



# The Science of Happiness and Experience of Bliss

*Marilyn Monk*

*32<sup>nd</sup> Scientists and Mystics Conference at Winchester April 3-5, 2009.*



*Annapurna Indian Dance*

**T**he aim of this conference, as explained in the flyer, was to 'look at the relationship between the emerging science of happiness and the personal experience of bliss'. It certainly did this and much more. There was much to consider in the areas of the current global economic crisis, education, politics, theology, art, creativity and beauty - all of which marked the need for a new world view - an essential examination of the values we hold and a need for change in the way we live our lives. The conference also included some solid science in a specialist talk on recent developments in neuroscience, excellent perspectives on education, some pure art in the consideration of the roles of the artist and the observer in the appreciation of beauty in the experience of bliss, and a wonderful dance performance from the Annapurna Dance Company.

The speakers were -

*Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox*, from USA, Dominican priest for many years, author of 28 books on aspects of faith, creativity, perennial wisdom, spirituality, education and reformation.

*Prof. Lord Richard Layard*, an economist from London School of Economics, now director of the Programme of Well-Being at the LSE Centre for Economic Performance.

*Shakti Maira*, artist and educator, with writings and workshops on art and life in America and India, and represented in the Indian National Gallery of Art.

*Dr. Peter Malinowski*, senior lecturer in psychology and cognitive neuroscience at Liverpool John Moores University, researching neurophysiological correlates of meditation, and the link between meditation and happiness.

*Dr. Carol Craig*, Chief Executive of the Centre for Confidence and Well-Being in Glasgow and an authority in the field of Positive Psychology.

The dancers were -

*Shantha and Devika Narendra Rao* of the Annapurna Dance Company

**David Lorimer**, the SMN programme director introduced the meeting on the Friday evening with a talk on his Learning for Life Project. Young people can access the website ([www.learningforlife.org.uk](http://www.learningforlife.org.uk)) to identify the values most important to them in life. The site guides them into different territories concerned with different life values where they are encouraged to reflect on what others have said - quotes, stories and poems - and then reflect on their own values. The Learning for Life project is now running in 140 schools, mostly in Scotland.



*Prof. Lord Richard Layard*

David used reflections from the website to illustrate the power of tapping into the natural wisdom of children. Following David's talk the speakers introduced themselves to us and then we retired to the bar or to bed in exited anticipation of an excellent feast of a conference in store.

Our first speaker on the Saturday was **Matthew Fox** who addressed his subject '**Happiness and bliss and the return of the sacred masculine**' with infectious enthusiasm. His lecture was peppered with stories and quotations from Thomas Aquinas, religious teachings over the centuries, the roles of archetypes (Sky and Green Man), ritual and ceremony. Matthew reminded us that happiness is not eternal optimism. All beings suffer but the opposite of happiness is not suffering. Happiness must be so real that it can embrace suffering. The test of our work in the world is to ask 'what joy does it bring to our selves and others?'

Happiness is dependent on our culture and science and Matthew maintains that we have been teaching despair for centuries – from the sixteenth century theology of John

Calvin, through the epidemic of depression of the eighteenth century, to today. Thomas Aquinas taught that the essence of religion is gratitude. We need to bring back the essence of the Goddess in civilisation - the celebration of life. This brought Matthew to his main theme – the invocation of archetypes, gods and goddesses, to awaken the 'Return of the Sacred Masculine' (the title of his most recent book). An archetype wakes us up. Jung says that archetypes come along when we most need them. Part of the recovery from a descent into chaos is a healthy sense of Father Sky. The celebration of the solstice and equinox at Stonehenge is part of Father Sky – we need new versions of Stonehenge. We also need the return of the Green Man – the goddess in man – representing our relationship to the plant world and the rest of the animal world.

Matthew then spoke of his teaching. He has been teaching spirituality for 30 years – to adults and kids. In America, 72 per cent of black boys will not graduate from high school and many end up in gaol. Matthew teaches expression of the self creatively in

art, dance, ritual and ceremony as part of the AWE (ancestral wisdom education) project in California. He presented a video featuring some of his students expressing their creativity in 'turf dancing'. These kids were sad morose and angry but now their lives were changing as they brought creativity and dance into worship.

