



S5E9: Transcript Wellness & Human Flourishing with Deepak Chopra

Tavia Gilbert: Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm writer/producer Tavia Gilbert, and every first and third Tuesday, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversations about the art and science of human flourishing.

Our guest today is Dr. Deepak Chopra, founder of The Chopra Foundation, a non-profit entity for research on well-being and humanitarianism, and Chopra Global, a modern-day health company at the intersection of science and spirituality. Dr. Chopra is a world-renowned pioneer in integrative medicine and personal transformation, and the author of over 90 books translated into over forty languages. In addition to holding a number of positions at medical schools across the US, Dr. Chopra has been at the forefront of the meditation revolution for the last thirty years.

Today's conversation explores the link between our minds and our physical health; between the way we decide to approach life, and the likelihood that we will flourish in our lives. Let's start with Dr. Chopra's definition of human flourishing.

Deepak Chopra: Human flourishing in the ultimate is the state of flow, where in every moment you feel no resistance, no regrets, no anticipation, you respond intuitively, flawlessly, in the moment, in a way that is nurturing, that is kind, that has empathy, compassion, love, joy, and equanimity. So for me, that would be the ultimate peak living.

When I wake up in the morning, I test my body. On a scale of one to 10, how joyful and energetic my body is. Then I ask the same thing about my emotions, I put my heart here, and say, on the scale of one to 10, am I experiencing a loving, compassionate heart in most situations? And if I say eight, nine, 10, I'm flourishing, thriving.

The same thing about my mental state. I ask myself, on a scale of one to 10, how quiet and reflective is my mind? And so then I get an idea about mental state. And finally, spiritual state, am I comfortable with old age, infirmity, and death? So that's what flourishing is in all its dimensions.

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Chopra's mission is to help others move from suffering and struggle, toward healing, health, and, ultimately, flourishing.

Deepak Chopra: Now, what I do is, when I ask people about their state of flourishing or thriving, I ask them the following questions. "How's life?" on the scale of one to ten. And if you mentally, intuitively say on a scale of one to 10, 10, you're flourishing. Actually, if you say eight, nine, 10, you're flourishing. Just that simple question: "How is life?" If you say six or seven, you're struggling in some area of your life, maybe it's lack of sleep, maybe stress, maybe a bad marriage, maybe problems at the job, maybe financial. But you're struggling, if you say six or seven. If you say five or less, you are suffering and you probably even have a chronic illness.

Now, this sounds, you know, so vague, but it actually has been tested. I can ask you the same question about your career. I can ask you the same question about your friends and family, your social interactions. Same thing, I can ask you about your financial situation. Not how much money you have, how happy are you, or how satisfied are you, or do you have any anxiety or absence of anxiety, scale of one to ten. I can ask you about community. Where do you live? Do you feel safe in your community? Do you participate in your community events? Do you have a shared vision with your community? One to 10.

So when we look at all these buckets of what we call well-being, they translate into either you're thriving or flourishing or you're struggling or you're suffering.

Tavia Gilbert: The degree of safety, satisfaction, and happiness we feel, how integrated we are into community, how pleasurable our relationships are

– all these qualities are directly linked, Dr. Chopra says, to our physical health.

Deepak Chopra: Less than five percent of all chronic illness, it doesn't matter – cancer, heart disease, autoimmune disease, diabetes – less than five percent is 100 percent predictable. The rest depends: How well you sleep? How well you manage your stress? Do you exercise? Are you happy? What are your social relationships like? What are your professional interactions like? What kind of food do you eat? Do you have contact with nature? Do you focus on things like compassion, love, joy?

Ninety-five percent of illness is influenced by what we today call lifestyle, which includes basically seven things. Sleep; stress management; movement, which includes exercise in mind-body coordination, deep breathing and yoga; personal relationships and emotions; connection with nature; and the connection with your spiritual self. Those are the seven pillars of well-being. So I see a good future for those who are self-aware.

Tavia Gilbert: But don't external circumstances, especially our financial abundance, have a huge impact on our happiness and our well-being?

Deepak Chopra: If you win the lottery, and let's say you were earning a hundred thousand dollars a year, which suddenly now you have 50 million dollars, of course you'll be happy, but your happiness will plateau in six months. And in one year, you return to your set point. So financial conditions do not change your set point in the long run and add only 10 percent to 12 percent of your daily happiness experience.

Tavia Gilbert: So how can we make choices that will help us become happier, so that we can become healthier?

