

THRIVE FINDING HAPPINESS THE BLUE ZONES WAY

By Dan Buettner

Study Guide by Ken Bingham

Preface

1. In his quest toward Finding Happiness The Blue Zones Way, Dan Buettner seeks answers to the following questions:

- Which types of governments yield the greatest happiness dividends for citizens?
- Which cultural values foster the greatest degree of life satisfaction?
- What role does religion play?
- How about money?
- What's the optimal mix of communal tradition and individual choice?
- What can the world's happiest peoples tell us about what makes a difference in their lives? (xiii)

Before you begin your travels through this *Reader's Guide*, lay out your own floor plan as to what will make for a happy life, a happy community. Start by answering the questions listed above for yourself. Be an active participant in the Dan's search for the secrets of happiness.

2. Jim Harter, the author of Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements, says that in his research, "we ask people to rate the quality of their overall life today on a 0-10 ladder of life...and what they think it will be in the next five years—to tap into their 'reflecting' self" (11).

Look at the ratings you gave yourself to question number one above. Now, tap into your own reflecting self. Where do you think you'll be in the next five years?

3. Buettner reveals that "according to the Gallup organization, 'thriving' countries are those whose citizens think positively about their lives and report more happiness, enjoyment, interest, and respect. These countries also report significantly lower rates of health problems, sick days, stress, sadness, and anger" (8).

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most positive and 1 being the least, how do you rate your overall happiness level, the level of respect you receive in your community, and the level of interest you have in the world around you?

4. Buettner says that when he went to visit Panchita in Costa Rica, she was “positively beaming,” announcing to her friends, ‘See, God has blessed me! El Gringo has come to visit me.’ And I’m thinking: Here’s a 103-year-old woman who has no money and no real possessions, is living in a borrowed house, is half paralyzed and mostly blind, and she feels blessed that I’ve shown up? How is that possible?” (xi).

What kind of blessings have you received? Today? In your life?

Chapter One: The Truth About Happiness

1. Michael Csikszentmihalyi, a professor of psychology and director of the Quality of Life Research Center at Claremont Graduate University says, “Everything we do is ultimately aimed at experiencing happiness. We don’t really want wealth, or health or fame as such—we want these things because we hope they will make us happy. But happiness we seek not because it will get us something else, but for its own sake” (10).

Think critically and honestly. What do you want from life? How much wealth? How much fame?

2. Ed Diener, author of Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth, says that “the word ‘happiness’ means many things.... It means many different things in the different ways people use it..... So I won’t define happiness. I try to use these other, more exact terms, such as positive emotions, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction” (11).

How do you define happiness? Define it in general terms and then specifically for yourself. How would you define and rate your own life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, your penchant for positive as opposed to negative emotions?

3. Ed Diener says that “the key [to his studies] is that each person is making the evaluation of his or her life—not an expert’s, philosopher’s, or somebody else. Thus, the person herself or himself is the expert. Is my life going well, according to the standards that I choose to use?” (12)

Is your life going well? How would you like to change it?

4. When asked if we have any control over our happiness, Sonja Lyumbomirsky, author of The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want, says that “on average, 50 percent of individual differences in happiness is influenced by our genetic makeup, 10 percent is influenced by our life circumstances, and 40 percent is influenced by how we think and act every day” (13).

How do you think of your life, of the world? Do your thoughts tend to the worrisome, the positive, the negative, the light, the dark? What would you like to see changed, if anything, about your thinking?

5. Lyumbomirsky goes on to say that “the true keys to happiness lie in changing the way we think and behave, seeking out experiences such as savoring a beautiful moment and taking a picture of it, thanking a friend, writing a gratitude journal, or performing random acts of kindness” (14).

When was the last time you thanked a friend for what they have done for you? When was the last time you performed a random act of kindness?

Chapter Two: Denmark: The World's Happiness All-Stars

1. Peter Gundelach, a sociologist at the University of Copenhagen, speaks of a folk tale that is vital to the Danish psyche. In Aksel Sandemose's "A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks," we learn of the town of Jante which insisted that no one was better than anyone else.

Gundelach claims that the spirit of this tale is intrinsically tied to the happiness of Danish people: "Countries where people have roughly the same level of status are happier than those places where you have a few haves and many have-nots" (39).

