

Why Following Your Bliss is Bullshit

Chris Dierkes | [Reality Sandwich](#)

“Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors for you where there were only walls.”

–Joseph Campbell

Follow your bliss.

You’ve heard the saying before. It’s everywhere. It’s cited time and again as if it were simply the truth full stop. It’s not so much an argument as an assumption.

I’m going to try to convince you that this saying is wrong. In fact it’s very wrong and it’s causing people pain, confusion, and illusion. I realize in taking this stance, I’m going to be pissing a bunch of folks off and stepping on a whole lotta toes. I’m definitely swimming against the current on this one. But I think it needs to be said regardless.

The call to follow your bliss comes of course from the great Joseph Campbell. I realize by criticizing this statement I’m criticizing one with some strong history to it, articulated by a very wise man (one far wiser than I). I should say Campbell’s work on mythology, in particular the hero’s journey, has had a major, positive influence in my life. The *Power of Myth* series with Bill Moyers is one of the single greatest things I’ve ever seen in my life.

Nevertheless, I still think this saying is wrong. At least, the way it’s commonly understood is really problematic (and I think the saying has inherent in it a tendency to be misinterpreted).

Bliss

First off we have to look at the word bliss as so much of the statement hinges on the meaning of this word.

Now authors are no doubt free to define terms as they please. But I think Campbell's choice of the word bliss was a particularly poor one and sets up an inevitable dynamic of misunderstanding. This misunderstanding leads inevitably to a shallow (mis)interpretation of Campbell's words, with following your bliss becoming a simplistic slogan. This is where we find ourselves today.

Here's a quotation from Campbell that unpacks what he means by bliss (from the aforementioned *Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers). Campbell is responding to a question from Moyers about whether life itself can be said to having purpose:

"Just sheer life cannot be said to have a purpose, because look at all the different purposes it has all over the place. But each incarnation, you might say, has a potentiality, and the mission of life is to live that potentiality. How do you do it? My answer is, "Follow your bliss." There's something inside you that knows when you're in the center, that knows when you're on the beam or off the beam, and if you get off the beam to earn money, you've lost your life. And if you stay in the center and don't get any money, you still have your bliss".

We can see from this quotation that for Campbell bliss is closely related to a sense of purpose, almost conscience, a deep pull within an individual as to their life's mission.

The problem, as I see it, is that by choosing the word bliss he immediately runs up against two more common understandings of bliss (one spiritual and one emotional) which run at cross-purposes to his intended meaning.

Let's look at these two other meanings of the word bliss. From there we'll see how the notion of following your bliss has become so corrupted in our day.

First the spiritual version of bliss. There's a long-established tradition of translating the Sanskrit word *ananda* into English as bliss. Think of the famous author of *The Autobiography of a Yogi*, Paramanasha Yogananda ("The Bliss/Ananda of Yoga") or Ramakrishna's great disciple and bringer of the Eastern Light to the West Swami Vivekanadna ("The Bliss/Ananda of Knowledge").

Ananda is the energetic state of awakening. It's the energetic space that comes from the realization of pure release in the state of utter liberation.

Sometimes people will translate *ananda* into English as happiness, joy, or even elation. Joy, happiness, and elation are temporary emotional states (good ones no doubt!) but *ananda* they ain't. *Ananda* doesn't come and go like happiness or joy. Happiness or joy are meant to be in relation to other emotions like sadness, grief, fear, and anger. *Ananda* doesn't have any such relations. There's nothing to compare *ananda* to. *Ananda* is not like happiness which we know as different from sadness (and vice versa). Moreover, it's possible to experience *ananda* while also experiencing an emotional state of joy or sadness, boredom or elation, fear or contentment.

In other words, *ananda* IS. It's an overwhelming realization of something that already is the case.

So applying that version of bliss to "Follow your bliss," there's a problem straight away.

Anadna isn't yours or mine or anybody's. There's no ownership. The state of *ananda* is precisely predicated on the dropping of the separate self-sense. The self is the only one who can claim possession of things (however ludicrous such claims might be...for example claims to owning land, sorry capitalism).

There's no your bliss. If by bliss we actually mean *ananda*. And while Campbell clearly didn't mean *ananda* it was also a

well-established use of the term by the time Campbell articulated his understanding of bliss. As a consequence, there's been a misinterpretation of follow your bliss—one that has led many to seek after and overemphasize the value of altered spiritual states of consciousness (bliss *asananda*). Such persons then claim ownership of such states (“my bliss”).

The other meaning of bliss is the emotional state of deep joy (bliss from the old English *blithe*). If instead of either *ananda* or Campbell's notion of bliss we understand bliss as the emotional state of bliss then we've got the same problem in reverse. Rather than getting hooked on spiritual states, follow your bliss becomes a justification for getting hooked on an emotional state. Choosing any one emotional state as the answer to what we should be doing in life is really problematic. Emotions exist in an ecology and we need to learn to flow with and through all of them. Bliss as a state of elation or ecstatic happiness can be very wonderful. It can also be very addicting, particularly in a culture that does so much to deny the value of other emotions like grief, remorse, sorrow, or hurt.

Bliss junkies exist—whether their drug of choice is chemical, work, food, power, money, material possessions, or spiritual practice.

I'd argue that a heroin addict shooting up is precisely following his bliss. His bliss lies elsewhere—in a state of chemically induced euphoria free from pain. He doesn't want to live with his pain, grief, and unexpressed sadness so he follows his bliss, which is synonymous with his addiction (the very force destroying his life and his relationships).

(More prosaically, the spiritual junkiehood meme has gotten so bad I see people on Facebook wishing each other “blissings.” Please God if you're reading this and you're ever inclined to do not, I repeat DO NOT, ever wish me a blessing. Oy ve, I threw up in my mouth a little bit just now having to write

that dreaded word.).

Our society, and in particular our economic order, are precisely built on possessiveness, being addicted to seeking the pleasurable at the expense of the painful, and believing that one magical thing will solve all our problems. By choosing the word bliss to describe his otherwise profound vision, I think Campbell left himself wide open to this form of misinterpretation and corruption.

So we've seen that the word bliss is easily misunderstood (and I would argue was a poor choice by Campbell). Bliss—in either the meaning of ananda nor as an emotional state—is not really possessed by anyone (it's not “your” bliss). They are simply states of being—we may experience them at various points but they aren't ours.

And then there's the follow part of “follow your bliss.” It too has some problems associated with it.

Ananda simply is, so it's hard to talk about following it. There's not necessarily a direction to *ananda* such that one would follow it. There's a way I suppose to talk about immersing ourselves deeper and deeper into the reality of *ananda* but I'm not sure that's the same as following it.

And as just discussed, becoming over-identified with the emotional state of bliss and following it at all cost is the very definition of addiction.

I want to emphasize again that Campbell didn't intend either of those meanings—he clearly defines bliss differently—but I think he should have chosen a different word, one that wasn't saddled with these already established meanings.

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