

Understanding Happiness: A Vedantic Perspective

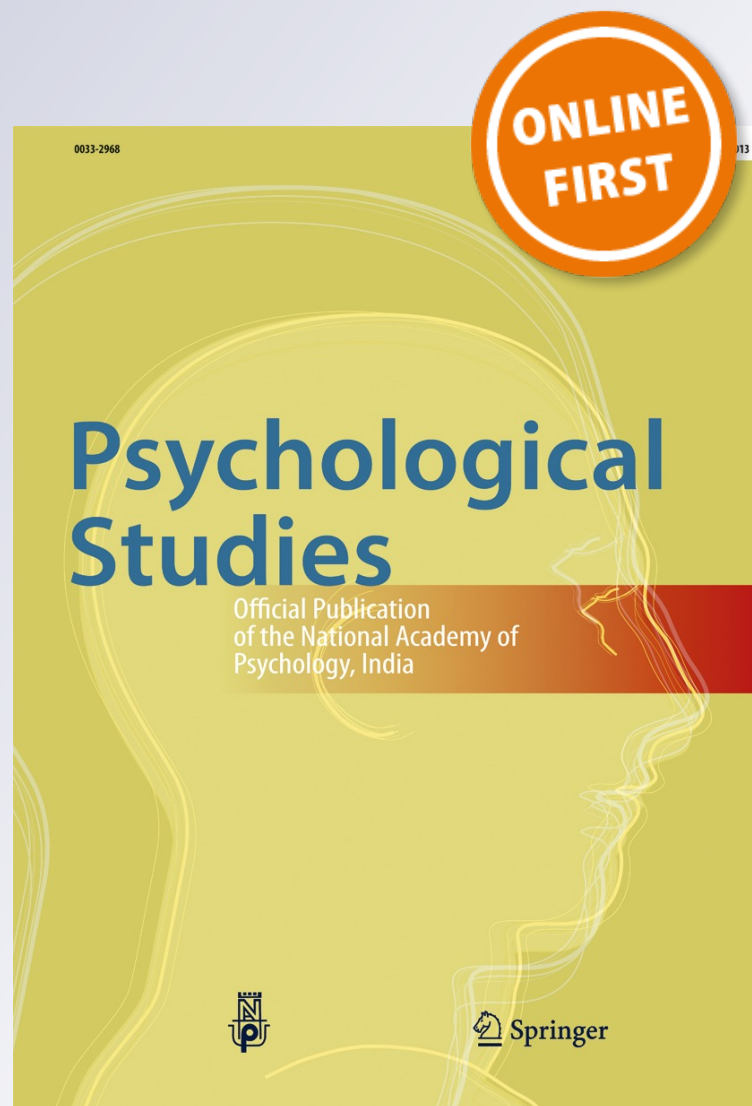
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Understanding Happiness: A Vedantic Perspective

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Abstract The pursuit of happiness has been the one of the most prominent goals of humanity since time immemorial. However, understanding and experiencing happiness varies across cultures. While the dominant understanding on happiness has developed from the Euro-American cultural background there are other significant conceptualizations present in the Eastern philosophical and cultural traditions like India and China. It has been noted that Eastern psychologies offer rich insights into human phenomena which are equally universal in nature because of their long-standing civilizational experiences. Drawing from these traditions would make the discourse on happiness culturally informed and more comprehensive. Furthermore, Indian tradition which considers bliss as the essential nature of the individual personality can contribute immensely in understanding and realizing lasting happiness. This paper explores the types and nature of happiness as expounded in the Vedantic tradition in the context of Indian psychology.

