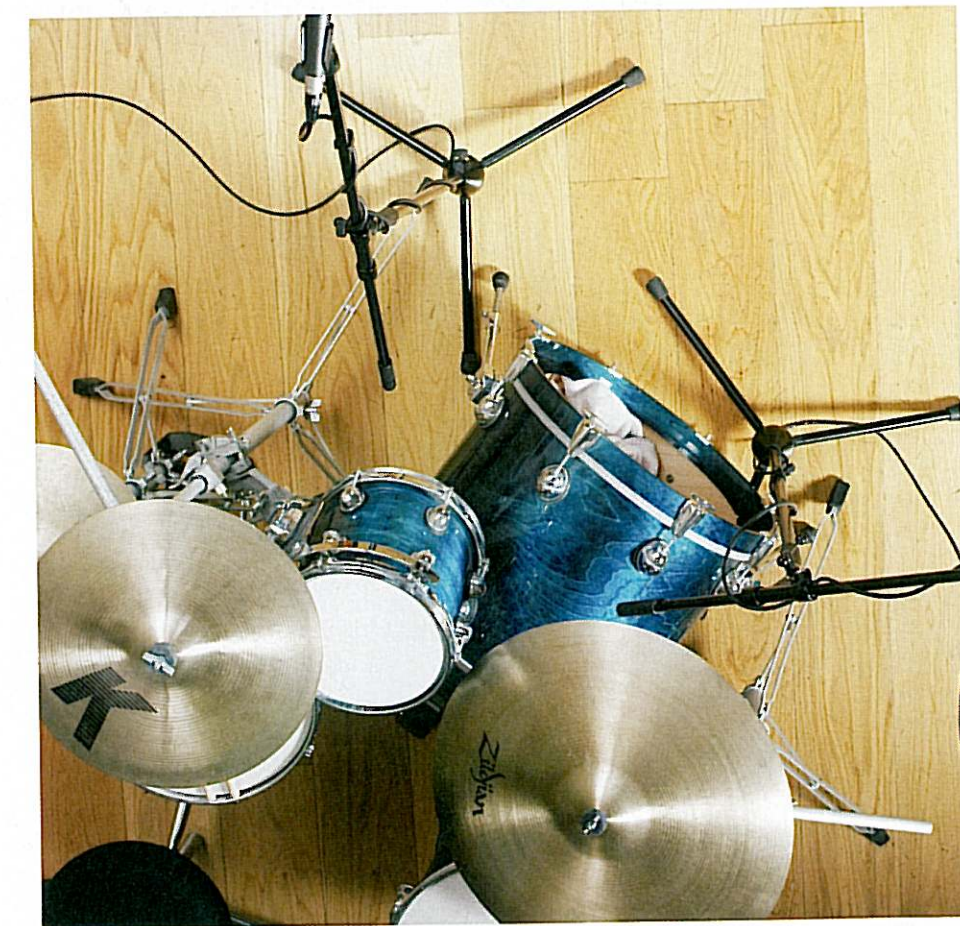
"Whenever you're presented with an opportunity, ask yourself, could I say yes to this? It's easy to say no to stuff - I couldn't do that, I'm too tired, I can't do that on a school night. Each week, try to say yes to something you'd ordinarily say no to."

BREAK YOUR TV ROUTINE

"Whatever your routine is for a particular night, like watching *Spicks and Specks* on Wednesdays, break it. Read a book, play a board game, talk to your partner, call up a mate." You can always watch the series on DVD.

GO BACKWARDS

"You can walk or run the same route, but go in the reverse direction. Things look different and you notice new things. Going a different route is even better. Exercise physiologists say it's good to vary your routine because your muscles need to be challenged in new ways. Psychologically we need to be challenged with variety in the same way." The same goes for other parts of your life. Have dessert first, then an entrée. Work out in the morning instead of the evening. Have sex first, then cook her dinner.



CORBIS PHOTOGRAPHY

WHAT IST ARE YOU?

