

Bring joy to the world

The pursuit of that elusive emotion happiness is a serious business.

WELLBEING CLAIRE SCOBIE

THE BRIGHT YELLOW balls with smiley faces are the only signs indicating this bland office in downtown Sydney is, in fact, the Happiness Institute. Its founder, Dr Tim Sharp, a clinical psychologist aka Dr Happy, slumps wearily into an armchair in the room where he runs courses in positive psychology. The bookshelves groan with titles such as *Happiness Now!* and *The Joy Diet*.

"I don't deny I have bad days," Sharp says. "As I tell my clients, Dr Happy gets frustrated. But what I've learned has helped me bounce back pretty quickly."

Sharp insists he didn't choose his Dr Happy title. "It stuck. It brings with it a huge burden of responsibility. People think I'll be wearing a bright orange suit and cracking jokes all the time." On the spectrum of happiness, Sharp says he sits around the calm and contentment mark.

And that's just it – the h-word is hard to define. It's vague, subjective and much diminished by the advertising industry. It evokes airbrushed, lollipop images – a smiling baby, a giddy schoolgirl – and fleeting moods.

Next week, 3500 people will gather to hear the latest findings on this elusive emotion at the second *Happiness and Its Causes* conference in Sydney, which the Dalai Lama will address as part of his Australian tour. The conference, inspired by the Mind and Life meetings between the Tibetan spiritual leader and Western scientists, brings together experts from East and West and diverse disciplines – science, religion and psychology.

Gordon Parker, professor of psychiatry at the University of NSW and one of the speakers, believes "happiness isn't just a cocktail party type of trivia. The topic is of huge importance to the general community." When the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan



Mellow yellow ... the Dalai Lama believes the point of life is to be happy.

announced it would measure the happiness of its people as an indicator of development and progress with a gross national happiness index (GNH), the Western media derided it. Two decades later, Canberra politicians actively promote happiness; London economists calculate it; and American neuroscientists can measure pleasure through neuro-imaging, with astonishing results.

In the emerging field of neuroplasticity, scientists can evaluate a subject's temperament by measuring the relationship between the left and right pre-frontal cortex of the brain. Happier people will have greater activity in the left pre-frontal cortex, while those prone to negative emotions will experience higher activity in the right pre-frontal cortex.

Parker is also executive director of the Black Dog Institute, which treats people for depression. According to various studies, he says, "about 15 per cent of the population is generally optimistic or flourishing; 10 per cent is especially pessimistic, known as languishing. Twenty per cent have a frank mental disorder and everyone else is in the middle." There is, he continues, "a strong genetic indication on whether people are in the flourishing or languishing group, but meditation and other techniques can move people from the right pre-frontal cortex to the left pre-frontal cortex."

This revolutionary discovery in science is what Buddhists have believed for more than two millennia – that just like a muscle of the body, the brain can be trained, in this case,

to be happier. In 2004, the first scientific papers published on the effect of prolonged meditation on the brain suggested that meditation not only changes the brain short-term but long-term.

One of the subjects tested as part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's ongoing trials, is Paris-born Matthieu Ricard, longtime friend of the Dalai Lama and author of *Happiness: a guide to developing life's most important skill*. Of hundreds of volunteers studied, scores of +0.3 indicated depression and -0.3 great happiness. Ricard scored -0.45: off the scale.

Before Ricard was ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk 35 years ago, he was pursuing a stellar scientific career, and his book *Continued next page*

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marries the two worlds he straddles. When it was published in France, it sparked a national debate and Ricard became the pariah of the intellectual elite, for whom creativity and pessimism often go hand in hand.

That's because happiness "is a serious matter", says Dr Richard Eckersley, a social analyst at the Australian National University, and author of *Well & Good: morality, meaning and happiness*. He believes that the issue "requires deeper solutions that go to the heart of Western culture and values".

"Individuals can learn to be happier," he says, "but there is no evidence that decades of self-help have helped people. At worst there is a substantial increase in depression, mental health and substance abuse."

Indeed, despite economic advancements in the West, there has not been a correlating increase in happiness. This is a universal experience, believes Tibetan teacher, Khandro Thrinlay Chodon, who teaches in Australia and India. "In the West there is a lot of insecurity and loneliness," she says. "It seems to come from a low self-esteem. Nowadays I also see much grasping in the East. It is not just a Western quality. It is a human quality."

According to Stephanie Dowrick, author of *Choosing Happiness*, "Most people need to have a first-hand experience that material advantages don't make the substantial difference they hoped before they can think about happiness more realistically."

"It is a shift in attitude towards greater trust in yourself and much greater consideration of other people."

