

“A thought-provoking guide to sustained happiness.”

—SHAWN ACHOR, AUTHOR OF *Before Happiness*
& *The Happiness Advantage*

the
five
thieves
of
happiness

.....

Bestselling author of
*The Five Secrets
You Must Discover
Before You Die*

.....

JOHN IZZO PhD

Foreword by MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

advanced praise

“Most of us are waiting for happiness to be given to us from the ‘outside.’ John shows us how to find it on the ‘inside.’ I hope this book helps you as much as it helped me.”

— **Marshall Goldsmith**, Bestselling Author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

“A powerful guide to becoming world-class happy.”

— **Robin Sharma**, Bestselling Author of *The Leader Who Had No Title* and *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*

“Brilliantly conceived, beautifully written, and thoroughly engaging. It's a sparkling gem of a book, rich in timeless wisdom and abounding in contemporary truths—a book that you will want to return to again and again as you ponder what it means to live a good life.”

— **Jim Kouzes**, Co-Author of *The Leadership Challenge*

“The only things holding you back from complete peace of mind are mental, and this book shows you how to remove these barriers once and for all.”

— **Brian Tracy**, Author of *The Power of Self-Confidence*

“*Five Thieves* is a perfect complement to *Five Secrets*. Dr. Izzo gives us not only a pencil with which to sketch the good but now the eraser to rid the bad.”

— **Dr. Geoff Smart**, Founder and Chairman, ghSMART, and Co-Author of *Who*

the five thieves of happiness

SHARE



BUY



JOHN IZZO PhD



BK[®]

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc
a BK Life book

the first thief: control

Most of you probably know the story of the Buddha.

Siddhārtha Gautama is believed to have been born a prince in India between 580 and 460 BCE.¹ His father wished to protect him and prepare him for the life of a king, but he had a premonition that if his son ever saw suffering he would become a holy man. The king orchestrated the young prince's life, prohibiting him from seeing religious gurus and surrounding him with youth so that he would not see the ravages of old age, suffering, and death.

At the age of 29, Siddhārtha decided to leave the palace grounds to meet his subjects. The story goes that soon after leaving the palace, he encountered an old man, later a diseased man, then a decaying corpse, and finally an ascetic (someone who renounces the pleasures of earthly life to withdraw to a simple lifestyle for spiritual reasons). Having never seen suffering or death, the prince realized that we age, that we get sick, and that we ultimately die, and it sent him into a deep depression and ultimately into a period of years leading the life of an ascetic, renouncing all earthly pleasures. Yet after his almost six

years of living the ascetic life, that path failed to alleviate his internal seeking.

After nearly dying at the age of 35, he found himself under a Bodhi tree, where he famously vowed not to rise until he had discovered a path out of the internal suffering in which all human beings are trapped. It is said that he sat there for 49 days until he found enlightenment and discovered what became known as the four noble truths.

Although it is not named as such, it is the thief we are about to explore that sent the Buddha on his journey. The first thief of happiness is named *control*. This thief wants us to believe that we can control life rather than accept life on its terms. The great truth that came to the Buddha was that what causes unhappiness is the craving for life to be other than what it is.

It is the nature of life that there are many things out of our control. As humans we will suffer, we will become sick, and we will ultimately die. These are the three truths about life that sent the young prince into a depression. He ultimately came to realize that it was not the hard truths about life that rob us of happiness, causing suffering, but rather our resistance to those truths. It was our craving for control that keeps us from true inner peace.

the monkey with the clenched fist

This thief makes us like the monkeys of Southeast Asia who were captured at one time by locals through a simple yet cruel trick. Sweets were placed all around a tree, and a coconut was hollowed out, leaving a hole just large enough for a monkey to slip his hand through. Inside was placed a sweet. The other side of the coconut had a bolt that was chained to a tree. When the monkeys came and ate the sweets spread around the tree, one monkey would inevitably pick up the coconut, reach inside,

and grab the treat. But the hole was not big enough to get the clenched fist out.

The monkey would often try desperately to carry off the coconut, but, try as he might, the coconut could never be taken nor the sweet removed from its shell. The only thing the monkey had to do to be free was unclench his fist and let go of the sweet. Yet most monkeys fought until utterly exhausted. The islanders would simply capture the monkey in that exhausted state. The monkey's undoing was his own attachment and inability to let go.

attention without attachment

Happiness is knowing what we can control and accepting what we cannot control. At the most basic level, happiness comes from understanding that we *can* control our actions and our responses to things external to us, but we *cannot* control the results of our actions. Focusing on our actions brings happiness; focusing on the result of our actions brings unhappiness.