Not sure which way your mental compass is pointing? Take our test to discover if you're a pessimist, optimist or some other kind of ist

- 1 You miss an appointment.**
 - A What appointment?
 - B I'm always forgetting stuff.
 - C Sometimes I forget things, but it's not the end of the world.
- 2 You're often asked to dance at weddings.**
 - A Well, I can moonwalk like a kid on a Harlem street corner.
 - B I think people must feel sorry for me.
 - C I really enjoy cutting the rug.
- 3 You win a sporting event.**
 - A I was on some great "gear".
 - B It was a fluke.
 - C I trained my arse off.
- 4 You and your partner make up after an argument.**
 - A Only because I wanted make-up sex.
 - B It won't be long until the next argument.
 - C I'm pretty good at talking things over.
- 5 You've been feeling tired and stressed lately.**
 - A I was up all night with this chick I'm seeing on the side. What do you expect?
 - B I never have enough energy, there must be something wrong with me.
 - C I've been busy this week and didn't get much time to relax.
- 6 You forget your anniversary.**
 - A I didn't forget, that bitch has bled me dry.
 - B I'm such a terrible person.
 - C I've had so much on at the moment that I forgot. I'll make it up to her.
- 7 You get a love letter from a secret admirer.**
 - A Happens all the time.
 - B Someone's setting me up.
 - C I guess she likes the cut of my jib.
- 8 You host a successful dinner party.**
 - A No shit, it was the bomb!
 - B Really? I noticed a few people yawning late in the evening.
 - C I pride myself on being the host with the most.
- 9 You fail an important test.**
 - A It was because I'm white.
 - B I've never been good at maths.
 - C I guess I just didn't prepare enough for it.
- 10 You ask a girl out and she says no.**
 - A She must be tripping. I'm going to reread *The Game* tonight!
 - B I knew she would. I'm hopeless at talking to girls.
 - C Maybe she's just not my type.

Mostly As	Mostly Bs	Mostly Cs
You're an egoist, possibly misogynist and maybe a little bit racist. You probably don't even care about the results of this test anyway.	You're a pessimist. You perceive negative events as a reflection on yourself. Time for an attitude overhaul.	Congratulations, you're an optimist. You're untroubled by minor setbacks, as you have a strong belief in your abilities and self-worth.

selfish than selfless. He goes absolutely Buddhist on me.

"Happiness is a bird with two wings – compassion and wisdom," he says, quoting an ancient metaphor. "The wisdom is knowing yourself, looking after yourself. The compassion is doing things for others. It's two wings of the same bird. If the motivations are good then they do coexist: it's a win-win."

Helping others also puts things in perspective, he continues, dropping Buddhism for brass tacks. "It makes you realise that there are other problems in the world aside from your own. There's an old saying: if you were in a room full of people and everyone put their problems on the table, most people would take back their own."

He's right. I wouldn't trade mine with any of those staying at Nugacity. There may only be seven of them but, as Justin points out to me as we leave, that's seven people who may otherwise have slept out in the cold. The yellow pill enters my stomach.

SPONTANEITY

I'm in Cronulla, a beach suburb in Sydney's south. It's 11.30 on a Saturday morning. Already today I've picked up some gardening supplies from Bunnings and had breakfast in Balmain. Now I'm more than 30 kilometres across the city in Cronulla. At the start of my day I didn't plan on being here. In fact, when I woke up, I didn't really have a plan beyond picking up the gardening supplies. It was such a nice day, though, that I suggested to my girlfriend that we drive to the beach. I suggested Manly. She suggested Cronulla. Here we are.

The last few weeks have been full of moments like this. I've been saying, "Yes" to everything. Yes to going to the footy with my mates, yes to dinner invitations and yes to parties that I'd otherwise miss. At the same time, when I get an impulse to do something, I do it. When I see a band I like the look of, I book it. When I think about catching up with a mate I've lost touch with, I call him up. When I walk past a florist, I stop and buy flowers for my girlfriend. Instead of walking the same route on my lunchbreak, as I have for the past three years, I

walk a different way each day. Where I'd normally get a sausage roll at the bakery, I get a pie. When I'd normally sleep, I have sex. When I'd normally have sex, I... pick up gardening supplies from Bunnings.

If that just sounds like living to you, for me it's been a revelation. You could set the tides to my Monday-to Friday routine of gym, work, drumming practice, TV, sleep. It's comfortable enough, but try it for a couple of years and you'll end up like Dustin Hoffman's character in *Rain Man*.

Not that I've always been so dedicated to routine. It's just that most of the occasions when I've lifted the needle from the groove on my mental turntable have involved getting smashed. A few years ago, my friends and I would meet up for a "quiet drink" on a Saturday afternoon and walk out of a club at 4am the next day. It was spontaneous, sure, until we were doing it every weekend.

That's why I'm enjoying walking along the beach in Cronulla right now. I don't know what's coming next. I may not have hitchhiked to Melbourne on a whim, or flown to New Zealand for the weekend, but at least I've thrown out the script.