Keywords Enduring happiness · Bliss · Nature of happiness · Transcendental happiness · Indian Philosophy · Indian Psychology · Culture

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Introduction

The pursuit of happiness has been the axiomatic reference of all human endeavours across cultures and time-lines. In the Indic traditions, this idea could be noted in statements like, 'Let me be happy and not sad, is the intent behind all human actions'¹ or in the most common wish expressed, 'let all be happy'². In the West one can note that even the formation of the modern state and market economy are guided by this underlying principle of happiness. 'The United States Declaration of Independence' adopted in 1776 by 13 states of the East coast stated, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'. The remarkable figure of Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith, notes that, 'The happiness of mankind as well as of all other rational creatures, seem to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of Nature.' (Smith 2009, p. 132). Thus the need to seek 'happiness' and be 'happy' through all one's actions is universally acknowledged as the main motivating force in the lives of people.

The heightened interest in the study of happiness in the West, in the recent times, owes its sources to the advent of positive psychology and to the works of Martin Seligman, Diener, Kahneman, Csikszentmihalyi etc. With this approach, the study of well-being and happiness has acquired central focus in the discipline of psychology today (Diener, Subjective well-being: The science of happiness, and a proposal for a national index, 2000) (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005).

¹ *sukhaṁ me syāt duḥkaṁ me mā bhūti iti lokapravṛttiḥ*

² *sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ*

Current Understanding on Happiness

At present, there are two dominant approaches to human happiness and well-being: Hedonic and Eudaimonic perspectives. The hedonic perspective with its roots in Hedonism – an ancient school of thought which argues that pleasure is the only intrinsic good, seeks to maximize one's happiness by maximizing one's pleasure and avoiding displeasures. Subjective Well-being (SWB) has been associated with the hedonistic approach. Well-being in itself refers to the optimal psychological experience and functioning of the individual. As it involves people evaluating themselves subjectively, the extent to which they experience a sense of wellness is termed as Subjective Well-being (SWB). SWB is operationally defined in terms of experiencing a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one's life. Strictly speaking, from the hedonistic perspective, it would suffice to consider the presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect as the constituents of SWB and leave out life satisfaction as is not particularly a hedonic concept. However, life satisfaction has been widely accepted in the operational definition of SWB. This concept of SWB, as earlier defined, is frequently used interchangeably with happiness. This implies that hedonic happiness occurs when one is primarily seeking pleasant feelings and avoiding unpleasant ones (Ryan and Deci 2001).

The other important approach to happiness is the eudaimonic perspective. This approach bases itself on the Aristotelian philosophy of life. In his famous *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle deliberates on the nature of the happy man and then attempts to define happiness as the highest good that one seeks and one ought to seek as the end in itself and not as a means to any other end. It results from a life based on virtuousness and contemplation (Aristotle 1999).

The eudaimonic perspective also draws its substance from the works of analytical and humanistic psychologists like Fromm, Jung, Maslow, Allport, Rogers etc. and proposes that human well-being is a process of fulfilling or realizing one's true self – *daimon*. Here, well-being is achieved when an individual lives in accordance with her true nature i.e. when she aligns her activities and fully engages her life with the values that are deeply held within. In such a condition an individual feels she is 'intensely alive', 'complete' and existing as she 'really is' (Waterman 1993). Psychological well-being (PWB) is the counterpart of SWB in the eudaimonic tradition. Ryff defining eudaimonia or psychological well-being 'as the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one's true potentials' (Ryff 1995) identifies six characters of it viz. self-acceptance, purpose in life, personal growth, autonomy, environmental mastery and positive relationships (Ryff 1989). This conceptualization maintains that not all desires – not all outcomes that a person might have – would yield well-being when achieved. Fulfilment of desire may be pleasure-producing but not necessarily good and

hence may not promote well-being. It is interesting to note that in this way, eudaimonic theory distinguishes well-being from happiness (Ryan and Deci 2001).

The concept of well-being has social dimensions as well. Extending the ideas of eudaimonic approach at the social level, Keyes has defined social well-being as the positive 'appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society' (Keyes 1998). He further identifies five dimensions of social well-being viz. social acceptance, social integration, social contribution, social coherence and social actualization. This is based on the premise like in PWB that society as a whole has a collective purpose and each member of the society has a definite role and responsibility in realizing its purpose. Accordingly, maximizing happiness at the social level is largely dependent on one's ability to realize her role and contribute towards its fulfilment. According to Keyes, this approach to well-being is based on 'classical sociological theory and current social psychological perspectives' (Keyes 1998, p. 133). Nevertheless, it is clear that the measures of social well-being are closely connected to and modelled on the lines of the measures of PWB.