The Buddha and Jesus often appear to the casual reader to be very different in their approaches to enlightenment or salvation (the two terms used in each tradition). In fact, the more one examines the teachings of each, the more one sees the way that both teachers emphasize the need to surrender to that which is at any moment. This is why the Buddhist Thích Nhất Hạnh has written extensively about the similarities of each teacher.

When Jesus encouraged his followers to look to the flowers of the field as role models because they did not seek, he was making a very important spiritual point. When he said, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?”² he was making the same point. It is not the lack of control that brings suffering but the desire for control, which keeps us from lasting happiness and peace.



One of the big moments in my own life was when I first understood the distinction between attention and attachment. *Attention* is the energy and choices I make, whereas *attachment* is an inner desire to control what is inherently uncontrollable. Another way to think about this is to see it as intention without tension. Having goals in life, or even desires of what we want to happen in any particular situation, is not a problem in terms of our happiness. It is when we become attached to controlling an outcome that the thief starts to rob us. The theft of our happiness rarely comes from our intentions but from the tension we feel when attached to the outcomes of things.

How do we know the difference between attention and attachment? Attention is about taking action in the present moment toward hoped-for ends, whereas attachment is becoming wed to a particular outcome's being the source of our happiness.

I play a great deal of tennis, and this point can be illustrated easily there. Happiness on the tennis court is found in the experience of the body playing the game, the joy of experiencing the way the body, the racquet, and the ball all become one. In my most sublime moments playing tennis, my focus is simply on being fully present in the game, attentive to how I am hitting the ball and moving my feet. The moment I become focused primarily on whether I am going to win a point is the very moment when tennis becomes a source of unhappiness. Of course, I have the intention of winning a point and even the match, but this is an outcome I cannot control. What I can control is my intention to be as fully in the game as possible at every moment.

Life is much like that tennis game. We are happiest when we are simply fully present in each moment, expressing our intention through our focus and unattached to the outcome as the source of happiness.

Often we discover that the outcome—the goal we have become attached to—turns out to be less rewarding than the striving (the intention). My partner, Janice, tried out for the national baseball team in Canada for 18 years! For almost two decades, she worked hard, played hard, and practiced hard, and every year she tried to win a spot on the roster. Every year she failed to make it until finally, after all those years, she was given a spot. You would think, of course, that the outcome would have been the highlight of all that struggle. The opposite turned out to be the case. Getting on the team was anticlimactic compared with the present-moment focus, year after year, of trying to be the best player she could possibly be, both on the field and in the inner mental game. Besides, she could not control the outcome, so the more she focused on the process, the happier she was.

control is an illusion; the present moment is real

Two of the most obvious things we try to control are the past and the future. Of course, we cannot control that which has already happened, and we cannot control that which has not yet occurred. The twins of regret and worry (first cousins of control) take away moment-to-moment contentment. Each time we find ourselves indulging in regret or worry, we are letting this thief take away our natural state of being present.

One of the things the thieves do is rob us of something that is naturally ours and leave in its place a false truth that brings us misery. This thief puts on the disguise of intentionality, which is a good thing, then robs us of our happiness by making us focus on controlling the outcomes of our life. Being in the present moment, accepting whatever is at that moment (letting go of the clenched fist) is the door to happiness, but the thief

wants us to believe that if we try hard enough we will be able to control the outcomes of our life.

all suffering is resistance to whatever is

A principle to bear in mind is that almost all internal suffering comes from resistance to whatever is true at any moment. It is not the happenings of our life that lead to unhappiness but the desire to control them rather than accept whatever the present moment serves up. Don't confuse this acceptance with passivity. Remember intention without tension, focus without attachment. Wanting or trying to achieve something is not the source of unhappiness, but the desire for control of outcome is.

Imagine, for example, a person who grew up believing that one day they would win a gold medal in the Olympics. There is nothing wrong with wanting a gold medal, but if I crave a gold medal as the source of my happiness, the love of the sport itself will elude me. Every experience will merely be either a step toward or away from that goal. If I don't achieve the goal, disappointment will be my reward. The word for "attachment" in Tibetan is *dö chag*, which literally means "sticky desire." Desire is good; a sticky attachment to outcome is not. That person cannot control getting a gold medal, but they can be fully present in all the steps toward that goal. This also means not being resistant to whatever natural element find yourself in; seek only to ask how you can flourish in that element.