The next speaker was **Richard Layard** on '**Can our children be happier than us**'. Richard is concerned that the health and well-being of young children is central to education rather than a by-product of economic growth. Surveys of people reporting happiness levels showed that these remained the same from the 1950's to the present day despite the huge growth in living standards. At the other end, studies on mental illness and depression showed no decrease of the negative state over these periods – instead there is a tendency for increase. Income rates high in estimations of happiness but this is not actual income but income relative to other people. Richard claims that man is living in a new situation – the issue of survival and attainment of higher living standards



*Matthew Fox with Oliver Robinson, Bronwen Astor and Tuvi Orbach*

are now less important than how we live together. We need to give more value to relationship at home, at work, and in the community, to achieve a better balance of life rather than attaining higher level productivity. It is clear that the most important external features underlying happiness in people's lives – family, work, community – have not been improving but getting worse, especially family break down, more conflict in marriages that stay together, increased stress at work and loss of trust in community Anglo-Saxon countries show an extraordinary decline in trust the reason possibly being the spread of individualism from the USA to the UK; individualism directed at making the best of yourself and doing better than others. Society becomes afraid of what another might do to you – spouse, boss, neighbour.

How can trust be promoted? Caring for others needs to be developed. Parents are of prime importance but Richard believes that schools are also important to develop inner strength and confidence. Schools are changing to incorporate greater psychological awareness, and more awareness of how the other is feeling. The new approach must be combined with values that foster the idea that kindness is not in order that other children will be nice to you, it is simply the right way to behave to be a decent person. Also there is a need for new school programmes to teach life skills in areas of sex, alcohol and drugs as part of a more general programme of overall well-being and values (the specific programmes do not seem to work alone). Richard is campaigning for these to become specialist subjects with dedicated teaching time and for an evidence based approach. We want a culture that incorporates all the traditions – the perennial philosophy. In a word – compassion. 'Compassion as the compass of our lives.'

On the Saturday afternoon we all participated in a workshop, '**Removing the obstacles to happiness, joy and bliss**', led by **Matthew Fox** on the playing field outside the conference centre. We joined together in singing and circle dancing in the spirit of celebration as an example of group joy inspired by the wisdom of native people. Spirally in and spiralling out in our circle we sang songs to celebrate gratitude and beauty. Matthew stresses the importance of ceremony

and speaks of strengthening the heart against fear, and bringing love and wisdom to everything we do.



Shakti Maira

After the workshop on Saturday afternoon, the speaker was **Shakti Maira** on '**Bliss and beauty – an Indian Vision**'. The Indian view is that experiencing beauty and bliss is the science of well being. First, the purpose of happiness is growth; second, the role of the arts, both practitioner and viewer, is bliss and happiness; and third, beauty is the core wisdom if we really understand the nature of beauty.

Shakti told us the Mango Story of a mango seller who inherited three special mango trees. It was a great year for mangos and the mango seller harvested the mangos and sold them but waited and waited for the time he would taste one of his mangoes for himself - first to buy his motorcycles, then his dish TV, then more fame for being the prize mango seller, and so on, until the end of the season. Then a famous singer came along to buy mangos but the mango seller could not awaken as his soul had sought refuge in the tree refusing to come down because he had been denied a mango for so long. Finally the soul comes down and the mango seller wakes up. The singer invites him to share a few mangoes and the mango seller realises what he had been missing. He is transformed and completes his poem -

'Oh God when the heart desires your mangoes it is sinful to postpone'

The message is 'don't postpone happiness'. We think we have to achieve things first to be happy when happiness is already here.

Shakti, although he studied economics, has been an artist all his

life and became known as a 'spiritual artist'. The highest aim in classical Indian art is transformative bliss.

He introduced an experiential exercise –

'Close your eyes and imagine an experience of beauty. Something that makes you feel and taste beauty. What is the experience?'