Deepak Chopra: We make two kinds of choices every day. One is for personal pleasure. Now, interestingly, the most frequently made choice for personal pleasure in the United States of America and probably most of the Western world is shopping. So do people get happy after shopping? Yes, they do, but only for a couple of days. The other choices they make for personal pleasure are alcohol, sex, entertainment. Do they make you happy, yes, again, for a few days.

Then there's a second category of choices that people make, which social scientists call fulfillment. If you have worthy goals that are not only about you, and if you know how to make other people happy by giving them attention, affection, appreciation and acceptance, then that's the fastest way to be, "happy".

When you make somebody happy, you automatically feel happy. So that's the third part of the formula, which adds 40 percent of your daily experience. You know how to find fulfillment by making other people happy and being fulfilled by having meaning and purpose. So that's happiness.

Does it get rid of our existential dilemmas, old age, infirmity, death? It does not. That requires a lot of awareness and almost, I think, lifelong attention to who am I, what do I want, what's my deeper purpose, and what am I grateful for, and what is the meaning of existence. That's basically what I would call fulfillment, which is more an indicator of flourishing than happiness alone, because happiness is a state of mind.

Tavia Gilbert: Does Dr. Chopra have a recipe for achieving a happier state of mind?

Deepak Chopra: Social scientists actually have worked on happiness a lot, and there are various iterations of what they call the happiness formula. So here it is. I mean, I'm giving you my version, but there are many versions of the happiness formula, they're all similar.

Do you see the world as a problem or do you see the world as an opportunity? So if you're constantly criticizing, condemning, complaining, or being the victim, obviously you see the world as a problem. And that's a set point for unhappiness. On the other hand, if you see the world as an opportunity, then you'll have a set point for happiness.

Apparently, the set point determines 50 percent of our happiness experience every day. So 50 percent of your happiness experience today comes from your set point. How is the set point determined? In childhood, through conditioning. If your parents or caretakers were constantly complaining, condemning, criticizing, playing the victim, you grow up to have a set point for unhappiness.

Can it be changed? Yes. First you have to be aware that you are an unhappy person. Secondly, you have to reflect a little bit on why you're unhappy. Thirdly, if you practice mindful awareness and reflective self-inquiry, you can change your set point. So it's not fixed, although for most people it is, because they're not even aware of this.

Tavia Gilbert: If we practice mindfulness and change our set point, can we eliminate unhappiness and suffering from our lives?

Deepak Chopra: In my mind, peace of mind is an oxymoron. It doesn't exist. The mind fluctuates between opposing tendencies, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, birth and death. All this. Depressed, happy. Equanimity is flourishing, equanimity means you are independent of hope and despair, because hope is a sign of despair and despair is a sign of hope, they go together. You can't have one without the other.

Tavia Gilbert: So if sorrow and loss are inescapable, and we have only limited control over the circumstances of our life, how can we still intentionally create the conditions for our own flourishing?

Deepak Chopra: So when you go deeply into the question, who am I?, I am the confluence of meaning, contexts, relationship history. And therefore my thriving depends on my supporting the ecosystem of conscious beings, starting with human relationships, but then extending to all of life, including the planet's life.

So when you look at the world, you see social injustice, you see economic injustice, you see racial injustice, you see mechanized systems of delivering violence, you see climate change, you see pandemics, you see terrorism, you see war. And then we say, that's the world. But actually, it's not. It's us, only thinking about ourselves.

As soon as I extend my identity to all that gives rise to what I call me, then I will never flourish ultimately unless I see a more peaceful, just, sustainable, healthier, and joyful world, because the world is our projection as a collective. And we are always complaining about the world, not realizing that we created the world. If there is war, we created it. Terrorism, we created it. Atomic bombs, we created it. Extreme

nationalism, we created it. Cyber hacking, we created it. Pandemics, we created them. There's a connection between climate change, pandemics, mutations, extinction of species.

So, the Western idea of thriving, flourishing, happiness, contentment, joy, is based on false provisional identity that I am a person, when in fact I am not a person, I'm the awareness in which all persons thrive if they interact with each other with empathy, compassion, love, joy, equanimity and kindness.

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Chopra believes that the uniquely Western concept of self separate from an integrated ecosystem is part of what creates our ill health and suffering, and what may ultimately lead to our own destruction.