The Need for Alternative Perspectives

Defining happiness operationally in terms of SWB and Psychological well-being, researchers have come up with measurements for both of them. Research on SWB and PWB focus on the factors that contribute to SWB – personal, socio-environmental and cultural factors (Deci and Ryan 2008) and on the six parameters mentioned respectively. However, some researchers have critiqued the comprehensiveness and sophistication of the current understanding of the concept of happiness. They have also questioned the psychological depth behind the theory, efficacy and utility of the instruments and the applications of such ill-conceived theories (Ryff 1989). Despite serious research and a good number of empirical studies being conducted in the field of happiness, Diener himself acknowledges that the progress has been slow and little when it comes to understand the core of this fundamental human experience called happiness (Diener et al. 1999).

Furthermore, some others have pointed out that the current understanding of happiness is not culturally informed. Ryff remarks that the contemporary notions of well-being obscures the awareness that culture, history, ethnicity, class, and so on give rise to different, perhaps competing, conceptions of well-being (Ryff 1989). It is been largely felt that the existing conceptualization and the measurements draw heavily from the Euro-American cultural perspective while ignoring the Eastern perspectives (Lu 2001). While there are many common underpinnings, the West and the East epitomizing the individual and social oriented societies respectively, have altogether different conceptualizations of happiness (Lu and Gilmour 2004) (Uchida et al. 2004). Hence, culture being a

significant factor in the construction of happiness, determining its causes, conditions, motivations, correlates and outcomes, any meaningful discourse on happiness has to be culturally informed. In this backdrop, this paper presents the Vedantic perspective of happiness from the Indic tradition in its original context and maps out its contours.

In addition, there are studies that question the direction and utility of the researches that are happening in the field of happiness. They observe that on a practical side the findings of these studies have helped people little in deepening their knowledge about what makes them truly happy (Nelson et al. 2013). 'To the extent that people's predictions about what will make them happy are flawed', Wilson and Gilbert remark that, 'people fail at maximizing their happiness' (Wilson and Gilbert 2005). Consequently, the decision and the choices that the people make would be negatively impacted. On the other hand some people have noted that there are psychological traditions in the East that have recognised the individual's ability to grow and evolve and thereby provide her a 'sense of the unlimited ecstasy that could be found within a self which is freed of personal strivings' (Murphy and Murphy 1968). While mentioning about the Indian sages whom he personally met who had achieved higher and newer (not familiar in the West) states of health and well-being, Boss notes (Boss 1965, pp. 187–188):

And yet there were exalted figures of the sages and holy men themselves, each one of them a living example of the possibility of the human growth and maturity and of the attainment of an impeccable inner peace, a joyous freedom from guilt, and a purified, selfless goodness and calmness...No matter how carefully I observe the waking lives of the holy men, no matter how ready they were to tell me about their dreams, I could not detect in the best of them a trace of a selfish action or any kind of repressed or consciously concealed shadow life.

Moreover, new research suggests that authentic happiness equated with the Indic concept of '*sukha*' is marked with the presence of 'plenitude, bliss, peace of mind, serenity, inner peace or fulfilment' (Dambrun and Ricard 2011). In this context it becomes desirable to revisit some of the conceptualizations of happiness and well-being in the Vedantic view point from the Indic tradition.

Happiness in the Vedantic Tradition

Any discussion concerning Indian intellectual heritage must necessarily begin with the Vedic reference for a simple reason that it is the first available document of human culture and thought. When one glances through the Vedic and especially the Upanishadic (also known as Vedantic) texts, one would note the presence of significant number of passages that deal

with the topic of happiness amongst others that are of interest to us in the present context.