Nature is a great teacher about the practice of nonresistance in this way. When I was on my self-imposed sabbatical in the Peruvian Andes, I thought of this when I saw a small tree that had literally grown atop a boulder in a river. The tree would surely have preferred to have taken seed in a nice clearing in the woods, where life would be easy, but this is the place it found

itself. In this unlikely place, it had flourished by working with the elements around it rather than resisting them.

Although a present-moment focus—being always in the present moment—is most strongly associated with Buddhism, the value of focusing on the present appears in nearly all spiritual and philosophical traditions. Many people mistakenly believe that the secret to happiness is to have this present-moment focus, but the real secret is to let go of control. We tell ourselves to “stay in the moment,” as if just by staying in the moment we will be happy. What we miss is that staying in the moment is not what brings happiness. What brings inner peace is acceptance of whatever is happening in the present moment. There is nothing inherently unhelpful about thinking about the future or about the past; it is the desire for control that changes the landscape.

Let me illustrate. If I sit for an hour and daydream about the future, let’s say a trip I am to take soon or my coming wedding day, this can be a very pleasurable activity. Likewise I could spend an hour reminiscing about a pleasant or even painful past experience of my life. This too can be pleasurable and perhaps even useful, if it gives me insight into my current choices.

The problem arrives when control shows up. As we think about our wedding day, we may fret that it might rain, or what if Uncle Bill drinks too much and gets angry, or maybe I won’t be as beautiful a bride as my sister was, and on it goes. The thief knows we have no control over these things but keeps telling us that if we worry enough (hold our fist tight enough), somehow we will find peace. The opposite of course is true: when we imagine future things that may happen that worry us, we must be mindful of the thief and brush it aside. The future cannot be controlled, only experienced. Happiness does not depend on that outcome.

There is also nothing inherently unhelpful about reflecting on the past. For example, I might find myself thinking about a

failed relationship, along with mistakes I might wish to correct. The feelings of regret are not the source of unhappiness so much as the desire to control the past. Of course, I have no control over that. The past is what it is. We can learn from it and carry new intentions into our present decisions. So long as I mindfully accept that which is at any given moment, including the past, I am always keeping the thief in its proper place. Many people spend hours of misery wishing they could relive decisions from their past when what is required is simple acceptance.

Don't confuse letting go of control with becoming passive about influencing the course of your life. Remember that it is not the intention that brings unhappiness; it is the attachment.

training your mind to let go of control

Being forced into an experience that keeps you firmly in the present moment, surrendering that false sense of control that may give you tentative relief but never true inner peace, can be a very powerful thing. The thief robs us of our natural capacity to be in the present, accepting whatever is at each moment (attention without tension) and leaves in its place the false belief that if I try hard enough to control all that surrounds me, I will find peace.

One of the experiences that taught me to keep this thief at bay was walking the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain in the summer of 2015. The Camino is a 750-kilometer pilgrimage that Christians have been taking for a thousand years, ending at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain, where the bones of the Apostle James are believed to be buried. Although it was once a spiritual experience exclusively for Christians, *The Way*, as it is often referred to, is now walked by people of all faiths, ages, and persuasions for many reasons.

My reasons for walking the Camino were several, among them to learn to be more fully present moment to moment. I walked an average of about 20 miles per day. The day would often start with two hours of walking, at or just before sunrise, to arrive for a light breakfast at the first place that seemed right that morning. As I began the day, I never knew how far I would walk, where I would stay, whom I might meet, or how my body would react.

In the beginning of my journey, I tried to map out each day, control with whom I would walk, determine where and what I would eat, plan the village where I would sleep, and so on. Yet it was not long before I realized that the Camino had its own lessons to teach. All the things I wanted badly to control became so evidently out of my control as the miles and days passed.

Some days my body was in the mood to walk forever, and other days some small muscle pull, a problem with a foot, the heat of the day, or an encounter with a fellow pilgrim (the word given to those who walk the Camino, *peregrine* in Spanish) would dictate the pace. I often had my mind set on staying in a particular village or hostel, only to discover that all the beds were already taken. My mind would get set on that wonderful freshly squeezed Valencia orange juice and the homemade potato tortillas from the cafés consumed gleefully for several days, only to discover that for the next five days the search for what had been omnipresent was in vain. It was not long before I began to see the parallel between the walk on the Camino and the walk of life. The more I took the Camino as it came to me, rather than being wed to some perfect plan, the greater the contentment and peace I discovered.

