A Little Book of Happiness

RUSSKIN BOND
Ruskin Bond is the author of numerous novellas, short-story collections and non-fiction books, many of them classics. Among them are *The Room on the Roof*, *A Flight of Pigeons*, *The Night Train at Deoli*, *Time Stops at Shamli*, *Landour Days*, *Rain in the Mountains*, *A Book of Simple Living* and *Friends in Wild Places*. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993, the Padma Shri in 1999 and the Padma Bhushan in 2014. He lives in Landour, Mussoorie, with his extended family.
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Last Saturday, when I was autographing books at the local bookshop, a young college student asked me, ‘What is the secret of happiness?’

At first I couldn’t think of an answer, except to say, ‘It’s no secret. Happiness is right next to you’—with particular reference to the pretty girl who accompanied him.

But thinking about it now, I suppose happiness means different things to different people.

Beena is happiest in her pooja room, or when she is on the phone talking to her children—Siddharth in New Delhi, Shrishti in Bhubaneswar, Gautam in Dehradun.

Rakesh is happy behind the wheel of his car; the last place where I would be happy, having once driven through a garden wall in Friends Colony, New Delhi.

Nor am I happy on a motor-cycle, which is where Siddharth likes to be happy. And you won’t find me in the Beauty Parlour, frequented by Shrishti when she’s home on holiday.

Some people are miserable when it’s raining heavily and they can’t go shopping. I’m quite happy on a rainy day because then I can curl up on a sofa, visit Blandings Castle with P.G. Wodehouse, enjoy a village cricket match with Mr Pickwick and his Dickensian friends, or go rowing on the Thames with Jerome K. Jerome’s three men and a dog. A good book on a rainy day is happiness for me.

As a writer I am also happy when I have completed a story or poem or essay and feel pleased with it. On the other hand, failed creations make me unhappy and I don’t like leaving anything unfinished. If I am not happy with something I have written, it goes into the waste-paper basket.

We all have to do something in life, and if our occupation or vocation or profession
gives us pleasure, well, that’s happiness.

So choose well, my friend. Before you launch out on the journey of life, make sure that the career or lifestyle that you have chosen is something that you really want to follow.

And may some of the words in this little book help you to realize your dreams.

Ruskin Bond
April, 2016
‘Happiness is as good as food.’
—An African proverb

‘One joy scatters a hundred griefs.’
Having bumbled through eighty years without permanent injury, I am no wiser than an old cabbage! I only know that for the most part I have followed instinct rather than intelligence, and this has resulted in a modicum of happiness. Life hasn’t been a bed of roses. And yet, quite often, I’ve had roses out of season.

Happiness is not waiting to be found; there’s no use looking for it. All we need to do is to find the barriers within ourselves that we have built against it. Trust—in people, in life—is a good way to begin.

‘Why not seize the pleasure at once? How often is happiness destroyed by preparation, foolish preparation!’
—Jane Austen

I come upon my friend Pitamber dancing on the road one night.
‘Why are you dancing in the middle of the road?’ I ask. ‘Because I am happy,’ he says. ‘And why are you so happy?’ He looks at me as if I am a fool. ‘Because I am dancing in the middle of the road,’ he says.

Feeling down and out? Lift up your head and shout—‘It’s a great day!’

Happiness is a matter of temperament rather than circumstance. To take life lightly and in good humour is to get the most out of it.

Whether by accident or design, we are here. Let’s make the most of it, my friend. Make happiness our pursuit, Spread a little sunshine here and there. Enjoy the flowers, the breeze, Rivers, sea and sky, Mountains and tall waving trees. Greet the children passing by, Talk to the old folk, be kind, my friend. Hold on in times of pain and strife;
Until death comes, all is life.

Happiness is as elusive as a butterfly, and we must never pursue it. If we stay very still, it may come and settle on our hand. But only briefly. We must learn to savour the moment.

‘We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.’
—E.M. Forster
Expect good, and good will come.

Happy is he whose heart sees more clearly than his eyes.

To be happy, you must have
compassion—not only for the
world, but also for yourself. And you should know that
ccontentment is easier to attain
than happiness, and that it is enough.

For all its hardships and complications, life is simple, and a nature that doesn’t sue for happiness often receives it in large measure.

‘That man is happiest who lives from day to day and asks no more, garnering the simple goodness of life.’
—Euripides

‘Be happy. It’s one way of being wise.’
—Colette

‘To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness.’
—Bertrand Russell
The first condition of happiness is that a man must find joy in his work.