In the first section of this paper, we will examine the major *Upaniṣads* and allied texts for their content of happiness. All the *Upaniṣads*, to a considerable extent, share a similar understanding of the concept of happiness though the details differ from one another. The texts that have been the focus of discussion here are, in strict terms, from Vedantic school of thought, which is one of the traditions practised even today. Moreover, since most of the other schools of Indic thought share similar views on happiness, the term Indic is used synonymously with the term Vedantic in this paper.

Before getting into the concept of happiness, it would be helpful and essential to take a cursory glance of the two terms that have been used to denote or represent the concept of happiness.

1. *Ānanda*: This term is made of the prefix 'Ā' and the root 'nand' meaning rejoicing. Happiness, joy, enjoyment, sensual pleasure, pure happiness are the meanings of the term as provided by Monier Williams. It is the most commonly used word in Vedantic literature. Generally, it covers the entire range of happiness at various levels but mainly refers to the ultimate happiness or bliss. It is also one of the terms used to describe the essential nature of the Self along with *Sat* (Existence) and *Cit* (Consciousness).
2. *Sukha*: This is the other most common term for happiness in Vedantic literature and folk culture. It means pleasant, comfort, easiness, prosperity, pleasure, happiness etc. according to the Monier Williams dictionary.

In common language the terms *sukha* and *Ānanda* are used synonymously. However, it must be noted that *sukha* belongs to a set of concepts where dualities exist i.e. *dukha* (pain, sorrow, suffering etc.) stands in contrast to *sukha*, whereas *Ānanda* is beyond *sukha* as it transcends both *sukha* and *dukha*. As such it has no term that stands in anti-thesis to the experience of *Ānanda*.

The other terms used to describe aspects of happiness would be explained in the subsequent passages as necessary.

Summary of Discussion on Happiness in Various *Upaniṣads*

It is interesting to note that the happiness and well-being of an individual have been dealt with so extensively in the *Upaniṣads*. *Ānanda*, the term for bliss or happiness itself, appears in various places and there are extensive discussions on the nature and sources of happiness. This section will merely describe the different contexts in which the concept of happiness has been covered without attempting to be either interpretative or prescriptive. A discussion on the same will follow later.

Taittirīya Upaniṣad

To start with, in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, the second chapter is called *Brahmānandavallī*. It is a chapter on *Ānanda* of the *Brahman*. Accordingly, it starts and ends with a detailed discussion on the nature of happiness and realizing it as the core of one's being. According to it, the innermost core of the being is the '*Ānanda*' – pure existential/transcendental bliss, along with '*Sat*' (Existence) and '*Cit*' (Consciousness). It is the core of human personality around which the individual exists and functions. However, there are many layers or sheaths around this core which impede the experience of the original condition. The sheaths that cover are five in number viz. *Annamaya kośa* – physical, *Prāṇamaya kośa* – the vital, *Manomaya kośa* – the mental, *Vijñānamaya kośa* – the intuitive, and *Ānandamaya kośa* – the blissful (Salagame 2003). This idea is strengthened in the third and next chapter *Bhṛguvallī*. Continuing further, a very interesting imagery of a bird is presented in another passage. It introduces the threefold concept of *priya*, *moda* and *pramoda* and says that the '*priya*' is its head, '*moda*' and '*pramoda*' are its left and right wings respectively, '*ānanda*' is the soul and '*brahman*' is its base. Shankaracharya, while commenting on this section, shares an interesting insight pertaining to happiness. He notes that the happiness experienced, when an object is seen or perceived with a sense of wanting it is '*priya*', when the object is possessed, it is '*moda*' and when enjoyed/utilized, it is '*pramoda*'.

