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## Context to the nugget

Raj speaks about his journey to becoming a researcher of happiness. He speaks about how he thought about his journey after graduating from IIM Calcutta and how he came to the US. He also speaks about how he started out with a deep interest in marketing but has gravitated towards teaching happiness over a period of time.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And Raj we'd love to talk about your insights based on your work in happiness but before that I'd love to talk about your journey and how you got here. You started out with degrees in Engineering from BITS Pilani and then you had an MBA from IIMC and an early career in Lintas the advertising agency. Talk to us about the transition to academics. How did that happen and what drove that decision?

Raj Raghunathan (RR): Yeah, so I think you and your listeners are going to be a little bit disappointed to hear the story perhaps, but I really did not choose to come into academics. I just wanted to get out of India. We are talking of the early 90s when really we did not have a whole lot of opportunities to travel abroad and for me that was very, very important, it was a top priority in my life to travel to see places and everything. And because I am from a middle-class family more or less the only way in which I got to travel abroad, I thought, this was the only way I could do it, was to actually get a PhD because Masters and undergraduate degrees you have to actually pay money. Sometimes you did get a scholarship as a Master's but as a PhD you are guaranteed a stipend and my parents did not have enough money to send me abroad for me to travel around. So, I came here to the US really believe it or not just to travel abroad. But, once I got here something really interesting happened, which was that I really fell in love with studying. I was never really into studying. I mean, I was smart enough to get into BITS and IIM and everything but I would just basically kind of fake, you know, once I was inside, I would just do the bare minimum possible to get to the next level. But in the PhD program I discovered that I was studying topics that were of inherent interest to me. So, for the very first time I was studying not for the sake of getting a job or grades or whatever, I was studying for the sake of exploring your topic and so that's how I ended up here in the US.

DJ: Fascinating, definitely didn't expect that. And even in your journey as an academic you have transitioned from marketing, I think to studying happiness and psychology and leadership and some of the related topics. How did you gravitate towards these topics along the way?

RR: So, I was always very, very interested in happiness at a very personal level, and I suppose that you could say that that's what led me to come to the US. And, after getting a degree in IIM, I would say that most people are very keen on taking advantage of the grade degree that they have to get

into a good company and earn as much money as you can. Even back in those days before India started really taking off, there were jobs that were paying quite well. So, the fact that I chose to not do that and forgo that earning potential and opportunity for earning to come and spend time here in the US five years right to get a PhD is a decision that most people wouldn't take lightly, but I wasn't taking it lightly but it was a no-brainer for me. For me, I wanted to travel abroad and that trumped everything else and so I ended up doing it. Now, it's a good thing that it ended up being a good decision career wise too I would say. And a similar kind of a phenomenon happened after I started teaching Marketing in the Marketing department. At some point I realised that hey, I don't know if what I am teaching is actually helping people out at the end of the day. I am giving them tools and skill sets needed to persuade other people to buy stuff that they may or may not need and that's leading to consumerism. I don't know the marketers are really happy about being somewhat manipulative agents and I don't know the consumers ultimately happy buying things that they don't need and the Earth is definitely not happy. So, that was one of the thoughts in the background of my mind and then I went to India, took a bunch of MBA students from McCombs School of Business to India as a part of a course called Global Connections, and I remember last day of that trip in 2006 I think it was I turned around to them and asked them, how do you like if I offer a course on happiness? Because for me the ultimate purpose of education is to make the world a happier more fulfilling place. I want my students to be happy, I wanted them to make other people happy, and I wasn't sure that the marketing courses were doing it. And so, I turned around and asked them this question and to like one person they all said, to the very last person they all said that they would love to see a course like this. And that really did it for me and then I came back and I put my course and in a way it just took off more wildly than I would have ever expected. It has been 10 years since that happened since I had first taught the course, this was I told you in 2006 or 2007 when I talked to the students; it took me a good 3-4 years to actually offer my very first course to the students here at the McCombs School of Business. So, it's been 10 years since I have taught it and as you know there are two online courses now that I have offered. I go and teach the same course at ISB, I teach it both for MBAs and for undergrads, I get invited to give talks to organizations on the topic and so it has really taken off in a way that I wouldn't have expected and of course I am not complaining, so it has been a good ride.

DJ: Lovely. And may be just going back to that piece around building capability, let's say the 3-4 years between when you sensed the demand from students and when you offered it, talk to us about how you spent that time Raj.

RR: Yeah. So, you know, this is back in 2006-07 and there was no university Professor, certainly no tenure track Professor offering a course on happiness anywhere as far as I could tell in the US. So, there was no real path that was already carved out for me, I couldn't buy a textbook and then just teach it from it. I had to literally sit down and read the papers and structure it in the way that I thought fit. So, it took me a while and I went in and sat in on a few courses that I thought were somewhat related to the topic and a couple of courses were much related to happiness, but they were taking an entirely different approach. I wanted mine to be very scientific, logical, and amenable to a kind of philosophical inquiry if you will a rationalistic approach as opposed to a faith-based approach. So, it took me a while to wrap my head around it and figure out what the content was going to be and how I was going to structure it. I have to tell you that, if somebody were to have sat in on that course now and they sit in on the course now that I teach now, they wouldn't be able to see any similarities at all. So, it has changed even in the last 10 years but because there was no other course like that I had to spend a good amount of time figuring out what it is that I wanted to say in the class.

DJ: Got it. And what are some of the dimensions in which it has changed since you mention it? What has changed?

RR: So, I would say that one similarity is that it's a course that starts out with what are our basic motivations in life. And then I end up saying why do we have these motivations and how achieving them makes us feel happy and in the very early days, I had these kind of buckets and I said that you needed to have some level of basic need, some level of accuracy need I called it at that point in time, some level of achievement need, some level of relationship need and I conceived of all these as being buckets that are kind of hanging in space or on a pole if you will, that is a horizontal pole, it's all hanging there and the more one bucket gets full, you need to also fill in other buckets otherwise it gets lopsided and it's not a very happy life. And, it was kind of weird now that I think back on it I don't know why I was thinking that way about these things. I felt that you needed to have a balance between all these things in order for you to be happy. And, maybe to some extent it's true but I've kind of now the way that I have structured it, it basically boils down to three very, very important goals. I call them MBA goals, Mastery Belonging and Autonomy and then I have a couple of other things that are very important but those are the three big goals. I have gotten rid of this whole idea of the buckets and they need to be in balance and I had I think seven buckets so it has changed quite a bit.

DJ: Got it. This reminds me of the work of Stewart Friedman who was on the podcast a few months back. He talks about Self, Work, Home and Community and he talks about some sort of a harmony, not quite the buckets that you spoke about but at least those four dimensions.

RR: Yeah, I would say that, that in a way was my idea as well that these need to be in balance or harmony, you could call it harmony. Now, I don't know if I think that way about it. I do think that it's nice if they are in balance or every one of them is fulfilled but I don't necessarily think that having one fulfilled and the other not fulfilled is worse than having nothing fulfilled. So, in that way my thinking has changed.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

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## End of nugget transcription

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## About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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