I have yet to meet a neurotic carpenter or stonemason or clay-worker or master craftsman of any kind. Those who fashion beautiful things with their hands are usually well-balanced people.

The fewer your desires, the greater your happiness.

‘If a straw can tickle a man, it is an instrument of happiness.’

—John Dryden

There is no happiness without love. And to find love you don’t go looking for it; you only need to open the doors and windows to your heart. And if the love does not last, there will be memories to keep you warm on cold and gloomy days.
The wind carries the muted sound of conversation, the hillside rings with laughter. There’s a celebration somewhere. From a distance, these are good sounds on a cold and silent night. The thought of happy people in the neighbourhood puts me in a good mood.
If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.

— J.R.R. Tolkien
Into the woods on an October afternoon. I lie in the sun, on sweet-smelling grass, and gaze up through a pattern of oak leaves into a blinding blue heaven. And I praise god for leaves and grass and the smell of things—the smell of mint and bruised clover—and the touch of things—the touch of grass and air and the sky’s blueness.

This morning I was pondering on the absence of a philosophy or religious outlook in my make-up, and feeling a little low because it was cloudy and dark outside. Then the clouds broke up and the sun came out and almost immediately I felt an uplift of spirit. No philosophy would be of use to a person so susceptible to changes in light and shade. No philosophy would be necessary.

‘The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts.’
—Marcus Aurelius

‘If you don’t have horns you are not a bull, and if you are not
warm and friendly you can’t be happy.’
—A Bhutanese proverb

‘All suffering there is in the world comes from desiring only myself to be happy.’
—Shantideva

‘Some day you will find out that there is far more happiness in another’s happiness than in your own.’
—Honoré de Balzac

Grow a garden, or some leaves and flowers in old tin cans or plastic buckets. Water each plant every morning, giving it your full attention. Stand back and watch the water sparkling on leaf and petal, and you are ready to face the stormiest of days.

Among the Turks there is a saying: Patience attracts happiness; it brings near that which is far.
And among the Masais there is this belief: Happy is he whose own faults prevent him from castigating the faults of others.

If we have never been unhappy, how will we know when happiness comes?

Two things make life worth living: a good joke and a good digestion.
Contemplating the tiny ladybird on the wild rose gives one hope that there is more to life than interest rates, dividends, market forces and infinite technology. There is space for the big and the small; there is space for you and me and the ladybird.

‘When the first baby laughed for
the first time, the laugh broke into a thousand pieces and they all went skipping about, and that was the beginning of fairies.’
—J.M. Barrie

‘Don’t let one cloud obliterate the whole sky.’
—Anaïs Nin

If I am fit enough to gambol, I must gambol. Why should it matter that I am old? The world is like a cheerless headmaster, always telling you to behave. It likes to put you in a box, but you must never let it succeed. The inside of a box is not a happy place.

I may not have contributed anything towards the progress of civilization, but neither have I robbed the world of anything. Even the spider on the wall is welcome to his space. After all, he gives me mine, and we are both at peace.

‘Happiness is when what you
think, what you say and what you do are in harmony.’
—Mahatma Gandhi

‘Happiness is the only good, reason the only torch, justice the only worship, humanity the only religion and love the only priest.’
—Robert G. Ingersoll

‘Those born to wealth, and who have the means of gratifying every wish, know not what is the real happiness of life, just as those who have been tossed on the stormy waters of the ocean on a few frail planks can alone realize the blessings of fair weather.’
—Alexandre Dumas

‘Life works upon a compensating balance, and the happiness we gain in one direction we lose in another. As our means increase, so do our desires; and we ever stand midway between the two. When we reside in an attic, we enjoy a supper of fried fish and stout. When we occupy the first floor, it takes an elaborate dinner at the Continental to give us the same amount of satisfaction.’
—Jerome K. Jerome
A local racketeer, who has been in jail a couple of times, meets me on the road and compliments me because I’m ‘always smiling’. I think better of him for the observation.
If you can smile when you feel hurt, the hurt is half cured.

Happiness is not the opposite of sorrow. They co-exist; in that acceptance we take the first step towards inner peace.

‘Happiness always lingers with unhappiness. They are two sides of the same coin. When the whole coin drops from your hand you are neither happy nor unhappy.’

—Osho

‘Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.’

—Dr Seuss

We have as much right to cry as we have to laugh. Men given to tears are good men, goes an old Greek saying.