Do you agree with this philosophy? Take your Gratitude Journal and put your philosophy into words. Don't just jot down a few phrases. Let yourself reflect. Get involved. Pour over your ideas of life. Now, look back over the material you put together. Is there a myth/folk tale that you can relate to which is tied to this philosophy? If not, create your own.

2. Gundelach says that "enlightenment came early" to Denmark (34). He believes "a lot of it goes back to the period after 1864, after we lost 25 percent of our territory to the Germans... We had to abandon our ambitions to be a superpower" (34).

How is abandoning ambitions to be a superpower tied to enlightenment? What are your ambitions? Is this curtailing your happiness?

3. Nikolai Grundtvig, a pastor, poet, and hymn writer, started a populist educational movement that "offered classes that prepared students for society and for participation in the arts. They promoted a spirit of freedom, equality, and disciplined creativity. The idea—for the first time in human history...was to give peasants and other poor people a chance to appreciate the arts, to enjoy a poem, or to delight in a Mozart sonata" (35). Peter Gundelach believes that this movement may be one of the greatest reasons for the Danish social harmony.

How involved are you in the arts? When was the last time you read a poem, wrote one? When was the last time you went to a museum?

4. According to recent reports, the Danes eat more sweets than anyone else. Gundelach says that “Danes love to eat.... There’s a saying in this country, ‘If a man comes at you carrying a knife, you can be pretty sure he has a fork in the other hand’” (40).

How tied into “diet” are you? How would giving up on your diet free you? How have the headlines of glossy mags and their ideas of weight influenced you? Why not walk through the world with a fork and knife in hand, ready to take on the next gastronomic joy?

5. Gundelach doesn’t believe that American workaholic culture is as productive as it first appears: “I lived in the United States long enough to know that people spend a lot of their workday checking their e-mails and chatting at the watercooler” (42).

How much time do you spend at work? How much time do you spend working at work? How much time do you spend checking emails and “chatting at the watercooler”? If you could free this wasted time to do something more productive, what would you choose to do?

6. His Royal Highness of Denmark, Prince Phillippe de Bourbon-Parme has a son Joe (not Joseph) who “found his passion in woodwork. Joe was a carpenter’s apprentice” (47). When Buettner asks the King why he “didn’t push [his] son into doing something, well, more regal,” his Royal Highness responds, “Whatever for? I want him to be happy with what he does” (47).

Do you push your own children into certain professions because they may be more lucrative, respectful, or safe? Or do you push them toward their passions? Likewise, have you been pushed, by your society, by your family to make the choices you’ve made?

7. Jorgen Carlsen, the headmaster of a Danish folk school, designs his curriculum around studies from politics to pottery, with a strong dose of socializing and exercising in the countryside: “The idea is to give people an idea of the richness of life. We believe that a rich person is not necessarily the one with a lot of money. It’s the one who really has a lot to be grateful for: nature, the company of other people, the capacity to enjoy a good book, and an understanding of philosophy. The more things for which you develop a fondness, the richer the life you live” (56).

In your Gratitude Journal make note of what you're grateful for in nature, in your friends. What good books have you read lately? Good poetry? How much have you shared with friends on the subject?

8. As Buettner relates, after dinner, Erik Kristiansen's family traditionally moves "out to the backyard, where [13-year-old son] Peter built a fire in a small pit and the conversation continued. 'This is the time my family usually talks about their day,' Erik told me. 'We're away from the food and confusion and the daily schedules. This is the time we connect'" (61).

What is the ritual of your family after dinner? How much time do you spend with the television? Your kids with video games? When do you sit back and just talk? How often do you connect?

9. Approximately 70% of the average Danish income is taxed after the 70 thousand dollar threshold. Buettner says that, As such, "ambition is frowned upon, there's no upside to taking a job for pay or status. So people take jobs that interest them, which gives them a better chance to feel satisfaction and flow in their careers" (70).

How much of your own waking hours are consumed by your job, of climbing up the ladder, of making more money? Did you choose your job based on how much it paid or impressive the title was? If given the choice, and all jobs paid 70 grand, what job would you take?

