

UNITED WISDOM

The Golden Cage of Happiness: Why a Good Life Can Feel Insufficient

Meaning and the Path

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The Golden Cage of Happiness: Why a Good Life Can Feel Insufficient

Why even a good life can feel insufficient—and whether we have to suffer to feel alive

United Wisdom · Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

> *Thus his life swings like a pendulum between pain and boredom.*
>
> *Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, Book IV, §57. The Russian article translated this passage from Jonathan Bennett's English adaptation; the wording here follows that supplied Russian text.* Source

We know how to explain the unhappiness of someone whose plans have failed. It is harder to understand someone for whom almost everything has worked out. They have the job they wanted, live where they hoped to live, and have people they love beside them. Yet an awkward feeling sometimes arises: life is good, but somehow it feels cramped to live inside it. Admitting this is difficult. Immediately you hear someone else's voice, or your own: what more could you possibly want?

The question deserves more than a rebuke for ingratitude. Sometimes a person really does need more. Sometimes they no longer notice what they have received. Sometimes they fear losing it. And sometimes they call “happiness” a state that, by its very nature, cannot continue without interruption.

This article follows the path from disappointed expectations to fulfilled desires—and to the strange moment when achievement becomes a golden cage. Along the way, we will encounter research, philosophical arguments, and spiritual teachings. We will distinguish their foundations while keeping the question that connects them: can we feel life fully without demanding constant exhilaration from it?

I. The Keys to a New Life

A dream come true changes our circumstances, but need not fulfill every promise we attached to it. The difference does not become apparent immediately.

Imagine a person; let us call him Mikhail. This is an illustrative story. For several years he wanted to move to the sea. In his imagination, buying the apartment meant buying another way of being: a quiet morning, time for loved ones, the ability not to hurry anywhere. He worked, saved, compared options. Finally, he received the keys.

For the first week, almost everything matched the dream. He ate breakfast on the balcony and photographed the water. After a month, he found himself answering emails over breakfast. After six months, the sea had become a backdrop for video calls. A neighbor began renovating, the air conditioner needed servicing, and an acquaintance bought an apartment with a more open view.

The purchase itself was not a mistake. Mikhail really liked living there. The mistake lay in an invisible appendix to the contract: along with the home, he expected to acquire a person who would always be content with it. But the person who moved was himself—with his habits of hurrying, comparing, and postponing rest until the next task was finished.

At this point it is easy to conclude that every dream is deceptive. Yet the sea still exists. It did not cease to be beautiful because Mikhail stopped looking at it. The question is what job he assigned it. The apartment could provide space, convenience, a view from the window. Ensuring permanent inner agreement with life was not among its duties.

While the dream lay ahead, it organized his days. He knew why he was enduring inconvenience. After the move, space opened up where anticipation had been. Mikhail encountered a question absent from the property listings: how do you live what you no longer have to strive toward?

Life can improve while the habitual way of waiting for happiness remains unchanged. The mind then discovers the next missing detail: now the complete picture requires a different income, more free time, a new version of oneself. The promised “at last” recedes again.

II. The Contract Nobody Signed

Expectation hurts especially when we begin to treat it as an obligation reality has undertaken. Between “I would like this” and “this is how it must be” lies an unnoticed but substantial boundary.

Imagine the same evening. Someone comes home and finds themselves alone. If they expected rest after a noisy day, the silence is welcome. If they expected a meeting, the same silence feels empty. An event acquires meaning in relation to what was supposed to happen.

In an experimental study by Rob Rutledge and colleagues, participants' momentary happiness ratings depended on recent monetary outcomes, expectations, and the discrepancies between them. The authors studied particular rewarded decisions; this cannot yield a formula for love or grief. But the work illustrates why the size of a gain alone does not explain the intensity of experience. Pleasant anticipation can also improve how we feel before an event's outcome. Reducing expectations to zero means losing that side of experience too. Rutledge et al., 2014

Epictetus offers a brief injunction: “Do not demand that events happen as you wish.” Paragraph eight of the *Enchiridion* concerns bringing the will into agreement with what happens. For a contemporary reader, one useful question is: where am I acting, and where am I mentally presenting the world with a bill? Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §8

“I worked hard” may be true. “Therefore I am certain to be appreciated” already contains a promise nobody made. “I love” describes an experience. “Therefore the other person will never change” attempts to fix the future in place.