So how did the day end? All I can reveal here is that it involved a special moment with my girlfriend that took me completely by surprise. Who knows? Perhaps she was responding to my spontaneity. The yellow pill has entered my bloodstream.

CALMNESS

I'm sitting cross-legged, in the lotus position, in a sheltered corner of a garden in Lavender Bay, Sydney. It's a secret place filled with corridors of lush foliage and pockets of organic whimsy, lovingly fashioned into the hillside using railway sleepers, scrap metal and any other junk its creator, Wendy Whiteley, could find. But I could be anywhere. For the next five minutes, my whole world revolves around my breathing.

I feel the air coming in my nose, down my throat and into my diaphragm. I breathe in hard until I feel the knot of anxiety buried deep in the pit of my stomach retreat.



Then I breathe out again. The knot is the physical manifestation of my mind's thoughts – what I think of as my gut instinct. When I'm agitated or depressed it tightens up. When I'm truly happy it vanishes completely. In just a couple of weeks of meditation, I've found the knot has begun to recede.

A growing body of scientific evidence has credited meditation with everything from reducing stress levels, to protecting against disease, to promoting creativity.

The catch? It's tough. I find I can focus on my breathing for about 30 seconds before thoughts begin to arrive. The trick is not to pursue them and return to your breathing instead. Think of it like trains coming into a station. You can either get on the trains or let them pass. The more you do it, the more your mind becomes like CityRail – no trains arrive. If that's too prosaic a metaphor, try this ancient Buddhist one: clearing your thoughts is like clearing the ripples on the surface of a lake. When the ripples are gone and the water is still, you can see the beautiful jewel at the bottom.

The mistake many people make, reckons Dr Happy, is to try to do it for too long. He recommends you engage in a couple of 3-5-minute sessions through the day and stick with it. "The benefits are cumulative," he says. "It's not a straight line. Every couple of weeks it'll jump and you'll reach a new baseline."

I've taken his advice and have been meditating for five minutes when I get up, 10 at lunch, five when I get home in the evening and 5-10 before bed. It needn't be done solely in a calm oasis like Wendy's garden, either. I've taken to doing it while running, and in the Harbour Bridge cycle lane on my ride to work. I even did it while stuck in a traffic jam, transforming road rage into road relaxation.

You might ask yourself why you should spend time sitting quietly doing nothing when you could be doing something productive? Dr Happy advises you to think of it this way: "Every minute spent meditating is a minute closer to happiness". The yellow pill has reached my heart.



FLOW

I'm paddling furiously as the gentle swell starts to arch and grow into a rolling translucent crease. If I can catch it before it breaks, and stand up, I'll have caught my first wave. I feel a surge behind me and am suddenly thrust forward. It's my cue to push off my board and spring into the classic crouching position. I don't know how, but, to my astonishment, as the wave breaks, I'm still upright. "I'm still standing", as Elton John might sing. I straighten up and feel a momentary sense of control. I'm surfing. I'm happy. I'm killing it. I'm... losing my balance and being tossed about like a pair of jeans in a washing machine.

I'm about halfway through a surfing lesson run by Lets Go Surfing (letsgosurfing.com.au) at Bondi beach. It's about 8.30am, the sun is out and the sea is relatively flat. I'm in a group of six guys under the supervision of our Brazilian instructor Leo. I won't stand up again this morning, but it doesn't matter. That one fleeting moment of exhilaration has left me hungry for more.

Part of the allure lies in the challenge. The concentration required to position yourself to catch a wave leads to total immersion in the moment. The previous wave has gone; the next doesn't yet exist. Lose focus on the one arching towards you and you'll be tossed into a salty spin cycle.

"You don't worry about other stuff," says Dr Happy on the merits of being in the moment, or what he calls "flow". "The sorts of things that lead to flow are things that utilise our strengths and give us pleasure. They also involve stretching yourself so that you get that sense of accomplishment."

I experience another moment in the zone the next day, which fittingly happens to be the last weekend of my six-week challenge.

I'm rounding the last bend in the Sydney Morning Herald Half Marathon. Exhausted after running 21 kilometres, I've summoned my last ounce of energy to sprint towards the finish line. I lengthen my stride and pump my arms. The crowd lining the track has become a technicolour blur, but as I hit the home straight, I notice a small hand sticking out hopefully. As I run past I get a sudden impulse to give the little hand an exuberant high five. Loaded with endorphins, the action seems to sum up how I'm feeling right now. I hear an excited shout. "Dad, did you see what he did?" I break into a smile as I power on to the line. The yellow pill has entered my brain.

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