Chapter Three: Singapore

1. Singapore is a very family oriented country. In fact, "to help keep families together, the government offers tax subsidies to citizens who care for aging parents. Partly as a result, 84% of seniors live with their children. That makes all family members feel like they're part of a legacy, rather than just lonely individuals" (87).

How much focus do you put on your family? Your traditions? Your parents? Who takes care of your kids when you work? When was the last time you called your mom?

2. Unlike Denmark, Singapore supports a great emphasis on work, putting "in long hours in pursuit of the five C's: cash, credit card, car, condominium, and club membership" (78).

What are the metaphorical “five C’s” for your family? What goals do you have in terms of income and job security, status and respect?

3. Jennie Chua, the CEO of Raffles Holding Ltd, a model of Singaporean success, says that “the five C’s are just a more glamorous way to provide for our families” (93): “We’ve always focused on our children’s future.... For so long, it was such a struggle to put a roof over our heads, food on the table, and get our kids educated.... The generation of men who built this country barely knew their children. They had an enormous responsibility. They worked all the time and were fiercely competitive. The new generation has evolved and become less transactional. They spend weekends with their kids and are beginning to see the value of volunteering their time” (93).

How much time do you spend away from your own family in order to build a more prosperous world for them? When is the time when you’ve provided enough, when you can step back from your own “five C’s” and cherish what is most important?

4. Singapore is “famous for its paternalistic government, which strictly enforces laws on the most trivial of infractions, from chewing gum in public to failing to flush a toilet. Offenders convicted of crimes from selling heroin to spraying graffiti on a wall are strapped to a wooden frame so a caning official can deliver flesh-splitting lashes with a soaked rattan switch, leaving a bloody pool on the floor” (78).

This has not created a world of fear and hostility, but instead one of safety and disciplined living; it’s also given the people of Singapore a happiness quotient far higher than the free world of the United States. Says Jennie Chua, “The idea that American democracy is the only path to freedom is arrogant. I’d rather live in a place where it’s safe for my kids to play today than one where I can read *Playboy* tomorrow” (94).

How much of your own freedom are you willing to give up in order to attain safety? How much mind space does the fear of an unsafe environment effect your daily life? How much time do you spend fearing your safety in the house, on the streets, as you park the car? How much does your fear of an unsafe environment curtail your pursuit of happiness? When was the last time you “read” Playboy?

5. Muslims put a great deal of time into the observance of friendship and family. In fact they have holidays created to celebrate the very nature of this connection: “On the first festive day of Shawwal, Muslim Malays go from house to house to visit relatives. They catch up with old friends and distant relatives, patch up old disputes if any have developed during the year, and exchange small gifts” (96).

How much time do you spend with your relatives? If you were going to set a day aside to patch up disputes, who would you patch these up with? How would this make your life better?

6. “The Malays have something called the Kampong Spirit,” says Ahmad Nizam Abbas, a 39-year-old lawyer who follows the Malay culture and traditions in his large family. “In the past, we used to live in fishing villages called kampongs, where we pulled together to help each other during times of adversity or disaster or during times of celebration, like preparing for a wedding. This notion still survives. When a Malay moves into a new flat, within a few days, other Malays in the neighborhood will quickly get to know them--this dates back to our fishing village roots. If something happens to a Malay household, within a few hours the whole Malay community will be there to lend its support” (97).

What is your village like? How much support do they offer one another? Would you like to see this change in any way? Can you develop a plan to affect such change?

7. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s founding father, has a “Spartan desk” which holds “only an appointment book and a computer” (100). The multiple awards he’s received are nowhere to be seen. Says Buettner, his desk “was a space of contemplation more than reflection” (100).

What does your desk look like? What does this say of your personality? Of your pursuit of happiness? Do you think your desk properly reflects who you are? Does it reflect who you wish to be? How would you like to alter it in order to reflect any changes you’d like to make in your life?

8. Lee Kuan Yew is proud that “you won’t see beggars in Singapore. You won’t see ghettos in Singapore. It’s by conscious effort. We know there is a lower five to ten percent of the population that cannot keep pace with modern life at the speed with which we are progressing. So we have to carry them and make sure that they have

a home. In fact, we more or less give them a flat so that they're not out in the streets. We find them some work. We make sure they have jobs. If the job doesn't pay enough, then we subsidize the utility bills, the conservancy charges, all the services that must be rendered. The alternative is to have them out in the streets" (106).