In another significant section, at the end of the same chapter, there is a detailed discussion on the grades of happiness that can be experienced by a person. Human happiness or '*mānuṣa ānanda*' is considered to be the baseline and '*brahmānanda*' is perceived to be at the top of the scale with nine levels in between. Each level marks a hundredfold increase of happiness than the preceding one. What is very interesting to note apart from the gradation is the mentioning of the determinants of human happiness, i.e., age, learning, value system, psychological, physical and financial resourcefulness. This converges largely with the determinants identified by Argyle viz. age, health conditions, family and friends, marital status, employment, income and wealth (Argyle, The Psychology of Happiness, 1987) (Argyle, Causes and Correlates of Happiness, 1999).

Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad

In the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, which is the most voluminous of all the *Upaniṣads*, there is a story of Prajapati, which says that he became happy after creating a companion for himself emphasizing the need for relationships.

Another psychologically significant parable of Yajnavalkya appears in this *Upaniṣad*. Yajnavalkya, who is married to Maitreyi and Katyayini, decides at some stage in his life to give

up his worldly pursuit in quest of immortality or *amṛtatvam*. As he had decided to leave, he wanted to distribute his property equitably between his two wives. When he announces his decision to them, Maitreyi questions him if he intended to distribute anything acquiring which she could be immortal. At the end of a detailed dialogue that ensues between them, Yajnavalkya utters the oft discussed phrase of the *Upaniṣad* - '*ātmanastu kāmāya sarvaṃ priyaṃ bhavati*', which means, 'for the sake of the self everything else becomes dear or desirable.'

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

In the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, the self of the individual is described using two words '*ānandamaya*' (filled with bliss) and '*ānandabhuk*' (experiencer of bliss). However, in the previous line in the concerned section, the self is qualified as the being in the dreamless state with no desires unfulfilled.

Chāndogya Upaniṣad

In the seventh chapter of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, in the conversation between Narada, a great scholar himself and sage Sanat Kumara, Sanat Kumara says that happiness lies in fullness or vastness and not in a sense of limitedness.

Kaṭh hopaniṣad

The *Kaṭh hopaniṣad*, which is in the form of a dialogue between Yama and Nachiketa, also provides us with rich insights in understanding the concept of happiness. At a certain point where Yama tries to lure Nachiketa with various forms of riches and sensual pleasures, the young boy, Nachiketa, is persistent in seeking the knowledge of immortality as he knows for certain that 'wealth cannot bring him happiness'³.

Bhagavad Gītā

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is another important source that needs to be examined in this context. Scholars and common people alike have sought answers to many issues concerning life – happiness being a prominent one among them – from *Bhagavad Gītā*. The *Gītā* defines it as 'something which the individual rejoices having attained with effort and which also marks the absence of unhappiness'⁴. It then goes on to classify three kinds of *sukha* – *sātvika* (noble), *rājasika* (dynamic) and *tāmasika* (lethargic). According to the classification, *sātvika sukha*

³ *Kaṭh hopaniṣad* 1.27

⁴ *Bhagavad Gītā* 18.36

consists of such happiness which appears to be effortful (while pursuing it) but eventually tastes like nectar, i.e. very pleasant. Such happiness arises as a result of intelligent and creative efforts with a right knowledge of oneself⁵. *Rājasika sukha* is the resultant of the contact of the sense organs and the objects which appears to be pleasurable initially but unpleasant at the end, i.e. after the experience as it leaves a person with a sense of wanting⁶. The third category, *tāmasika sukha*, is the happiness that is delusory in nature from beginning to the end that may arise from sleep, laziness, ignorance, illusion etc.⁷

Another important text in the Vedantic tradition which deals with the idea of happiness at considerable length is the *Pañcadaśī*. Later texts on dramaturgy, and aesthetics like *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Dhvanyāloka* etc. also reflect similar ideas. Without going into a detailed discussion on the various kinds of happiness that have been mentioned as it is beyond the scope and purpose of the present paper, it would suffice to present some key ideas provided by them. According to them, happiness can be broadly classified into three categories (levels as well). Such a classification and the nuances presented in this framework, in short conveys the quintessence of the Indic insight on happiness. They are (in the order of gross to subtle):