Yet it was my desire to control other people that taught me the most powerful lessons on the Camino. On the first few days of my journey, I met two German pilgrims whom I liked a great

deal. Walking with them was enjoyable, and we struck up an immediate friendship. For the first few nights, we stayed in the same hostels, often in multibed rooms. Then one morning as we began our day, one of them said, "I am going to stay longer for breakfast." The other companion started to walk faster than me, and soon she too was gone. I had become wed to walking with them for many days, but suddenly both of them were gone and I was on my own.

I so much wanted to control my Camino experience. As the walk continued, some of the people I connected with would show up again and again. Others shared with me an amazing hour of deep spiritual connection, never to appear again. The thief kept me wanting to control whom I connected with and how long we stayed connected, to avoid the loss of people I had come to care about or even to conjure up just the right person when needed.

It was not my intentions that caused me to suffer but my attachment to control. Because intent isn't wrong, I realized that my desire to connect with certain people wasn't the problem. But I couldn't control the desires of others or the various circumstances that might cause my path to diverge from theirs. After more days and miles went by, more and more I found myself staying in the present moment, open to all that might appear. When the thief would show up, I gently noticed it and ushered it to the door.

Think of all the things in your life that you want to be constant. Think of the expectations we hold on to about our careers, the goals we must achieve, the people in our lives, and even the events of a particular day. Know that having intentions is fine but that holding on to them like that monkey, when life is not under your control, will bring you unhappiness. The more you allow this metaphor to sink into your conscious mind, the more you will see how we cling to control, how we bang the

coconut of life against a tree, trying to set the sweet free. But freedom is found not inside the coconut but in the unclenching of the fist in the present moment, accepting whatever is happening right now.

control in relationships

The thief shows up in our daily relationships as well. For example, we spend much of our time trying to control others, leading to unending internal suffering. If you are angry at me and I apologize, I want very much to control your reaction. My desire for your forgiveness robs me of my happiness, when I should focus on what I can control, which is my sincere apology. This is a subtle but important distinction. Focusing on my apology is within my control; how you respond to it is not.

Perhaps I want to control how my intimate partner feels loved. Perhaps for me love is expressed through touch, but for my partner love is experienced through acts of service or kindness. My desire to control the other's experience of love will cause me a great deal of suffering, whereas an acceptance of how they experience love will bring me peace. It seems to me that the source of much suffering in intimate relationships comes from the presence of control, when we want our partners to act and be the way *we* want them to be.

Let me share a personal example. My ex-wife and I were together for 15 years. Although there were many downs in the relationship, there were also moments of incredible happiness, joyous experiences with our family, as well as good work that we did together. After we split, my ex seemed to feel the need to diminish our relationship and to see the time we spent together as a "mistake" and perhaps a waste of those precious years. She rarely talked about the good times, focusing instead on the ways we had disappointed each other. For me those years had been a

time of great learning for both of us and a necessary part of our journey. Together we had done important work in the world and likely discovered important aspects of ourselves while bringing inspiration to others.

For several years after we ended the relationship, I had a strong desire to get her to see those years the way I did, to have her validate to me that she saw them as worthy. She would often show up in my dreams, which always involved, in some form, my trying to resolve this difference. Then one day a good friend said to me, “You want to control how she sees your years together and expresses that to you, but you cannot do it. You can control only how *you* see your years together.”

In that moment it was as if a veil was suddenly lifted from my eyes. The thief of my happiness was my desire to control that which I was unable to control. It was not her view of our life together that took away my peace; it was my unrealistic focus on controlling her view. From that moment forward, whenever I had the desire to seek that validation from her I would instead focus on what I could fully control, which was my seeing those years as precious and important even if tumultuous. I let go of my sticky desire for an outcome over which I had no control. Interestingly, to this day she has never again visited me in dreams as an unresolved conflict.

surrender—the oppositional force

The opposite of control is *surrender*: complete acceptance of whatever is at any moment. Here is a simple example. All day long you are looking forward to a game of golf, but the weather forecast is dicey. There is a 50 percent chance of rain. You anxiously watch the skies and check the weather radar and forecast. You know, of course, that you cannot control the weather, but you persist. You cling to the idea of needing to play that game to

be happy. When your tee time approaches, the sky is clear, only to suddenly darken, leading to a washout. The thief has ruined your entire day. Rather than surrender to that which is—it may rain or it may not, and I have no control over either outcome—you resisted what simply is. Surrender literally means to stop fighting the natural flow of things.

