


WOMEN'S LIBERATION, MEDITATION, AND THE AMERICAN WAY

The Pursuit of Happiness

All of us are looking for some magic panacea that will bring hapiness. Advertisements, travel brochures, even social movements promise us that this happiness is just around the corner, if only we would buy, try, go, see, join, involve. The pursuit of happiness is not only part of our American way of life, it is our constitutional, God given right.  So, we strive harder, we look everywhere for happiness -- in our marriages, in our careers, in our children, in ourselves. We sometimes feel we are close to reaching temporary goals that we thought would make us happy, but never feel we've quite found or permanently captured it. In a sense we are all very much like a baby who at six months can sit but is frustrated because she can't stand; at nine months is frustrated because, although ^{she}~~se~~ can stand up, she can't bend her knees to get back down; and at one year, having mastered both sitting down and standing up, is frustrated because she can't walk.

Women's Liberation & Meditation

In many ways the above model of a small child's physical development can serve as a useful analogy for two social movements which gathered impetus during the 1960's. The first movement, analogous to the child's development from sitting passively to standing up, may be seen in the women's movement.

In the sixties, women voiced resentment about their trapped lives, complained of feeling worthless and dependent. The women's movement,

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in its most popularized and therefore most accessible (although not always most accurate) form tended to convey the impression that a liberated woman was assertive, ambitious, independent, self-centered, employed. Therefore, to become happy women literally needed to learn to stand up for themselves. There was a widespread need to gain social status and recognition of equal competency with men, and a concomitant flurry of consciousness raising groups and assertiveness training programs. The implication was that, once liberated, once able to stand up, happiness would follow.

However, simultaneously, there was a second social movement gaining impetus. This movement involved an interest in Eastern values and philosophy, alternative lifestyles, a back to nature movement. Individuals turned to these new paths as an alternative to the very real problems that they felt existed in the competitive, goal-oriented, acquisitive mainstream of American society. They realized that what has been considered assets from a material and technological viewpoint in our society (the so-called typically "masculine" characteristics of aggression, competition, rationality, goal-oriented striving) had been bought at a steep price. The costs of the mainstream American lifestyle included health-related problems such as stress diseases, ulcers, heart attacks, and psychological and emotional problems: a loss of living in the ~~moment~~ ^{here and now}, a loss of experiencing the delicate joys of the moment. These negative consequences of the second movement suggests that some of the values of the women's movement were misplaced. Standing up, acting assertively, trying to build up one's ego, are merely adopting the values of the mainstream culture. It's like the child who can stand up, but whose legs are so rigid (ie, so assertive, so egocentric), that the child can't sit again. What is needed, according to this second

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movement, is a new set of values: the ability to yield, let go, be relatively egoless, live in the moment (ie., the ability to sit down). The implication of this movement ^{was} that once these new values would be achieved, happiness would follow.

The Next Step

However, for many of us, the either/or answers of the more radical spokespeople for these movements were not sufficient. We felt a piece was still missing. For example, most women, while influenced in large and small ways by the women's movement, did not wish to leave husband and ~~have~~ ^{home} to begin a new life rooted in ideology. Further, recent surveys of undergraduate college women showed that a majority wanted career and family. Similarly, most individuals who committed themselves to voluntary simplicity and meditative practice, tried to do so within the framework of societal jobs (and even, God forbid, an occasional Big Mac!).

We personally feel the time is ripe for a new synthesis which goes beyond the either/or rhetoric. This new synthesis draws from the values of both the women's movement and Eastern philosophy, forming a comprehensive, holistic integration. In this new vision, men and women alike would develop the abilities to be nurturing, cooperative, yielding, and assertive, motivated, goal-directed; productive, instrumental, and relaxed, appreciative of the joys of the moment.

But, even as we **posit** this new synthesis, we must beware of its implicit and alluring promise: ie., once achieved, it will bring us

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happiness. Rather, at the risk of sounding ~~is~~ American, we would like to suggest a new premise: that happiness does not lie around the next corner of commitment. We need to learn to accept ourselves and our lives in the here and now -- with all the stresses, illogical contradictions, imperfections, and unresolved ambiguities. And, we also need to simultaneously continue to search for the new synthesis and new vision.

As we strive (with acceptance) to achieve this new integrated vision, let us acknowledge that, even if achieved, we will still be like the small baby who, knowing how to stand strongly and assertively, knowing how to sit with yielding and delicatness, is still unhappy because she cannot walk. We are young in our understanding of the meaning both of the liberation of women and the liberation of the spirit. We still need to learn how to walk, and to realize that, for a little child, even walking will not bring happiness.