Studies point to happiness as improving health, longevity and work productivity. Yet people get confused between happiness and pleasure, says David Michie, author of *Buddhism for Busy People* who had a crisis in his mid-30s. Despite the high-flying job, loving relationship and BMW, Michie was miserable. He was told to start meditating and manage his stress. "Happiness," he says, "is about rearranging the internal world."

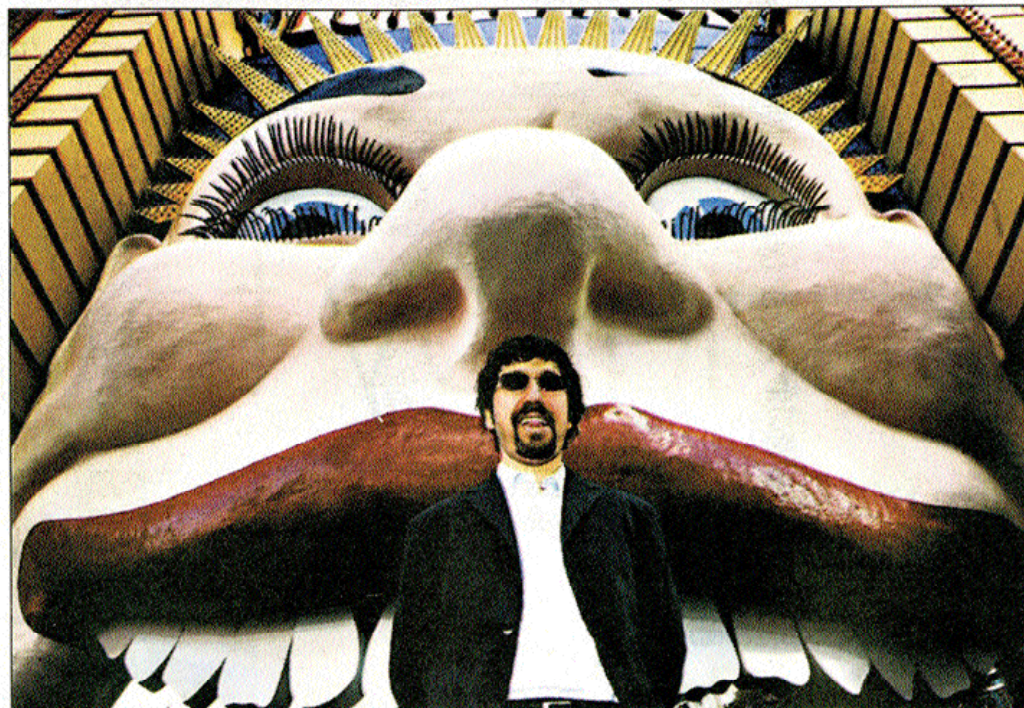
"Buddhism is about being your own therapist," agrees Venerable Robina Courtin, an Australian-born Tibetan Buddhist nun and Director of San Francisco's Liberation Prison Project, which gives spiritual instruction to prisoners.

However, Eckersley says, there is a danger the Buddhist point of view is "too focused on training the individual and detaching them from the sources of suffering or desire. People are led to believe that we can choose the life we want; the reality is very different. We have to approach the issue of happiness as citizens and as consumers."

The Dalai Lama takes an inclusive approach. For him, the sole focus of human life is to be happy. And yet when I interviewed the Tibetan leader at his home in Dharamasala, northern India, I was initially taken aback by his serious manner. Our meeting, in 1998, was at the height of unrest among the community of Tibetans-in-exile. The Dalai Lama expressed his concern over

'We have to approach ... happiness as citizens.'

Richard Eckersley,
social analyst



Smile ... Tim Sharp says his "Dr Happy" tag is a big responsibility.

Photo: Sahlan Hayes

the rising anger of his people and his hope that peacefulness would ultimately prevail.

It struck me that his ability to remain optimistic were the bricks and mortar of happiness. For all his earthy physicality, the Dalai Lama radiates an ineffable warmth. When I left, I smiled non-stop for 24 hours. Perhaps he helped tip the balance between my right and left pre-frontal cortices.

Free talks by the Dalai Lama will be held in the Domain, June 15, 2-3.30pm; and June 16, 10-11.30am. See dalailama.org.au.

The Dalai Lama, Tim Sharp, Gordon Parker, Richard Eckersley, Robina Courtin and Stephanie Dowrick will speak at Happiness and its Causes, Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, June 14-15, see terrapinn.com/2007/happiness.

HAPPY READS

- ▶ **Choosing Happiness** by Stephanie Dowrick, Allen & Unwin, \$39.95
- ▶ **Buddhism for Busy People** by David Michie, Allen & Unwin, \$26.95
- ▶ **Well & Good: Morality, Meaning and Happiness** by Richard Eckersley, Text Publishing, \$24
- ▶ **Happiness: a guide to developing life's most important skill** by Matthieu Ricard, Atlantic/Penguin \$26.95