If a tortoise could run,
And losses be won,
And bullies be buttered on toast;
If a song brought a shower,
And a gun grew a flower,
This world would be better
than most.

‘I felt my lungs inflate with
the onrush of scenery—air,
mountains, trees, people.
I thought, “This is what it
is to be happy.”’
—Sylvia Plath

One of life’s greatest pleasures is
free. It lies in watching a plant
grow—from seed to seedling, to
green branch to bough,
to flower to fruit.

‘Having a great intellect is no
path to being happy.’
—Stephen Fry

‘Laughter is the language of
the soul.’
—Pablo Neruda
Live close to nature and your spirit will not be easily broken, for you learn something of patience and resilience. You will not grow restless, and you will never feel lonely.

A mynah bird alights on the window sill, delivers a short speech, waits for me to nod my approval and takes off. My birthday gift in advance.
If you want happiness for an hour—take a nap.
— A Chinese proverb

Last night, as I lay sleepless
In the summer dark
With window open to invite a breeze,
Softly a firefly flew in
And circled round the room
Twinkling at me from floor or ceiling,
Lighting up little spaces—
A friendly presence, dispelling
The settled gloom of an unhappy day.

‘Never despair.’
—Horace

Never believe those who tell you that there are no second beginnings in life. Every day is a chance to start afresh. Very often, all satisfaction and achievement is in the effort.

The whistling thrush is here, bathing in the rainwater puddle beneath my window. His blue-black wings glitter in the sunshine. He loves this spot. So now, when there is no rain, I fill the puddle with water, just so my favourite bird keeps coming.
'For every minute you are angry you lose sixty seconds of happiness.'
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Three mantras of happiness:

Think of old friends.
Make new friends.
Become your own best friend.

‘A sure way to lose happiness, I’ve found, is to want it at the expense of everything else.’
—Bette Davis

‘Do not anticipate trouble, or worry about what may never happen. Keep in the sunlight.’
—Benjamin Franklin

‘If you want to be happy, be.’
—Leo Tolstoy

Happiness does not arrive with fireworks. It settles in quietly, long before you recognize it.
And sometimes it is gone
before you do.

‘People who dream when they sleep at night know of a special kind of happiness which the world of the day holds not, a placid ecstasy and ease of heart that are like honey on the tongue. They also know that the real glory of dreams lies in their atmosphere of unlimited freedom.’

—Karen Blixen
If we have the eyes to see, and ears to listen, the world is never without things to soothe the
heart. Each day there is birdsong and moonlight, flowers and old familiars, food to satisfy our hunger and water to quench our thirst.

I like a sausage, I do; It’s a dish for the chosen and few. Oh, for a sausage and mash, And of mustard a dash, And an egg nicely fried— maybe two?

‘Learn to let go. That is the key to happiness.’ —A Buddhist teaching

‘It is more fitting for a man to laugh at life than to lament over it.’ —Seneca

‘There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power of our will.’ —Epictetus
‘Happiness is a gift and the trick is not to expect it, but to delight in it when it comes.’
—Charles Dickens

‘When we are happy, we are always good, but when we are good, we are not always happy.’
—Oscar Wilde

A life of constant virtue, like a life of constant vice, can only end in misery.

Don’t be depressed by your surroundings. That pebble at your feet has as much beauty as any great work of art.

I don’t have to climb the Eiffel Tower to see a city spread out before me. Every night I see the lights of the Doon twinkling in the valley below; each night is a festive occasion.

Some people choose to sail
around the world in small boats. Others remain in their own small patch, yet see the world in a grain of sand.

‘Happiness is not a horse, you cannot harness it.’
—A Russian proverb
Listen to the night wind
    in the trees,
Listen to the summer
    grass singing;
Listen to the time that’s
    tripping by,
And the dawn dew falling.
Listen to the moon as it
    climbs the sky,
Listen to the pebbles humming;
Listen to the mist in the
    trembling leaves,
And the silence calling.

‘Happiness is never grand.’
—Aldous Huxley

‘The true secret of happiness lies
in taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life.’
—William Morris

‘God bless the inventor of sleep, the cloak that covers all men’s thoughts.’
—Cervantes

A pillow can make all the difference to one’s life. Sleep with the wrong pillow and you’ll wake up an angry man. The right pillow, and you wake up a happy man.

And here’s a gem from a book of Bhutanese wisdom: ‘Do not chirrup too much about your happiness, and do not whine too much about your unhappiness.’

