

# What Does It Mean to Be Truly Happy ?

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Are you happy with your life right now? This is the question I was asked by a child at an orphanage in the Philippines. How would you answer this question?

When I was asked this question, I couldn't give an answer immediately. Why not? It was because I had never thought deeply about what happiness really means to me.

In fact, Japan as a country ranks quite low in the global happiness rankings. Why is this? Relationships? Academic stress? Financial issues? Health issues? Worries about the future? Or maybe, we just don't think about what happiness is.

This summer, I traveled to the Philippines, where two particular experiences made me question and redefine what happiness means to me. Let me share these experiences with you.

The first was my encounter with Linda, a woman living in a community called Payatas, once home to the largest garbage landfill in the Philippines. As I walked through the streets of Payatas, I was overwhelmed by the smell of garbage, rotting food, and animal waste. Linda invited us to her "home," a small shack built from scraps of metal and plastic from the landfill. The floor was bare earth, moreover, she had no electricity or running water, and the air inside was unpleasant, hot and humid.

Despite these harsh living conditions, Linda greeted me with a big warm smile. She and her husband lived humbly, supporting each other. Linda worked as a landfill scavenger, earning the equivalent of only 300 yen a day. She spoke with pride about owning her home, humble though it was. Most of all, she valued her family and seemed generally happy in her life. Looking at Linda's circumstances, compared to how we live in Japan, it seems inconceivable to us that Linda should be happy. But she was.

My second experience was at a children's orphanage. I stayed there and

interacted with the children. These kids, aged 6 to 16, had to live through unimaginable hardships. Many were once street children, forced to beg and survive in dangerous and harsh conditions. They were abandoned or orphaned due to various reasons and had no access to education until they arrived at this Japanese NGO run facility.

Given their history, what kind of children do you imagine they were? Sad? Withdrawn? Aggressive? Frightened? Lacking self-confidence? On the contrary, I thought they were incredible. Some children were passionate about studying, determined to create a better future for themselves. Others worked hard every morning, waking up very early to prepare meals, clean and do laundry to become better, responsible individuals. They dreamed of having warm families of their own in the future. These children were bright, kind, and filled with resilience.

When they asked me, “Are you happy?” I couldn’t answer. When I asked them the same question, they said without hesitation that they were happy. Despite their difficult past experiences, they were filled with gratitude for the smallest of things and held onto hope for a brighter future. Their resilience and sense of happiness left a lasting impression on me.

After I returned to Japan, I reflected on my own life. I realized how fortunate I am to have access to clean water, hot showers and a bath, a comfortable bed in a large clean house, good food, clean environment, the latest technology, money to spend, and most importantly, my family. These are all things we take for granted in our daily lives in Japan. But they are not a given for everyone.

So, let me ask you again, are you happy with your life right now? In our privileged environment, where we have most of what we desire, we may focus too much on material things, or desire what others have, in the process losing sight of our happiness. But, happiness exists in the small moments, in the people around us and in our everyday lives.

Now, I can confidently answer: Yes, I am happy. Because, I’ve realized something important about happiness-it’s not something which you have to constantly search for. It’s already here, surrounding us.