It is not about inaction; it's about taking action from a place of what I call *surrender energy*. There is no problem with reflecting on what my plan B will be if the game is rained out or on how I might fit the game in next week. What I won't do is let control keep me from the simple act of surrendering to whatever is happening right now.

This thief is also very tricky, affecting us in very subtle ways. A friend of mine is in a relationship in which there was a betrayal by her male partner. The couple almost split up over it. She told me recently that she used to long for him to ask her to marry him and that she would proudly wear his ring. Now she says she no longer desires that ring because “what if one day he decides to leave me again, and I am left with the embarrassment of his choosing to leave me as his wife rather than his girlfriend?”

Our desire to control often means we want to control future hurt, emotions, and events that may or may not occur. In this case, my friend and her partner had made great progress as a couple since the betrayal. They were well on their way to building a better relationship than they had ever had. Yet she wanted to control the possibility of embarrassment and hurt that might happen down the road. By allowing the thief to trick her into thinking that she could control all future hurt, she was actually fencing out the possibility of truly having what she wanted, which was a long-term commitment. Of course, she might get hurt and her partner could embarrass her again, but by allowing the thief to dominate, she was fencing out true happiness as much as potential hurt.

This thief wants us to wall ourselves off in some safe corner with a helmet on so that we can protect against every eventual-ity. But as the Buddha discovered when he left the palace, we cannot control the possibility of suffering, but we *can* choose to tame our desire for control, ultimately leading to inner contentment. When the thief is banned, we can take life on its own terms and then sit like the Buddha, calm and ready for that which is.

kicking the thief out of your house

At this point you hopefully see how thief named control robs us of our happiness. But how do we get the thief out of the house? The first step is to recognize that this is *your* house. Many spiritual traditions speak of the mind as a temple or a palace. This is a helpful metaphor because a temple is a sacred place, meant to be cared for in the most meticulous manner. Your inner house is the temple of your happiness. Because your happiness resides in the temple of your mind, it is your prerogative to decide who gets into that temple and who gets to stay.

Although perhaps apocryphal, there is an instructive story about someone the Buddha encountered soon after his experience under the Bodhi tree. A stranger he passed on the road was so struck by the Buddha's calm radiance that he asked him, "Are you a god?"

The Buddha replied, "No. I am not."

"What are you then?" the man asked.

And the Buddha simply said, "I am awake."

The peace that the Buddha exuded was simply that of one who was awake.

Being awake is about being mindful—truly noticing what is going on. A simple definition of *mindfulness* is "the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete

awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis.”³ To be awake and mindful is to have a heightened sense of awareness of what is going on in your inner mind, the temple of your happiness.

The two key elements of mindfulness are moment-to-moment awareness and nonjudgment. When we are mindful, we are consistently aware of what is happening in our inner mind and in a place of curiosity rather than judgment. Once we understand these two concepts, we are prepared to learn how to master the thieves. Though we want to kick them out of the house, we must recognize that a thief is part of our own inner nature, not some foreign visitor. Humans like to control things, and at times that serves us well; but when we let our desire for control rule the house, we find misery rather than happiness.

We cannot always control our instinctual thoughts, but we can be mindful by noticing them, by being in a place of non-judgment, and then choosing a different path. We can decide what thought patterns get a permanent bedroom in our inner temple. We must recognize that the thoughts we allow to rule us are a choice. But many people act as though they are not in charge of their own minds, such as wanting to control the future by incessant worrying.

The final and most critical aspect of mindfulness is the capacity to gently brush aside something once we become aware of it. This step is critical when it comes to changing any behavior that ultimately doesn't serve us.

To explain this let me tell you about my first experiences learning meditation. My first meditation teacher was Deborah Klein, who was the wife of my co-author for my first book, *Awakening Corporate Soul: Four Paths to Unleash the Power of People at Work*. Deborah had practiced yoga for many years. Although the core idea of meditation is to quiet the mind, training it to stay in the present moment, the greater goal of

meditation is to become the master of the inner temple. Many people talk about what is called the *monkey mind*, which is a Buddhist term meaning “unsettled; restless; capricious; whimsical; fanciful; inconstant; confused; indecisive; uncontrollable.”⁴ The goal of meditation is to train the mind to be the opposite of this: aware, awake, and constant.

When I first started meditating, it was difficult to quiet my mind; some worry, task, or thought would invade my peace. I asked Deborah, “What do I do when distracting thoughts come into my mind?”