Deepak Chopra: Cultural differences are very simple in that the Western philosophical and cultural framework is about the individual. And the Eastern wisdom traditions say that as long as you are thinking only about yourself, you'll never be thriving. You have to think of yourself as part of an ecosystem of relationships.

So in Eastern cultural wisdom traditions, you thrive when, and this is a phrase, a Buddhist phrase, when you see yourself as part of the matrix of sentient beings, there's a phrase, we are interbeings in the inter-is-ness. That, the idea that I'm an individual squeezed into the volume of a body in the span of a lifetime is a mirage, because the individual itself is a conglomeration of historical influences, economic history, racial history, cultural history, mythological history, religious history.

I think if we go on the solution, Western-based, we are heading for collective suicide and extinction. It's obvious— look at the world right now, we're sleepwalking to extinction.

Tavia Gilbert: So what is the solution? How does Dr. Chopra believe we can save ourselves from annihilation? First, he says, we have to recognize a fundamental truth.

Deepak Chopra: Love as the ultimate truth at the heart of the universe. And what's the ultimate truth? The inseparability of existence. You and I are entangled with all that happens on this planet. And the pandemic has shown us

there are no boundaries, economic boundaries, there are no national boundaries, there are no ecological boundaries. All boundaries are conceptual and perceptual and artificial.

I ask myself every day – every day – how can I serve, what is my purpose, how can I make a difference, and when I'm not thinking about (DING) myself, I'm happier. Next time you're unhappy or not flourishing, ask yourself, who am I thinking about? Just that one question. Because love without action is meaningless and action without love is irrelevant, when you participate in love and action, then the whole world comes to help you.

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Chopra is hopeful that if more people recognize the truth of our interconnectedness, the inseparability of our existence, it will create a positive disruption.

Deepak Chopra: If we follow the trends of collective creativity, we have a solution to every problem, but we are not doing it right now. If you have a collective system, which we should embody, if we want to avoid a catastrophe, extinction, and if we want to solve these big problems – which are solvable, by the way – climate change, extreme nationalism, war, terrorism, conflict resolution, healthy food, all of that, want to move in the direction of flourishing, we need emergence and collective creativity, not simple innovation, which is recycling the past with a little improvement.

So when the smartphone came out, that was real disruption. Ok, when VR came out, that's real disruption. When artificial intelligence comes out, that's real disruption. So we need real disruption, but on a massive scale and collectively. And that's not simple innovation. That is disruption, new context, new meaning, new ways of looking at relationships, new ideas. It's a real death and resurrection.

Tavia Gilbert: What does Dr. Chopra believe the future holds?

Deepak Chopra: What I see as the future of well-being is totally dependent on the confluence of information and artificial intelligence technologies, number one. But also new ways of reinventing humanity altogether. In terms of energy without fossil fuels, transportation, automatic without fossil fuels, food production without killing animals, things like precision

genomics and fermentation, creating new matter, going right to the heart of nature instead of extracting minerals, creating them from waves and particles, and ultimately bringing all this creativity together as a collective creativity.

Social scientists are talking about emergence and collective creativity, where if you have shared vision, emotional bonding, complementing each other's strengths, maximum diversity, and open, transparent systems, you will have true creativity and emergence.

I want to be a realist, and not an optimist or a pessimist. And if I'm a realist, it depends on the choices we make individually and collectively. Having conversations like this and expanding people's awareness makes me a little optimistic that we are addressing these issues and we are not walking blindly towards self-destruction, because if we don't think of climate change, if we don't take care of social injustice, racial injustice, if we don't take care of war and terrorism as a means to solve problems, then of course, we are doomed.

Tavia Gilbert: We'll be back in two weeks for a conversation with another leader who affirms that flourishing depends on connecting to something greater than the individual self. Here's a preview our our next episode, with father of the Internet, Vint Cerf:

Vint Cerf: Perhaps one of the most important virtues is a willingness to commit to doing things that are positive and constructive. The idea that you care about other people, not just immediate family members but others who are part of your local community, neighborhood, household, country and state, and so on – this sense of belonging must be a part of flourishing. If you don't feel like you belong, it's hard to feel as if you are flourishing.

Tavia Gilbert: If you appreciate the Stories of Impact podcast, please follow the podcast, and rate and review us. We are on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and at storiesofimpact.org.

This has been the Stories of Impact Podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. Written and produced by Talkbox Productions and Tavia Gilbert, with associate producer Katie Flood. Music by

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The Stories of Impact Podcast is generously supported by Templeton World Charity Foundation.