

Being Happy

By Terri Ann Guingab

I always had trouble with the phrase, "Beauty comes from within." I understand the spirit of it - that we should not allow society to completely dictate what we think is beautiful. While this statement promotes the power of positive thinking, I feel it does not respect the impact society and our external environment can have on our psyche.

I recently read a book called "Being Happy" by Andrew Matthews. This book offers strategies we can use to invite more happiness in our lives by increasing confidence and security. The first chapter discusses self-image, defining the relationship between our own inner thoughts and the role of



external influences in creating our self-image. Contrary to what many other self-help books will tell you, self-image is not entirely our own creation. Our self-image is first created in our early childhood years. It is modeled after our parents primarily and secondarily by the environment we find ourselves in. From the Tao perspective, karma also plays a role in defining our self-image, putting us in situations that challenge us to learn and grow. If we are around alcoholics, there is a stronger likelihood that we might become an alcoholic. If we are around successful people, chances are we too can be successful.

As adults, our self-image continues to be modeled, in part, by the people and the environment that surrounds us. We also build up karmic momentum based on past choices that influences how we choose to act in present situations.

If we are around abusive people, and we responded in the past by being abusive, there is a stronger likelihood that we might face present and future situations in an abusive manner. If we are around caring, generous people, and we choose to face situations from that perspective, there is a stronger likelihood that we can become even more caring and generous in present and future situations.

Self-image, then, is an interplay between our minds/hearts and our environment. While the core (and majority) of our self-image is our own creation, there is a mutable outer rim that fluctuates based on the kind of people and the kind of environment we surround ourselves with and the way we choose to interact with that environment.

Sometimes, environmental influences can be so strong that no amount of positive thinking can overcome them. Other times, we really can use the power of the mind to overcome whatever life throws at us. How is it that some children born into alcoholic families continue the cycle of alcoholism by becoming alcoholics themselves; while others never allow a drop of alcohol to touch their lips their entire lives? It would seem that breaking such a strong pattern would take a lot of energy. How do these people do it?

Being Happy offers a few strategies. The first is to understand how much of an impact our self-image has on how we interact with the world, and consequently, how the world treats us. By analyzing how the world treats us, we often find we need to strengthen our belief that we are worthy of love and respect. With that attitude in mind, we can identify and manage those negative influences that keep us from cultivating a deeper sense of self-worth. We can then actively surround ourselves with positive influences that inspire us to grow and become better people.

These strategies mirror my experience with cultivating Tao for the last year. Before I became involved with the Tao Practice, I was shy and did not have any close friends. I would socialize when absolutely necessary, but I preferred to be on my own whenever possible. This was because I had a very negative image of myself. I felt ugly, weird, and stupid. I believed I was not worthy of respect, attention, or love.

My belief that I was unlovable negatively influenced the way in which I would interpret the behaviors I saw in others. For example, if I was in a room and heard laughter, I automatically assumed that the people laughing were making fun of me. In reality, they probably were not even talking about me. It was a vicious cycle - I believed I was unlovable, I thought I saw signs in the outside world that reinforced this idea, so I believed more strongly that I was unlovable.

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Photo by Peter Brooker

Andrew Matthews writes, “The first step toward a vast improvement in our results is to change the way we think and talk about ourselves.” As I learned more about Tao, it became easier to see the world with more clarity. The discipline of the Tao Practice calmed down my heart in such a way that I could look at situations more objectively. Certainly, I still felt a great deal of anxiety and depression in a number of situations. But cultivating Tao gave me the “mental space” where I could take a step back, receive feedback from other Tao practitioners, and come to a better understanding about the reality of a situation.

In the early months of cultivating Tao, I would face a challenge with a great deal of fear and trepidation. I believed each challenge to be too difficult to face, and that I would instantly fail. My friends in the Tao community provided a tremendous amount of support, providing crucial assistance where I needed it as I overcame each challenge. As I worked through and overcame a number of difficult situations, the idea that I am a good person, worthy of love and respect, became stronger and stronger in my mind.

I came to respect how much our environment influences our self-image. Back in the days when I had a much more negative self-image, I selectively chose to be around those things that would strengthen that belief. I listened to music that spoke of broken hearts and being unlovable. I watched movies and television shows that painted a dark and negative picture of love.

Through cultivating Tao, I began to let go of these negative influences. I discovered that I could not handle listening to The Carpenters for more than a few days in a row before I started to feel really depressed. I practically stopped watching television, especially the news. This was mostly due to lack of time, but also because there is a lack of positive, enlightening, and entertaining shows out there. I was also careful about selecting movies, avoiding those

kinds of movies that I knew would just make me feel bad. Along with getting away from those negative influences, I invited more positive influences into my life. In the past, the overwhelming majority of my wardrobe was either black or very dark. I used my wardrobe almost like camouflage, to avoid being seen by anyone. A friend of mine suggested wearing brighter, more colorful clothing. Not only did this lighten my mood, but it helped me to become more comfortable with being noticed. I began listening to happier music, and watching movies that were more enlightening. These all contributed to my having a more positive outlook on myself and on life.

Most importantly, I opened up to others who are also cultivating Tao. I cannot begin to describe how much I have benefited from being around positive people who are also actively working to better their lives. Their example and their wisdom helped me to direct my efforts so that I could receive the maximum benefit.

These days, I still struggle with the baggage of having lived for years with a negative self-image. I still get a little nervous when I am faced with a new situation. But I find that because I have built a solid foundation of positive experiences, it is much easier to face situations I never thought I would have the strength to face before. In recent months, I have faced challenging situations with less fear and more excitement. I see these challenges as opportunities for growth, and for breaking long-standing patterns. My attitude is less, “How much is this going to hurt me?” and more “How can I maximize the positive potential that this challenge offers?” Because I believe that I am worthy of positive things, more positivity comes into my life. So in the end, beauty really does come from within, but it is helped significantly by actions that invite beauty into our lives. □