Which makes me think: happiness shared is an act of compassion; happiness flaunted, an act of violence.

‘I shall take the heart. For brains do not make one happy, and
happiness is the best thing in the world.’
—L. Frank Baum

‘We all look for happiness, but without knowing where to find it: like drunkards who look for their house, knowing dimly that they have one.’
—Voltaire

Love is as mysterious as happiness—no telling when it may visit us; when it will look in at the door and walk on, or come in and decide to stay. May both love and happiness enter your life, dear reader, and decide to stay.

For most people loneliness is wrongly linked to unhappiness. Their minds are not deep enough to appreciate the sweetness and balm of solitude.

‘Of all the means to insure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the
acquisition of friends.’
—Epicurus
As in life, so in art: only connect.
I have always believed that to
communicate and be readable is all that a writer should aim for. For a writer—as for any artist, whether a painter or a comedian—there can be no greater joy than this connection.

‘The crowning fortune of a man is to be born to some pursuit which finds him employment and happiness, whether it be to make baskets, or broadswords, or canals, or statues, or songs.’
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

How many dreams might have become happy realities but for that terrible sentence, ‘Too much trouble!’

‘One swallow does not make a summer, neither does one fine day. Similarly, one day or a brief time of happiness does not make a person entirely happy.’

Thus spoke Aristotle. But brief times of happiness can be sufficient gifts for a lifetime. No one is entirely happy for all time.
'Happiness when you are miserable:
To plant Japanese poppies with cornflowers and mignonette,
and bed out the petunias among the sweet-peas so that they shall perfume each other. To see sweet-peas coming up.
To drink very good tea out of a thin Worcester cup of a colour between apricot and pink shell…'
—Rumer Godden

‘I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today. I can choose which it shall be. Yesterday is dead, tomorrow hasn’t arrived yet. I have just one day, today, and I’m going to be happy in it.’
—Groucho Marx

‘All of man’s miseries stem from his inability to sit quietly in a room alone.’
—Blaise Pascal

‘Why should we build our happiness on the opinions of others, when we can find it in our own hearts?’
—Jean-Jacques Rousseau
To be able to laugh and to be able to care—just this much will ensure a good life.

‘We have no more right to consume happiness without producing it than to consume wealth without producing it.’
—George Bernard Shaw

‘Only the development of compassion and understanding for others can bring us the tranquility and happiness we all seek.’
—Dalai Lama XIV
‘I felt once more how simple and frugal a thing is happiness: a glass of wine, a roast chestnut, a wretched little brazier, the sound of the sea. Nothing else.’
—Nikos Kazantzakis
'Happiness. It comes on unexpectedly. And goes beyond, really, any early morning talk about it.'
—Raymond Carver

‘God gave us our faces,’ said Granny, ‘we give ourselves our expressions.’

Granny again: ‘Life may be short, but a smile is only a second’s effort.’

The past is another country, someone has said, and it is good to go there on a visit once in a while. It is the small things I remember most vividly from my past. They come to me like pieces of cinema-coloured slides slipping across the screen of memory, bringing me solace, and sometimes a smile to my lips.

‘The day returns and brings us the petty round of irritating concerns and duties. Help us play the man, help us to perform them with laughter and
kind faces.’
—Robert Louis Stevenson

‘The secret of happiness is not in doing what one likes, but in liking what one does.’
—J.M. Barrie

‘My flute, M. Poirot, is my oldest companion. When everything else fails, music remains.’
—Agatha Christie

‘My cat is selfish, smug and ungrateful. Then she jumps onto my lap and purrs, asking to be loved, and I’m happy.’
—Talula K.

If you owe nothing, you are rich. Money doesn’t make people happy. But neither does poverty. Just enough to be your own person, and to lend a helping hand—that much would be the best, I suppose.
‘A hot sun and a hot wind blowing; I go home and I am happy.’
—An Italian proverb

‘The secret of happiness is to find a congenial monotony.’
—V.S. Pritchett
If you have the ability, or rather the gift, of being able to see beauty in small things, then life holds few terrors.

A cherry tree bowed down by the night’s rain suddenly rights itself, flinging pellets of cool water in my face. This, too, is happiness.

There is a flower I meet on my walk down to the bazaar these days. It has sprung out of a plastic mug in Mrs D’s little
balcony and is always nodding
and dancing in the breeze.
It is a happy flower, deserving
of a happy, light name. I have
named it Merry Heart, and
sealed our friendship.