At the same time, expecting agreements to be honored is normal. A promised salary, agreed boundaries, responsibility for a child: these are real obligations. Stoic thought is easily distorted if it is used to label every demand for justice spiritually immature.

The distinction lies between what can be agreed upon and what we have independently written into life's terms. The more such unspoken conditions there are, the more often events will look like breaches. Sometimes freedom begins with discovering one unnecessary clause: nobody promised me that a worthy action would necessarily produce a pleasant feeling.

III. Where the Power of Expectations Ends

Not all pain arises from a disappointed expectation. A hungry person needs food; someone being harmed needs the ability to protect themselves. An explanation beginning with “it is all in your head” overlooks the situation itself.

The initial thought therefore needs greater precision: expectations and insatiability can create suffering and intensify suffering that already exists. This formulation leaves room for both inner work and real help.

In the Buddhist “Discourse on the Arrow,” someone experiencing bodily pain is compared to a person struck by an arrow. The mental anguish added to the pain is likened to a second strike. According to the text, a trained disciple experiences “one pain: bodily, but not mental.” This describes a spiritual ideal, not a demand that someone immediately stop grieving. *Sallatha Sutta*, SN 36.6

The distinction is useful even without accepting the whole Buddhist worldview. I may be struggling, and another feeling may arise on top of that struggle: something must be wrong with me if I still have not coped. The second layer deserves attention, although that does not make the first imaginary.

Brett Ford and colleagues studied the habit of accepting one's thoughts and feelings without judgment. It was associated with less negative emotional reactivity to stress and better subsequent indicators of psychological health. A significant detail: the association concerned acceptance of internal experiences, not simply acceptance of the external situation.

Acknowledging your fear and agreeing to remain in danger are different actions. Ford et al., 2018

Material conditions also continue to matter. A joint analysis by Matthew Killingsworth, Daniel Kahneman, and Barbara Mellers showed that the relationship between income and emotional well-being is more complex than the popular claim that “beyond a certain amount, money changes nothing.” For many participants, higher income continued to be associated with better ratings of how they felt. This is an observational association, not a promise of happiness for money. But neither does it justify dismissing material well-being as trivial. Killingsworth et al., 2023

A conversation about insatiability becomes honest when we allow both possibilities: someone genuinely lacks necessities; someone already has much available, yet a sense of insufficiency continues to govern their life.

IV. Wanting and Enjoying Are Different Capacities

The strength of desire does not equal the magnitude of future pleasure. We can notice this without leaving a shop: something we spent a long time choosing is sometimes more interesting before the purchase than afterward.

Kent Berridge and Terry Robinson's review distinguishes *wanting*, the motivational drive to obtain a reward, from *liking*, the pleasure it provides. Usually they are connected, but they can diverge; the gap is particularly important in addiction research. The evidence does not justify calling every ambition an addiction. It shows something narrower: a stronger drive does not guarantee greater enjoyment. Berridge & Robinson, 2016

In everyday life, this distinction helps us ask an uncomfortable question: do I like what I am striving for, or do I like approaching the next achievement? You can love your work. You can love defeating a competitor. You can wait for the moment others finally acknowledge your value. From outside, all three people look equally busy. Inside, they are occupied with different things.

In Ecclesiastes, the narrator conducts an extreme experiment in possession: building, gathering, enjoying, denying his eyes nothing they desire. Then he asks what remains of all those acquisitions. Later comes the formulation: “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money.” In the biblical text, this belongs to a reflection on futility and the limits of human labor. It raises a question the next purchase cannot settle: which acquisition will count as the last? Ecclesiastes 2:1–11, 5:10 in NRSVUE numbering

Epicurus proposes examining desires themselves: which are necessary, which natural, which lack a stable limit. In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, pleasure requires choice and consideration of

consequences. The fact that we can want something does not mean it deserves the next year of our lives. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*

Insatiability can thus be described without an accusation of greed. A person simply has no clear condition for completion. Asked “What are you missing?” they name another object. Yet every object obtained soon ceases to be an answer. Perhaps the issue is now the promise itself: one more achievement is supposed finally to give me permission to be myself.

V. Yesterday's Miracle Becomes Normal

Even genuine pleasure can weaken through repetition. Becoming accustomed to something does not prove that the joy was unreal.