How are these five to ten percent treated in your community? How do you treat them personally? What do you think is beneficial about the way Lee's philosophy works? What part of his philosophy would you like to see adopted by your own village?

9. Lee Kuan Yew lives by the philosophy that "you have to be engaged with the world. Yes, I know Singapore, but it's changing. Yes, I know America, but every time I go there it's changed, new people, new leaders, and new enterprises. Life means impermanence. That's a British axiom: There's nothing permanent in life. No living thing is permanent. If it's permanent, that means it has no life. That's the challenge of life. Are you able to keep on adapting to your changed environment?" (108) Lee says that the problem is that people "become complacent," that they "resent leaving [their] comfort zone" (108).

How do you deal with the impermanence of life? What is your comfort zone? How much do you protect this comfort zone? How much do you challenge it? When was the last time a major change occurred (by choice or not) in your life? How did you react to it? Initially and in the long run?

10. Lee Kuan Yew says that he sees times changing in Singapore. "Every festival day I see \$100,000 to \$200,000 worth of fireworks. I would never do that. I'd build a club. I'd build a little dispensary or clinic. But for 20 minutes you see this spectacle in the sky or on your TV, and then we'll give you computer graphics. That's the only way to attract the crowds at the marina. The younger generation says, 'We can afford it. Let's burn it up.' It still hurts me" (110).

Reflect on each of these lifestyles/philosophies. What are their merits? Which lifestyle/philosophy do you think is the better to emulate?

11. Buettner sees a large difference in the makeup of Asians as opposed to Americans. "For Asians, striving for personal happiness appears to be a vaguely impolite and selfish concept that falls somewhere near the bottom of a list of lifetime goals. For

Asians, the individual exists only in the context of his family and community. The individual is not separate. He is often driven toward perfection, but not for personal gain as much as to live up to societal expectations, and to make his mother proud” (114).

Exercise: What do you strive for in terms of achieving happiness? Create a list in your Gratitude Journal. Take note of how many items on this list are personal, how many are geared toward society and how many are geared to family. What does this say about you? What, if anything, would you like to see changed?

Chapter Three: Mexico: The Secret Sauce of Happiness

1. Dan Buettner reveals that “a recent study carried out by Gallup-Healthways shows that social time massively affects day-to-day happiness. It suggests that for most people spending six to seven hours in social time each day helps to maximize their well-being... ‘The secret,” says political scientist Miguel Basanez, “has to do with maintaining just the right tension between making a living and savoring life’ (137).

How many hours do you put in at the office everyday? Look at your social life as you would your work life for a moment. How often do you get together with friends? How much time do you put into socializing? Do you have a closing time? Are you as productive socially as you are at the office? What do you think your annual social review would be like?

2. Victor Trujillo, known to millions as Bozo the Creepy Clown, says that Mexican humor is different than humor in any other part of the world. “In Mexico humor is not a vehicle to poke fun at people as it often is in other countries. We don’t laugh at the Indians, or the blacks or the gays. Here it’s something to give us space and time before we just get mad. We don’t have much power, so we laugh at those who do. It’s a balm against pain” (141).

The way we use humor says a great deal about who we are. As Oscar Wilde said, we are never more serious than when we’re joking. How do you use humor? What do you find humor in? What do your jokes say about you? What do the things you laugh at say about you?

3. Nicole Fuentes, an economist at the University of Monterrey, “found that about 80 percent of the people we polled believed in God and that people who went to church at least once a week—about half of respondents—were the happiest” (147). Buettner claims that “indeed worldwide research shows that religious people are happier than nonreligious ones” (147).

How religious are you? How big a part does religion play in your life? How does it affect your mood? What part do you see religion playing in society today? What are its advantages and disadvantages?

4. Research on the brain activity of Tibetan monks has shown that the more experienced practitioners of meditation have higher levels of activity in the left prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain where happiness ‘lives’” (169).

Why do you think this is? How much time do you spend meditating each week? How much time do you spend worrying about your daily workload? How often do you give yourself a conditioned break from your worries and concerns?