Members of the audience answered – oneness, love, peace, happiness, space, and so on – qualities of bliss and transformative experience. Beauty is not so much in the eye of the beholder but in the experience of the beholder.

On the Saturday evening, **Shantha and Devoka Narendra Rao** of **The Annapurna Dance Company** gave us a wonderful evening performance of dance inspired by the great God of dance, Shiva, storytelling the mythology and mysticism, and liberation and joy, through their graceful movement and their beautiful costumes.

On Sunday the first speaker on Sunday morning was **Peter Malinowski** on '**The Happy Brain: The Psychology and Neuroscience of Meditation**'

Peter is a research scientist based at Liverpool John Moores University interested in the neurological characteristics of sustained meditation practice. He has meditated for 20 years with a focus on Buddhist meditation. Meditation is about training the mind to experience its own nature. Buddhism itself is about happiness. It is clear that meditation relaxes the whole system and we do not need neurophysiology to tell us this. The test of whether your meditation works is whether you are happier and the people around you are happier. The fulfilment we are looking for is in the here and now free from expectation and having given up whatever is not ours. If we are not happy there is something wrong in our life. In all aspects of life, happiness is in finding balance – to bring the mind to the here and now. This is similar to the experience of beauty talked about by Shakti – beauty is experienced in the now.

Peter talked of his areas of study in four domains of mental balance –

*Conative balance.* What intentional states are conducive to meditation practice and do different motivations lead to different outcomes?



*Attentional balance* Does meditation improve attentional capacities and are there changes in activity circuitry?

*Cognitive balance* Does meditation change appraisal of experiences or negative thought patterns?

*Affective balance.* Does meditation influence mood and emotion?

Certainly the last three domains are influenced by meditation. Other questions of interest include, what are the changes in state during meditation, what are the enduring effects of meditation, and can meditation be used as a psychological intervention and are such interventions effective?

Peter reviewed published work on brain imaging studies by others. Meditators show increased activity in the region of the brain known to be concerned with attention. An 8-week intervention of mindfulness-based stress reduction results in a shift in frontal brain asymmetry to the left, indicative of good mood and positive effect. Brain regions involved in empathetic responses are activated during loving kindness meditation. Other early studies, based on responses to questionnaires, show that meditators show less judging activity, less tendency to negative thought patterns, less stress, and more optimism. The evidence that meditation leads to changes in brain function is strong and more and more studies are appearing daily.

Our final speaker on the Sunday was **Carol Craig** on **'Positive Psychology: A Common Sense Perspective on Happiness'**

On the previous day, following Richard's talk, Carol had introduced a warning that stirred us all into thought. She warned that we are in danger of turning our schools into treatment centres and by so doing we are demoralising teachers and possibly overprotecting young people. She affirmed that we do need changes – more art, more sport – but not psychological intervention. We need to create conditions for confidence rather than teaching confidence. We were keen to hear more on this.

Carol introduced her concerns and interests at the outset. Her background is political science. She worked with the BBC, and in Training and Development, and later she became very aware of Scots culture.

She is passionate about the need to grapple with the huge materialism of our time. There is something deeply dysfunctional in the culture we live in – the collapse of the banks, the alcoholism and drugs.

Carol is concerned with positive psychology, an area she has been working in for many years. But there are values and pitfalls that need to be considered in this discipline. While there are beneficial aspects of positive psychology, there are dangers as well. Balance is needed depending on the context. There is joy and celebration, but also grief. There is living in the present but future is also important.

Martin Seligman, the originator of positive psychology, realised that his profession was focussed on the negative and clinical. Psychology was concerned with what was wrong with people and not about what was right. The science of good character and virtue was lost. Seligman set up positive psychology to counteract this with focus on appreciation of strengths, positive emotions and enhancing lives, of the individual as well as society.

Positive psychology starts with the idea that the brain is hard wired for pessimism. It is easy to be fearful, depressed and anxious, and one could argue that these are valuable survival traits. People mainly remember the negative – criticism rather than compliment, losing £10 and not finding it, just missing the bus. It is easier to imagine the negative. Positive psychology claims it very important to be positive. When we are fearful the field of vision is restricted. Positive people are more likely to be creative, in good health and in good relationships.