In the first days after moving, Mikhail noticed the sea because each encounter was an event. Later, he recognized the familiar view at a glance and returned to his tasks. The same transition occurs with a comfortable apartment, a warm relationship, a new freedom to manage one's time. What we receive becomes part of an ordinary day.

Kennon Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky studied two routes through which the effect of positive changes weakens. Along one, positive emotions become less frequent or intense. Along the other, aspirations rise: new well-being becomes the starting norm from which the next improvement is desired. A three-month study of 481 students supported their model. Appreciation of the change already made, and variety in the experiences associated with it, were related to preserving its positive effect. This is neither a universal instruction nor proof that gratitude can remedy any conditions. Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012

Here it helps not to confuse two statements. “It no longer feels as vivid” describes a change of feeling. “It is no longer worth anything” judges the whole thing. The second does not automatically follow from the first. A safe journey home remains valuable on a day when someone feels no exhilaration about it.

Nor should adaptation become a sentence passed on our future. A meta-analysis by Maike Luhmann and colleagues combining data from 188 publications shows that different life events have different consequences, while emotional well-being and overall life evaluation do not change in the same way. The claim that everyone inevitably gets used to everything and returns to one fixed point is too crude. Luhmann et al., 2012

For Mikhail, this suggests a simple shift. He can stop demanding that the sea reproduce the impression of his first morning. Another relationship with the place has become possible: knowing it through different seasons, swimming, walking, meeting friends. Repetition sometimes erases an impression; sometimes it allows familiarity to develop. Much depends on whether we continue participating in the life we have gained.

VI. Who Locks the Golden Cage?

Well-being becomes a cage when preserving what has been achieved begins to take away the freedom to choose. Comfort alone does not lock doors.

Imagine another situation. Someone has attained a managerial position. The job pays well, is respected by loved ones, and validates years of effort. Gradually, they realize they are more interested in creating than managing. But returning to specialist work seems humiliating. They stay, although every promotion takes them farther from what they wanted to do.

Some constraints are real: a loan, family obligations, the state of the market. Others concern self-image. “This would be expensive” differs from “After this, I would no longer be a worthy person.” While they are fused, any discussion of change seems to threaten one's entire existence.

Glen Nix, Richard Ryan, and colleagues compared success in activities under autonomous and controlled motivation. Across three experiments, autonomous motivation showed an advantage in subjective vitality; happiness ratings did not show the same difference. A successful outcome and the feeling of participating in one's own choice turn out to be different aspects of experience. Nix et al., 1999

In chapter 44 of the *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi asks a question with almost no room for defense: “Fame or life—which is dearer to you?” Life and wealth, gain and loss are then compared. The text recommends knowing measure and when to stop. This is a Taoist evaluation of a way of life, not advice that everyone immediately renounce their possessions. *Tao Te Ching*, chapters 44 and 46

The golden cage image therefore needs precision. Sometimes a person is bored. Sometimes they depend on others' approval. Sometimes entirely material circumstances hold them in place. These situations call for different work. Boredom may benefit from renewed participation; lost autonomy from renegotiating agreements; financial dependence from building a reserve and making a gradual transition.

Destroying everything in one gesture can be another dream of instant liberation. We can begin with something smaller: restore one decision to the week that we make because we genuinely choose it. Sometimes it makes the desired next direction easier to see.

VII. What Exactly Do We Never Have Enough Of?

Different traditions recognize human dissatisfaction but explain it differently. Those differences help test our own thinking before we accept a convenient explanation as the only possible one.

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, separation from what is loved and not obtaining what is desired are named among the manifestations of *dukkha*. Its origin is linked to *taṇhā*, craving, which includes longing for sensual pleasures, becoming, and nonbeing. The question extends beyond unsuccessful purchases: it concerns a way of clinging to experience and continued existence. Liberation involves an entire path of practice. SN 56.11, translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

At the beginning of the *Confessions*, Augustine addresses God: “Our heart is restless until it rests in You.” The source of restlessness here concerns the creature's relationship with the Creator. Removing God from the phrase and presenting it as an ancient description of psychological self-regulation would lose what matters most. Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1

For Epicurus, the solution concerns choosing pleasures wisely, reducing fears, and sufficiency. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, action belongs to a discussion of duty and spiritual liberation. In verse 2.47, alongside relinquishing attachment to the fruits of action stands a warning: “Do not become attached to inaction.” Verse 2.70 compares a sage's steadiness to an ocean into which rivers flow. *Bhagavad Gita*, 2.47, 2.70

We cannot assemble one common doctrine from these texts merely by replacing their different words with “mindfulness.” We have the cessation of craving, rest in God, reasonable sufficiency, action without enslaving attachment to results. Agreement in particular observations leaves the differences in their goals intact.