5. Buettner visits with several women in a poor neighborhood who sit out on cinderblocks and chat in the afternoon. When he asks a young woman named Christina who was currently living with five adults and three children what she would do if she had a great deal of money, she says that she wouldn’t move because then “we probably wouldn’t meet like this every afternoon” (151).

Many people with a good deal of money live in large houses with wide lawns that serve to separate themselves from their neighbors. Thus, it takes a good deal of work to manufacture meeting times with their immediate community. How often do you see your own neighbors? How many shared challenges do you have?

6. Buettner visits a young girl known as La Nina, who is renowned for creating miracles for her followers. He says “she addresses their pain and dispenses hope, the poor man’s most valuable commodity. People leave feeling that they’ve been heard, that someone cared, if only for just a few minutes. For her followers—the poor and uninsured—La Nina provides a powerful dose of pain mitigation. And, as novelist Carlos Fuentes once said of his native country, it is impossible to understand Mexico without appreciating what it is to believe in miracles” (159).

How much do you believe in miracles? When was the last time you completely and unquestionably did? How was the world different then? Would you like it to be so again?

7. Mexicans are known for their celebrations. Armando Fuentes Aguirre, a newspaper columnist and humorist, says, “We celebrate everything. Mother’s Day. Father’s Day. Godfather’s Day. Saint’s Days. Dead people’s days. Something every week. We invent reasons. We know how to mix work and pleasure” (161).

How many celebrations are you involved in each week? Do you ever feel too busy or hurried to enjoy a celebration? Do you sometimes avoid them altogether?

8. Armando Fuentes Aguirre says that “you need to believe in something to be happy. You need to believe in something bigger than yourself, something that transcends you. This gives you hope, and that is part of happiness” (162).

What do you believe in that’s bigger than yourself, that transcends you?

9. Armando Fuentes Aguirre goes on to say that Mexicans “cannot live without faith, hope, and love. It’s something we get from our elders. It’s in everyone around us. If we live only for ourselves, we’re not going to be happy” (162).

What do you have faith in other than yourself? I’m talking about unquestionable faith. It could be God, a parent, a friend, even a pet. How does this faith help to enhance your life? What happens when you lose this faith? Can you regain it? Can you try?

10. Armando Fuentes Aguirre says that “if you think only about yourself, your problems will be endless—you’ll have a new pain in your back, some part of your car will need fixing, your savings account won’t be big enough. Fix one problem, and a new one always appears to take its place. But when you worry about someone else’s problems, or volunteer your time, you take the light off your own troubles” (163).

Do you volunteer your time? Do you spend time trying to help others? How much of the day do you spend mulling over your own problems?

11. Armando Fuentes Aguirre offers a poem of wisdom that his grandfather gave to him, a recipe for happiness, if you will:

Drink without getting drunk

Love without suffering jealousy

Eat without overindulging

Never argue

And once in a while, with great discretion, misbehave. (164)

Do you find wisdom behind these words? Do you pattern your own life after such a philosophy? What kind of philosophy do you pattern your life by?

Chapter Five: San Luis Obispo: A Real American Dream

1. Leslie Mead, a winemaker, took a \$25,000 pay cut in order to accept a position at a vineyard close to San Luis Obispo. This goes against American norms, where most people relocate based on where they will make the most money.

Would you take a similar pay cut in order to work close to a place where you'd like to live? What do you think of your job right now? Take a look at the place you'd truly like to live? Do some research. What kind of jobs do they have available? Make contact. Test the waters.

2. Russell Brown, the pastor of the Old Mission in San Luis Obispo, says that "you make a choice in life. You either do what you want to do and go wherever that takes you in the world, or you say, 'I want to live here, and I'll do whatever it takes to live here'" (187).

In light of this, what brought you to where you are currently residing? If you could choose any place on earth to reside, where would you choose? What could you do to make such a move happen?

3. The Gallup poll suggests that “happy people feel a sense of purpose on the job” (185).

Do you feel a sense of purpose on your job? What is your dream job? What sense of purpose would this dream job offer you? Why aren't you seeking out a job in this field already? Can you draw up a game plan that will help you to take steps toward attaining this goal?

4. Studies show that “happy people often have hobbies (which helps them stay connected socially)” (186).

Do you have forums where you connect and socialize with others? Do you have hobbies? Are there social groups that encourage these hobbies which could help you connect with others?