She said, “When a distracting thought comes into your mind, I want you to simply be aware of it and then imagine your hand gently brushing it aside, as if to say, ‘Not now.’”

In other words, with no judgment or resistance but instead with calm awareness, notice the thought and then sweep it aside. This is a subtle but important part of working with thieves and training our minds for happiness. The last thing we should do is scold ourselves for the thief’s presence. That which we resist persists.

I admit that it took many hours of training before this distracted mind could be trained to focus. In the beginning it felt like I was having to constantly imagine my hands brushing aside thoughts. But soon I realized a powerful truth, one that forever changed how I saw everything in my inner world. I realized that I am awake and alert; I am in control of my mind. The temple has a ruler, and it is me. Soon the habit of clearing the mind dominated the habit of allowing whatever thought arrived to take up residence.

the three steps

Let’s apply this idea of mindfulness to the thieves. When I am going through my day and a thief arrives, I follow three simple

steps: *notice*, *stop*, and *replace*. First we recognize the presence of the thief, then we stop the thief by gently brushing it aside, and then we choose to allow a different thought to dominate. To build on the thief metaphor, we must first catch the thief (notice), then arrest the thief (stop), and then throw the thief out or at least reform it (replace).

Here is an illustration from an earlier example. I have my heart set on playing golf this evening because I believe that golf will make me happy on this day. I obsessively keep checking the iffy forecast all morning and afternoon. My day's contentment is being dampened by my desire to control the weather. Remember that almost all suffering comes from resistance to whatever is at any moment. The thing itself is not what causes the suffering; it is the *resistance* to that which is happening at any moment that is the source of suffering. I notice that the thief is present—the desire to control the future rather than surrender to whatever is. I notice the thief, and then I choose to gently show him the door and accept that I cannot change the weather.

But there is an important third step. The thief has been noticed and its disguise removed. I have stopped the inner dialogue that robs me of my happiness (*To be happy I must be in control*), but now I must take the third critical step, which is to replace.

To replace means to have ready at hand a new thought pattern or filter through which to see my life. In this case, that alternative view is to accept whatever is at any moment and to embrace what might emerge; that is, I see that I cannot control the future or the outcome of a situation, so I show the thief the door, sending it out of my house and in its place bringing in a new belief system that is open to whatever is at any moment, knowing that only my intentions are within my control.

The same could apply to my friend who was betrayed. First she must notice that the thief is holding her back from

recommitting to her relationship fully. She knows that she might get hurt but recognizes that she can control only her present-moment intentions. She notices the thief and arrests it. But then she must replace the filter of control with an acceptance of whatever is at this very moment and a willingness to take life as it emerges. Happiness and calm replace worry.

Of course, you are right in thinking, *It is not that easy*. The untrained mind is like that monkey mind. It is like when I first tried to meditate and was frustrated because I could not quiet my mind. Now, years later, meditation is natural for me, and most of the time I can easily quiet my mind. So it is with the thieves: at first when you notice, stop, and replace, you will find it difficult. Your mind will tell you that it is simply impossible. But not only is it possible, but unless you arrest the thief and throw it out, you will never find lasting happiness.

I suggest trying what I call the *two-week effort*. For the next two weeks, practice becoming aware of every moment in which either you believe a particular outcome is required for you to be happy or you find yourself resisting whatever is at any moment. Then practice the three steps: notice the thief, stop the thief, and replace the thief with the words *I choose to be fully present, embracing what is at this very moment*.

You might, for example, find yourself in a traffic jam at the end of a tiring day at work. You long for the relaxation of your sofa and the company of your partner but find yourself stuck in your car with no idea how long it will take to get home. In that moment notice how your desire to control and your attachment to being at home is robbing you of your happiness. Arrest the thief by gently showing it the door, as if to say, “You are not going to rob me.” Then replace the thief with a new thought pattern: *I choose to be fully present, embracing what is right now. My happiness is here, not there in the outcome of being home*. You may just find that your focus now shifts toward how to make

this moment stuck in traffic as happy as it can be. Like the tree that took seed on a boulder, you will seek ways to flourish, even in the traffic jam.

When it comes to replacing thought patterns, one of the most helpful aids are mantras. A *mantra* is a sound, word, or phrase repeated continually by someone who is praying or meditating. Although *mantra* is a Sanskrit word that literally means “instrument of thought” (or a tool for thinking), short phrases and sounds are found in almost all Eastern and Western traditions. Mantras are a great way to train your mind for happiness. Though mantras were originally mostly sounds in the early Vedic tradition, today mantras can take the form of a phrase or a set of words repeated frequently to alter your state of mind.