Positive psychology was very influential in America; it was highly idealistic and arrogant in the notion that it would change the world, that the social movement around it would influence public policy. But some disillusionment in positive psychology has occurred when this is not always supported by the evidence. The trials carried out on selected groups were not reproducible in other cultures and other groups. There is evidence for a small limited range of interventions of positive psychology that have mild effects that do not last. Carol

wonders whether this judgement is too harsh. There have been only 10 years to make these observations. But if we are looking at a problem is it appropriate to try to change the people rather than tackling the problem? Positive psychology should be a balancing of all psychology rather than a separate discipline. You cannot eliminate at the social level complaint and criticism. These may be more effective in some instances. A lot of changes take place due to public disgust and protest. Negativity is often incredibly important.

Carol then takes the example of schools. Teachers join the profession wanting to do good. The structure in which they work is the problem. Teachers are plagued by parents – every falling out is bullying. Parents think that anything that hurts their child is a wrong at the school. This leads to over protection of young people. Carol thinks we should also be careful about 'self esteem' programmes. If we are worried about what teachers are doing that might undermine a child's confidence this may well eliminate constructive criticism, school sports (do not want winners and losers), and undo the link between academic performance and self esteem. Within the self esteem bracket, telling young people that they are most important, we might end up with narcissistic and fragile children with inflated egos. Carol reminded us that all literature on spiritual practice is about shrinking the self.

The conference ended in the usual way with the **Open Forum** involving the speakers and members of the audience with more discussion on the themes of the conference. **David Lorimer** in summing up the conference finds the take home message is the realisation that we are dealing with fundamental issues – psychological, social, cultural, educational. We are at a stage of human crisis with the opportunity to transform all into something new. It would be too easy to go back to 'business as usual' (to the state of being that got us into trouble in the first place). The key words to formulate our own contributions for the future are - compassion (a culture of love), connection (belonging and meaning), biophilia (the love of life and living), beauty and wisdom.

# Growth and Happiness: a Mystics & Scientists Postscript

Keith Beasley

*As the recession bites, many of us know that we have to change our way of relating to the world. We would also love to be joyous in our lives. But is it asking too much to grow and be joyous at the same time?*

**T**here is no doubt that the Network's annual conference, this year exploring *The Science of Happiness and the Experience of Bliss*, inspired all who'd travelled physically to Winchester and mentally to a wonderful space of openness and willingness to share. As usual at such gatherings it was the comment that, although not a focus of the presentations, stuck in one's mind that provided an opportunity for deeper reflection. For me it was a heartfelt observation made by David Lorimer during the opening session, that we can be happy or we can be growing . . . but to do both at the same time seems almost impossible. This conclusion resonated deeply with me. Whilst periods of joy can increasingly be found, I seem to have to go through long and often prolonged periods that are far from joyous. Why is this? What is going on here?

In response to David's observation someone, I think it was Shakti Maira, suggested that we can learn through happiness. Indeed we can, as Maira's own presentation on 'Ananda': bliss and transformative joy through aesthetic experiences, helped us to see. Engaging fully in any art form can be both blissful and enabling of inner growth . . . as those of us who enjoyed the weekend's dancing will testify! Likewise, we can work through difficult moments by creating song or poetry. But can all our necessary spiritual development be achieved in this way? That certainly has not been my experience.

Answers may well come from examination of the common themes that emerged at *Mystics and Scientists* 32:

## 1. Happiness with depth.

Both Shakti Maira and Matthew Fox, from Hindu and indigenous American cultures respectively, reminded us that ancient wisdom teaches us that happiness is not about walking around with a constant smile on our face. Rather it is a deeper sense of inner peace and 'rightness' about life, which embraces both the highs of bliss and the lows of pain. Indeed, although far from the normal definition of happiness, true inner and profound contentment comes when we can feel as much a part of the collective human suffering, as when we can celebrate the joy of life. To be joyous at this level means changing our whole inner vocabulary. Before we can deepen our experience of happiness we probably need to significantly broaden our mental image of what we mean by the notion.