Yet placing them side by side helps pose a meaningful question: what am I asking of the next desire? Pleasure? Recognition? Stability? A justification for my life? The answer determines whether the chosen goal is capable of providing it at all.

A cup of coffee can bring pleasure. A promotion can open opportunities. Someone we love can share life with us. When each is assigned the task of permanently removing the anxiety of human existence, the burden becomes impossible. Disappointment then arises not only because the result was small. Sometimes we asked a particular thing for something far beyond its capacities.

VIII. Must We Lose Something Before We Can Feel It?

Contrast really can alter experience. It does not follow that a person needs a prescribed portion of unhappiness to live fully.

After a sleepless night, sleep feels different. After separation, a reunion may be especially intense. Such a change has obvious persuasive force: things were hard, now they are easier—and the good has finally become noticeable.

In an experiment by Siri Leknes and colleagues, 16 volunteers experienced moderate pain under different conditions. When it represented a better outcome than potentially stronger pain, the average pleasantness rating shifted into positive territory. Context changed the appraisal of a sensation. But a small laboratory experiment does not answer how much unhappiness a good life requires. It investigates relative relief. Leknes et al., 2013

Philosophy offers more radical versions. Schopenhauer describes the transition from painful desire to boredom after satisfaction. In §12 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks whether the capacities for intense pleasure and intense pain might be connected. His question unsettles the dream of a life that retains the whole depth of joy while removing all vulnerability. It is a philosophical challenge; it establishes no quota of compulsory suffering. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §12

In the esoteric *Kybalion*, a similar argument takes the form of a principle of rhythm: “Rhythm compensates.” The authors, writing as the “Three Initiates,” extend the pendulum image to mental states. The text presents itself as a bearer of Hermetic teaching, but its formula cannot be passed off as an experimentally established law of the psyche or automatically attributed to all ancient Hermeticists. *The Kybalion*, chapter XI

It is useful to stop precisely here. The ability to feel greater joy after misfortune does not prove that the misfortune itself was beneficial. If someone values the morning differently after an illness, that tells us what they managed to see. The illness may have taken far more than that shift of perspective gave.

And contrast comes in different forms: between effort and rest; the unfamiliar and the understood; solitude and conversation; two joyful but different days. Life offers more transitions than the route from unhappiness to relief. Before seeking a jolt, it is worth understanding exactly what kind of movement is missing.

IX. A Quiet Life Can Be Alive Too

Vitality is not reducible to the intensity of pleasure. Sometimes a person is quietly absorbed in an activity; sometimes they celebrate loudly while feeling empty.

Richard Ryan and Christina Frederick proposed studying subjective vitality as the experience of available energy and of being alive. This is a psychological concept measured through self-reports, not a claim about an invisible energy field. It is related both to bodily condition and to psychological circumstances. Ryan & Frederick, 1997

Shigehiro Oishi and Erin Westgate identify another aspect of a good life: psychological richness. It is created by interesting, varied experiences capable of changing one's view of the world. It is related to happiness and meaning but does not coincide with them. This approach

helps describe the value of experiences that are hard to call simply pleasant: a demanding book, an unfamiliar conversation, learning a new activity. Oishi & Westgate, 2022; online publication 2021

Mikhail may have sought continuous good spirits in his move when what he lacked was time to paint. Another person waits for passion when they need an honest conversation. A third calls exhaustion boredom, although another adventure would only add to the burden. The same “something is missing” conceals different questions.

There is also the trap of constant checking: do I feel good enough right now? In a study by Iris Mauss and colleagues, women experimentally encouraged to value happiness especially highly reacted less positively to a happy film. The result depended on conditions and does not mean pursuing well-being is harmful. It shows how the demand to feel the right emotion can interfere with the experience itself. Mauss et al., 2011

A useful counterweight comes from Lahnna Catalino and colleagues: among 233 adults, the habit of organizing life around pleasant activities was associated with better well-being. The design does not establish causality. But the distinction deserves attention: we can assess our happiness every minute, or set aside an evening for something we want to do. Catalino et al., 2014

Sometimes feeling alive means simply being involved enough to stop continuously measuring the quality of our own state.