A mantra for banishing control can be found in these simple words:

I choose to be in the present moment and to embrace whatever is. Happiness is not in the outcome I seek.

control in society

As mentioned earlier, the world as we know it, what we often call “society,” is an extension of the inner house of our individual lives. Control affects our community life in profound ways.

A good example of this is our desire to control others by getting them to see the world as we do. We often get angry when someone we love, or even a stranger, holds a view that is different from ours. Each of us is wed to our own way of seeing the world, often with the effect that we are not open to learning from the views of others. Much of the political rancor in the United States, for example, is driven by the desire to control our own emotions when others disagree with us. Psychologists call this *cognitive dissonance*.

Most human beings want an internal world with few contradictions. In 1957 the social psychologist Leon Festinger first proposed cognitive dissonance theory, which states that people have a powerful motive to maintain cognitive consistency. We want to hold our beliefs and feel as little internal conflict about those beliefs as possible, but this desire to control internal conflict keeps us from having authentic dialogue with those who disagree with us.

When our beliefs are challenged, a discrepancy is evoked, resulting in a state of tension known as *dissonance*. Because the experience of dissonance is unpleasant for most people, we are motivated to reduce or eliminate it and achieve *consonance*, or internal agreement between our beliefs and the outside reality. We seek to alleviate the pain we feel from being out of control by finding information and people who will validate our way of seeing the world.

The connected world of the Internet is a perfect milieu for us to avoid dissonance and for control to dominate our relationships with one another. Although the Internet allows us to explore many views that are divergent from our own, it also allows us to expose ourselves to the views of only those with whom we agree. By so doing we reduce any dissonance we might feel that our attitudes and beliefs might not be the full truth and widely shared. We want to control our internal conflict even though we might learn something by allowing ourselves to experience that conflict. We resist the possibility that our views might be shaped and that as a society we might learn from one another and thus find greater common ground. By letting go of the illusion that the whole world can be controlled by my point of view, I can suddenly entertain the possibility of learning from others.

Let me make this real. The United States is locked in a nearly two-decade divide between right and left. People are

afraid to talk about politics with anyone other than those who they know already agree with them. Many friends have told me about heated arguments that occur within families and even at work. Rarely is there any productive dialogue between the right and the left. There is little doubt that this is bad for the country and for creating a civil society that manages to solve complex problems.

One reason for this lack of dialogue, though not the only one, is that everyone is trying to protect themselves from dissonance. We hold on to our viewpoints even though that attachment ultimately constrains all Americans in an uncivil society. This often means we seek news that primarily supports our current mental models. During the presidential election of 2012, for example, it is not surprising that the most-watched network during the Republican convention was Fox, whereas during the Democratic Convention it was MSNBC and CNN.⁵ Because it is quite likely that more Republicans watched their own convention and more Democrats watched theirs, that means most people watched the television station that would most confirm their existing views rather than challenge them, a phenomenon known as *confirmation bias*.

The irony is that both conservatives and liberals are trying so hard to control and hold on to their beliefs about the world and about each other that they want to listen mostly to people who already agree with them. By doing so they control the dissonance or suffering they might feel (and the anger that might well up in them) when they listen to views different from their own. We stay in control. But the problem is that if each of us seeks only to validate our own views, there will be no learning and no possibility of finding middleground. We rarely learn much by talking to those whose views mirror our own.

The next time you have a conversation with someone who disagrees with you, or see something that contradicts your

confirmation bias, be aware of the thief. It tries to keep you from feeling any dissonance about reconsidering your beliefs. Instead of reacting by clinging to your beliefs or withdrawing, be mindful.

Having spent time in both Israel and the Palestinian territories in the Middle East, I saw this phenomenon firsthand. It can also be seen between free-market capitalists and those who want to rein in the markets, and between those who are pro-business and those who are pro-environment. By encouraging us to keep dissonance at bay, the thief robs us of opportunities for true dialogue. And we need dialogue to have a civil society.

Some will say that it is not control that prevents us from considering other viewpoints or seeking information that challenges our deeply held beliefs but rather a firm moral conviction that we are correct. My point is not that we should forgo strong convictions, nor am I suggesting that some beliefs don't have more objective validity than others. Rather we need to recognize that when we try to control others by needing them to agree with us and when we try to avoid any discomfort we feel about our beliefs being challenged, we create a community in which harmony becomes increasingly difficult. Our attachment to our ideas and beliefs can be as destructive to the social good as our attachment to controlling events and people is to our personal happiness.

the story of jack

As a young theological student in Chicago in 1980, I had an experience that showed me how damaging control can be.