As I’ve grown older, I’ve stopped
fretting too much. I laugh
at myself more often; I don’t
laugh at others. I live life
at my own pace.
And I am content.

‘For some of us, happiness comes
while we sleep.’
—A French proverb

Slow down, there isn’t always a
train to catch. Make your walk
as long and leisurely as possible,
and you will find that the
world you thought ugly is full
of lovely little surprises.

For as long as I can remember, I
have been the happiest taking a
path—any old path will do—and
following it until it leads me to a
forest glade or village or stream or
hilltop, or a face I long to see.

The adventure is not in arriving, it’s in the on-the-way experience. It is not in the expected; it’s in the surprise. You are not choosing what you shall see in the world, but giving the world an even chance to see you, to get to know you and, perhaps, show you just the things you had longed to see but could never find.

Turn your attention to the sky, look at the ever-changing cloud patterns from your window. There is no end to the shapes made by the clouds, or to the stories they set off in your head. We don’t have to circle the world in order to find beauty and fulfilment.

I remember the mouse who shared my room in London when I was seventeen and all on my own. He was a smart little mouse and sometimes he would speak to me—sharp little squeaks to remind me it was dinner time. The room was no longer as empty and lonely as when I had
first moved in.
‘Those who bring sunshine into the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves.’
—J.M. Barrie
Children bring me joy. Sometimes I think small children are the only sacred things left on this earth. Children and flowers.

Help a stranger in distress, do it when there is nothing that requires you to do so, and you will find you are lighter, happier. And maybe one day a stranger will extend a hand when you stumble, and once again you will find happiness when you least expect it.

Sometimes, when all else fails, a sense of humour comes to the rescue. Laugh at yourself, laugh at fate, and soldier on.

By all means observe the conventions, but remember that it is only in personal independence that happiness is to be found. Stay free!

‘Happiness…is not something that can be demanded from life, and if you are not happy you had better stop worrying about it and
see what treasures you can pluck
from your own brand
of unhappiness.’
—Robertson Davies

‘Make up your mind to be
happy. Learn to find pleasure in
simple things.’
—Robert Louis Stevenson

What if you failed yesterday?
Today is not yesterday.

Nothing compares to the joy of
hard-won success. Nothing is
sweeter than victory at the
end of many defeats.

Even the most uninviting and
unromantic places will surprise
you with small miracles:
moonlight on quiet alleys past
midnight. Or the scent of
quenched earth and fallen neem
leaves after the first rains. Or the
happy riot of the weekly bazaar.
He who has happy children
is greater than a king.
And he who spreads happiness
outside his home is greater still.

If one day you should lose all
your money, who knows—you
may become a happy yogi!
(If not, make peace with
your misery.)
‘Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.’
—Thich Nhat Hanh

‘Happiness is a how, not a what. A talent, not an object.’
—Hermann Hesse

Life rarely plays by the rules. Before you say, ‘What did I do to deserve such misfortune!’
think of all the times you found happiness when you had done little to deserve it.

Let us learn from the humble marigold. The rose may be the queen of flowers, and the jasmine the princess of fragrance, but the marigold holds its own through sheer sturdiness, colour and cheerfulness, brightening up winter days, often when there is little else in bloom.

‘We must try to make the end of the journey better than the beginning, as long as we are journeying; but when we come to the end, we must be happy and content.’
   —Epicurus

‘The storm is over, there is sunlight in my heart.’
   —P.G. Wodehouse

As a young man I planted a seed. In old age I reap the rewards: a wild cherry tree covered with pale pink blossoms, and a little
yellow sunbird, emitting a squeaky little song, flitting from branch to branch.

‘If you want a happy ending, it just depends on where you close the book!’
—Orson Welles

Dear reader, may you have the wisdom to be simple, and the humour to be happy.
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WHY BE HAPPY AND HOW. AND WHY NOT TO WORRY IF YOU THINK YOU ARE NOT.

WHY IT IS EASY TO BE HAPPY, AND HOW YOU CAN MISS HAPPINESS EVEN WHEN IT STANDS BEFORE YOU.

HOW A BIRD CAN FILL YOU WITH JOY AND A STRANGER’S SMILE CAN SOOTHE YOU.

WHY HAPPINESS MAY NOT EVEN BE THE WORD FOR WHAT YOU REALLY NEED.

India’s most beloved sage and writer brings together his own pithy observations and those by artists and thinkers he admires in this beautiful little anthology. *A Little Book of Happiness* is a miscellany for all seasons, one to cherish and to share.
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