X. What This Means in Practice

Leaving the golden cage begins with clarifying what holds us inside. There is no need immediately to devalue past decisions.

Take one desire to which much of your energy is currently devoted, and write down two things: what it will actually change, and what you think you will finally feel afterward. “A new job will increase my income” concerns conditions. “Then I will stop comparing myself with others forever” is a very different promise. That distinction alone makes the expectation clearer.

Next, define what “enough” would look like. For a particular project, it might mean completed work. For a financial goal, a specific reserve. For an evening, being with a loved one without parallel tasks. Such a definition does not prohibit future growth. It lets you notice that today's goal has been achieved before replacing it with the next.

The third question concerns the cost of preservation: what do I now forbid myself in order not to lose what I have gained? Sometimes the answer is reasonable—obligations really do require stability. Sometimes it emerges that a person has spent years defending an image of

themselves. These answers cannot be supplied for another person, nor assumed in advance to be the same.

Finally, instead of demanding immediate happiness, choose a small action that contains your own interest. Not a universal practice, but concrete participation: arrange a free evening, return to an abandoned activity, calmly discuss working conditions. Afterward, “Did I want to participate in this?” may be more useful than “Was the pleasure I received intense enough?”

Let us return to Mikhail. Suppose one day he eats breakfast on the same balcony. The sea has not become brighter. The neighbor is still renovating, and the work emails have not disappeared. But Mikhail notices that he has opened them again before looking at the water. He closes the laptop and decides to take a walk before breakfast. That evening, he will discuss with his partner how to free one morning a week from work.

This scene contains no final liberation from dissatisfaction. It contains a person beginning to use the life for which he worked so hard.

He is still allowed to want more. He can change his mind, move again, stay. He can feel quiet joy without mistaking quiet for the absence of life. This morning need not justify every preceding year. It has a more manageable task: to become a morning in which he was truly present.

> *We regard self-sufficiency as a great good: not so that we always make do with little, but so that we can be content with little when we do not have much.*
>
> *Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus. The Russian article translated this passage from Robert Drew Hicks's English translation; this wording follows the supplied Russian.* *Source*

Connections Between Traditions and Research

The comparisons below show points of contact and differences. They do not imply that the teachings are identical or that science confirms religious propositions.

Question	Comparison	What Remains Different
Why does an outcome disappoint?	Epictetus ↔ Bhagavad Gita ↔ Rutledge and colleagues	Working with judgments, spiritual nonattachment to fruits, and an experimental model of expectations have different foundations.

Question	Comparison	What Remains Different
Why is what we want never enough?	Ecclesiastes ↔ SN 56.11 ↔ Berridge and Robinson	The limits of acquisition, craving in Buddhist teaching, and the distinction between motivation and pleasure do not constitute one diagnosis.
Can additional anguish be reduced?	Discourse on the Arrow ↔ Epictetus ↔ Ford and colleagues	A spiritual ideal, philosophical discipline, and evidence about accepting experiences make claims of different scope.
What does “enough” mean?	Epicurus ↔ Laozi ↔ Sheldon and Lyubomirsky	Choosing desires, knowing measure, and weakening effects of positive changes describe different aspects of our relationship with what we have received.
Must pleasure be paid for with pain?	Schopenhauer ↔ Nietzsche ↔ The Kybalion ↔ Leknes and colleagues	Philosophical arguments and an esoteric principle are much broader than what a relief experiment measures.
How can we continue acting?	Bhagavad Gita ↔ autonomous-motivation research ↔ psychological richness	Duty and liberation, a sense of one's own choice, and varied experience do not require one shared worldview.

Primary Texts and Research

The short quotations were translated for the Russian article from the texts listed below rather than taken from existing Russian translations. The English body follows the supplied archive wording. Scientific work was used within the scope of particular findings. The archive states that the depth of source checking and material not included in the article are recorded in a separate editorial note; that statement does not certify a new source review for this translation.

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Tags

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All references below are inherited from the supplied archive. They were not newly read or verified for this translation. Existing inline links and bibliography details have been preserved.

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