One of my classes was taught by a professor who held very liberal views. Dr. Collins thought that the Bible was not to be taken literally; instead she encouraged us to think critically about how the scriptures came to be written. She suggested that many

of the events found in the Gospels, which chronicled the life of Jesus, likely did not happen the way they were reported and that some of words spoken by Jesus might have been attributed to him by others at a later date.

I struggled in Dr. Collins's class. It was tough to have some of my core beliefs challenged. The thief wanted me to stop listening. But hard as it was, it seemed important for me to entertain her ideas and consider them fully. But Jack, one my classmates, was having a much more difficult time. He often had heated arguments with Dr. Collins during class. As the semester went on, he became angrier.

Finally, I asked him, "Jack, why do you let her get to you this way? It is only one class, and she's only one professor."

He thought for a moment and then said, "John, I could let it go, but what if she is right?"

At that moment I fully understood what was really going on. Jack didn't want to be challenged by new ideas. He wanted to control his belief system, hold on to the sweet in the coconut, even though he felt it now chained him. His attachment to those beliefs as the source of his happiness was making him suffer.

In the end I agreed with some of Dr. Collins's conclusions and disagreed with others. But by allowing myself to realize that I could learn even in the presence of dissonance, I furthered my education and deepened my faith. Staying present became a source of strength. I remained in seminary and went on to become an ordained Presbyterian minister. Jack dropped out and, as far as I know, gave up his pursuit of the ministry.

letting go of the clenched fist

This thief robs personal happiness and societal harmony. If we let it rule our lives, we are indeed like those monkeys, hand clenched inside a trap from which we cannot escape until we

finally let go. Control is an illusion; surrendering to and accepting whatever is at any moment is the path to contentment: attention without tension, living in the present moment without attachment.

As I was walking the Camino, I approached León, a city I had dreamed of for days. Somehow it felt like arriving there would bring some greater happiness; but by the time I could see the city, I was finally letting go of everything but the present moment and had penned this poem:

You'd dreamed of Leon for days
 But now that you could see it
 Could hardly Remember why it had mattered to get
 there at all

All the Leons of our life Are a distraction from Now
 The present, Open to everything that might reveal itself
 Once you were a man who dreamed always,
 of far off destinations where Happiness would surely
 reside

But slowly, gently, Came to see There is no there
 Only here, only Now
 In the one place where happiness always arrives

four ways to banish the first thief

- In each moment surrender to whatever is happening. Control and influence what you can while choosing to accept whatever is at that moment.
- Accept the hard truths about life. Death, suffering, pain, loneliness, and sorrow are as much a part of the human experience as are joy, living, companionship, and happiness. Remember that it is the craving for things to be different, not the circumstance, that robs you of happiness.



- Know that you cannot control the past or the future. When you feel pain about the past or worry about the future, accept that only the present moment is real and gently choose to come back into that moment.
- Practice the three steps for two weeks: notice, stop, and replace. Become aware of control and begin to train your mind to kick that thief out of your house. This takes practice, but once it is mastered your natural contentment will blossom.

mantra

*I choose to be in the present moment and to embrace whatever is.
Happiness is not in the outcome I seek.*

about the author



John Izzo is the bestselling author of six books and has advised over 500 companies across the globe on creating high engagement, purpose-driven workplaces. He has personally spoken to over one million people and his work has been featured by the likes of Fast Company, Investor's Business Daily, CNN, Inc. Magazine, and the Wall Street Journal.

He has been a pioneer in understanding the future of workplace trends and what companies must do to succeed in the rapidly shifting world of new expectations. Twice in his career he was a pioneer both in employee engagement and corporate social responsibility (*Awakening Corporate Soul*, 1994) and changing employee values (*Values Shift*, 2002/2005). His latest books, *The Five Thieves of Happiness* and *Purpose Revolution* will be released in 2017.

Get your copy today!

“A thought-provoking guide to sustained happiness.”

—SHAWN ACHOR, AUTHOR OF *Before Happiness*
& *The Happiness Advantage*

the
five
thieves
of
happiness

.....
Bestselling author of
*The Five Secrets
You Must Discover
Before You Die*
.....

JOHN IZZO PhD

Foreword by MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

SHARE



BUY