5. Pierre Rademaker, who owns his own Design company, shuts down his offices every Friday at midday. As he claims, “I give everybody Friday afternoons off so we can run errands that would normally eat up your Saturday” (189).

How do you spend your Saturdays? What errands do you run? How much time do you spend on your Saturdays working and running errands? How much time do you spend relaxing and socializing? What would you like to see changed?

6. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman of Princeton “found that on a daily basis, commuting ranks as people’s *least* favorite activity, behind housework and child care. ‘Intimate relations’ scored highest, followed closely by socializing after work and dinner” (189). A select number of items from the list went as follows, from most enjoyable to least:

1. intimate relations
2. socializing after work
3. relaxing, dinner
4. lunch
5. watching TV
6. socializing at work

7. talking on the phone at home
8. cooking, child care
9. housework
10. working
11. commuting from work
12. commuting to work

Exercise: Itemize your own list from those above (make it more personalized if you like), ranking them from most to least favorites to be involved in. In your Gratitude Journal, write of a life where you try to maximize your joys while minimizing the chores. Can you design a life plan where you actualize this dream?

7. The people of San Luis Obispo created a mission plaza in the center of their community, a town square that brought everyone together. Immediately successful, the philosophy which inspired the change began to grow. As Rademaker says, “After the referendum to close that street, people felt empowered to make change themselves” (190).

Take a close look at your own community. Try to envision it as a clean canvas. What changes would you like to see? If you were empowered to make changes regarding green spaces, traffic, pollution, and the arts, what would you do?

8. As Buettner says, “San Luis Obispo has an aggressive greenbelt plan in place, as well as an ordinance limiting housing growth to one percent a year” (202). They understand that “one of the biggest casualties of sprawl is recreation. A gym just can’t replace convenient access to parks, hiking trails, mountain-biking trails, and wildlife preserves—beautiful areas both to enjoy and to get the body moving” (203). “Research shows that if you make the active option the easy option—good sidewalks, bike lanes, less and slower traffic—activity levels go up” (203).

What is the layout of your town? Does this encourage healthy active behavior? What changes would you make in the layout of your community to encourage such?

9. At first it's pretty surprising to see that such a small city as San Luis Obispo has its own orchestra, together with a 1,289 seat concert hall that hosts "a vibrant slate of classical music, opera, and pop" (197). They have their own art museum, two large galleries and space for rock concerts, art classes and film seminars. It's no wonder that the people in the town are happy, because, as Buettner notes, "access to the arts is a key contributor to well-being" (197).

How much do you think arts and your enjoyment of such add to your life? What kind of access do you have to the arts? How often do you make use of this?

10. Doug Carr, the business development director of San Luis Obispo's Level Studios, which employs 200 people, speaks of how "the company...sponsors blood drives and 5K races and Beer Fridays, where the CFO brings in quality micro-brews to sample and everybody can hang out and chop it up in the company kitchen a little" (198).

What does your company do for its employees? What could you suggest that might help further the social interaction? If you work at home, can you think of ways to further social interaction in your community that would encourage the same?

11. Kenneth Schwartz points out that "being happy in America is a funny thing: We value freedom to pursue happiness over any sort of planned happiness. Our founding documents promise us that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, but there's no plan to actually achieve it.... It seems that Americans feel a need to figure out happiness for themselves" (199).

How have you plotted and planned out your own Pursuit of Happiness? Do you spend more time working toward your happiness than enjoying it? Consider revamping your Pursuit-of-Happiness plan. Design one with realistic goals and a definite time frame.

12. John Stuart Mill, the British philosopher who gave us *On Liberty*, once wrote, "Let any man call to mind what he himself felt on emerging from boyhood—from the tutelage and control of even loved and affectionate elders—and entering upon the responsibilities of manhood. Was it not like the physical effect of taking off a heavy

weight, or releasing him from obstructive, even if not otherwise painful bonds? Did he not feel twice as much alive, twice as much human being, as before?" (199).

Buettner suggests that "Mill understood that we can still listen to great teachers and look to great examples, but ultimately the most meaningful lessons are learned on our own" (199).

What great teachers have you had? What great examples have you followed? What have you incorporated from their life to your own?