## 2. Experiencing

The point was made, particularly in discussions following Carol Craig's presentation, that both inner peace and growth come about through the experience of living . . . not from being taught mental concepts. We have become too caught up with what we think about things and lost touch with our range of feelings. Rarely do we truly experience the things that are happening to and around us. We've become very good at analysing, labeling and judging things (and other people), but had our wonder at new experiences squeezed out of us. 'Growth' requires that we reconnect to our childlike sense of adventure, which in turn requires disabling our analytical mind.

## 3. The thing, not the words

Closely linked to the above is the philosophical idea, unusually agreed

upon by most, if not all philosophers, and nicely stated by Krishnamurti: 'the word is not the thing, the description is not the thing described'. Words and concepts are not, and cannot be, the thing (or experience) they describe. And yet, in our heads we have, often hard wired, notions as to what 'happiness', for example, is. Worse still, we are attached to these ideas. It is not just a restricted idea as to what happiness might be that we need to change, but the idea that the description actually matters!

## 4. Collective cultural beliefs

We are also, as again was highlighted in a number of presentations, both a product and part of our culture, with all its attitudes and beliefs. Richard Layard, for example, identified the extent to which our society is run on competitive rather than compassionate values.

This collective mindset means that even if we are willing and able, at a personal level, to rise above such embedded beliefs, those around us may not. Being unconventional in our views puts us under pressure to conform to the prevailing beliefs; i.e. To the rational mind set. Although we can only change ourselves, we know (at some level) that it is the whole human world-view that needs to change. To make matters worse, a key feature of this mentality is, in many societies, that we're not 'meant' to enjoy ourselves!

## 5. Acceptance

One factor that I have found that seems particularly to make our growth process less that joyous is our need to accept. Accepting pain and suffering . . . and how different we all are, for example. Accepting all the above ideas of alternative ways of thinking

inevitably challenges our, usually over-inflated, egos. They do not want to change . . . anything. Even when we learn to rise above ego reactions, rather than fight them, a huge effort of attention and awareness is required. It is difficult to be joyous when making such efforts.

Peter Malinowski shed some light on the mechanics of this through research using brain scan results: whilst individuals experienced at meditating generate gamma waves, known to relate to relaxation, large mental activity was still detected. It was only advanced meditators, who had sufficiently changed something (we don't yet know what) in their mind/brain functioning, who used less effort in their meditating. It seems that, unless we are born with an enlightened mind, to think in a transcendent manner, takes much mental energy. This could well explain why our growth process feels like such hard work. Could this be further explained by the mind having to undo all the hard-wired, conditioned, thought patterns that currently emphasize rational over other thoughts?

### Conclusion

Take all these points together and we can see the scale of our endeavour. Our aim is nothing short of changing our whole way of thinking; transcending rational thought to embrace both it and the pre-rational (intuitive, flowing, way of using the mind) that most of the speakers at Winchester referred to. In short, our whole consciousness is evolving. And we are the forerunners of this post-modern approach to life. Phrased this way, is it perhaps not surprising that we struggle a bit?

Members of the Network and others like us are thus, perhaps, more akin to the very first humans to have experienced fire. Somehow our earliest ancestors knew it was an important thing to do, although they didn't really understand it. Something in them, we humans, prompted us to persevere in our endeavours, despite the undoubted objections of others in the community who would surely have been 'sore afraid' at the very first flames created by mankind. Likewise many within our communities now are 'sore afraid' at giving up rational control of their thinking process. But the

evolutionary process is most definitely well underway. Before cavemen could enjoy the pleasure of sitting around a campfire sharing stories, they had to go through the pain of burnt fingers and unpleasantness of choking smoke. Before post-modern man can enjoy living from our inner fire enabled by transcendent thought, we probably have to dry out our soggy old thought patterns!

Overall, this was a great weekend. It is extraordinary how the SMN gathers our mystics and scientists together in a harmonious way. We have experienced bliss through beauty and contemplated the need for the return of the sacred. We have considered the neural correlates of happiness and the fostering of well being through education. The message is that happiness is not something to get, nor somewhere to go, but a state of being already ours as we move between the mountain and the marketplace.

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Peter Fenwick, Shakti Maira, Peter Malinowski, Carol Craig and Matthew Fox



# Towards a Science of Consciousness Conference Hong Kong, China, June 2009

*Max Payne*

**H**ong Kong, once a remote outpost of the Empire, is now a vibrant ultra capitalist enclave of capitalist communist China with swarms of high rise buildings dwarfing the occasional Victorian church. Its 21st century rapid transit rail system puts the 19th century London tube to shame. As the 19th was the British century and the 20th the America, then if the 21st is to be the Chinese, then it seems that it will be because China has become more western than the West. Yet Hong Kong strives hard to pay tribute to traditional Chinese culture. Under the arches of a motorway flyover there is a large park which is a reconstruction of a Tang dynasty garden. The edges are banked up with trees so that the noise and sights of modern Hong Kong are hidden. Inside there is a delicate pattern of trees, rocks and water designed to awaken relaxed contemplation and harmony with the beauty of nature. It succeeds, but a viable synthesis between 21st century modernity and traditional Chinese values has yet to be achieved.

Consciousness Studies has yet to achieve an even more fundamental synthesis. This was made clear by Susan Greenfield's opening address. She showed how sophisticated optical imaging techniques can enable the neurophysiologist to relate the activity of brain cells more precisely to the internal subjective phenomenology of emotional moods and conscious awareness. She argued that the physical correlates of consciousness are not to be found in particular macro scale areas of the brain, or in individual neurones, but in complex networks of neurones. The larger the network, the more vivid and the more aware the experience was. In the last powerpoint frame of her presentation she showed a list of neuronal networks at the top, and a list of subjective inner experiences at

the bottom. One third of the screen was the blank space between the two. She had not, she insisted, showed how one converted to the other. Very few other speakers thought they had bridged the gap either, and their talks sat squarely one side of the divide or the other. Ovid Tzeng showed how the complex processes involved in reading Chinese characters are located on one side of the brain, whereas reading an alphabetic European script involves the other hemisphere. Japanese who have a stroke affecting one side of the brain can read their syllabic script, but not the Chinese characters that form their Kanji. A stroke affecting the other side of the brain has exactly the reverse effect on them.

As befits an Asian Consciousness Studies conference, on the other side of the divide there were a number of contributions on yoga and the inward exploration of the dimensions of consciousness, though none of them made contact with scientific neurophysiology. However Ramesh Manocha presented the results of an Australian survey. He argued that the only valid meditation technique was one which led to the silence beyond the active mind. This was what the Upanishads, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Zen Buddhism and Taoism all aimed for. In the Australian study 350 meditators were contacted who had done this mediation for at least 2 years and upwards to 30. They were found to have better than average mental and physical health on the test of the measurement of eight standard parameters. They also scored higher than the practitioners of other systems of meditation.

As usual with these conferences, this one was too large to form continuous personal contacts, and had too many parallel sessions for any participant to grasp everything that was going on. The quantum physics group wrestled with the obvious interconnection between the collapse of the wave equation and the consciousness of the observer. It was agreed that the paradox of Schrödinger's cat can be disposed of since the cat itself knows whether it is alive or dead. Further advance, however, appeared difficult. Some fringe participants were quite certain that they had solved the matter into mind problem. All their solutions were confidently put forward, and all were different.

This conference gave the sense that the axis of history is turning. Previous academic conferences on consciousness studies were dominated by those who thought that advances in brain imaging techniques really would enable mind to be reduced to matter. That confidence is now evaporating fast. The new problem is how to investigate the inner dimensions of consciousness. Throughout history exceptional individuals have reached into the higher levels of transpersonal consciousness. They have produced enlightenment, wisdom, obscurantism, and confusion all in equal measure. In what way will it be possible to advance into this area in a way which is scientific, or meta-scientific? Small as the SMN may be in numbers, its guidelines of openness, rigour, and mutual respect and love must surely indicate the best way forward,

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of the Network.*