1. *Viśayānanda* – Sensual/Material happiness
2. *Kāvyaānanda* – Aesthetic happiness
3. *Brahmānanda* – Existential/transcendental happiness

Viśayānanda – ‘*Viśaya*’ refers to objects. *Viśayānanda*⁸, which can be equated to hedonistic happiness, is experienced by an individual when she comes in contact with the objects of her desire. Usually, it is the pleasure associated with either yearning, possessing, consuming, etc. of material objects. It is the grossest form of happiness. The *Gītā* notes that such pleasurable experience based on the sense-object contact is momentary or short lived, and may even leave the person with a sense of wanting and lack and consequently cause pain and suffering once the external stimulus fades⁹. Moreover, the intensity of happiness experienced is said to reduce with prolonged exposure to the source. *Rājasika* and *tāmasika sukha* described in the *Gītā* come under this category. It must be noted that the Indic tradition does not negate the role and necessity of material happiness. However, it very clearly brings out the limitations of such happiness and persuades the individual to go beyond immediate gratification and seek a deeper and more lasting happiness.

Kāvyaānanda – ‘*Kāvya*’ literally means the work/product of a ‘*kavi*’ – a visionary, a seer, a poet, an artist, an adventurer etc. In this context, it refers to a class of activities where talent, skill, courage, will, grace, etc. are employed. Similar to eudaimonic

happiness, this is experienced in a situation where the individual is called to respond to a challenge where she has adequate resources to do so. This presupposes that every individual has certain potentialities within which need to be expressed and actualized. In other words, this is the kind of happiness a person experiences in self-actualization. Here, the external situation calls upon the person to rise above her ordinary comfort zone and excel in the required task and in response, her internal system rises to the occasion successfully. While the best comes out from within the individual, the situation or objects outside act as motivators or stimulants. Consequently, there is a sense of fulfilment, accomplishment, and enhanced self-worthiness that accompanies such an experience which could be self-directed as well as directed towards others. Such an experience is enduring in nature as it leaves the individual with a sense of contentment for a relatively longer period and also results in the augmentation of self-confidence and of psychological resources of the individual. This is also known as *sātvika sukha*.

The first and the second conceptualization as noted could be equated with the notions of hedonic and eudaimonic happiness respectively. The causes, determinants and correlates of these two kinds of happiness match to a large extent with their western counterparts. However, there is one more kind of happiness that the Vedantic tradition identifies – the existential/transcendental happiness. This conceptualization, is not completely unknown in the mystic traditions of both the East and the West, but nowhere else has it been made the essential basis of the philosophy of life. The same will be explained in the following sections.

Brahmānanda or transcendental happiness – ‘*Brahma*’, according to Indian thought, is the supreme singular being who is the essential reality of every individual as well as the substratum of the whole universe. ‘*Brahmānanda*’, is regarded as the highest form of happiness or bliss that a person can experience. It is transcendental in the sense that it transcends the limitations of compartmentalized individual existence. It is also called ‘existential’ because it is the core aspect of human existence in as much that it cannot be separated from human identity (Swami 2005). It is subjective in nature and not dependent on any external object, situation or person. The ancient texts assure us that every individual is capable of experiencing such a state of happiness through a conscious and systematic process of Self-discovery as it is the very nature of one’s being and it is intrinsic to all of us. This kind of happiness results from Self-realization which is qualitatively different from self-actualization. The tradition claims that for those who have attained this blissful state once, it becomes the baseline for all their future actions (Table 1).

Nature of Happiness

We have so far mentioned briefly sources from Vedantic texts and traditions which have deliberations on the causes, nature, correlates and consequences of happiness experiences. This

⁵ Ibid 18.37

⁶ Ibid 18.38

⁷ Ibid 18.39

⁸ *Pañcadaśī* 15.1

⁹ *Bhagavad Gītā* 5.22

Table 1 Summary of the discussion on happiness presented in Indian tradition

Sl No.	Sheaths (from gross to subtle)	Level	Happiness	Nature of happiness	Basis	Indian concept	Euro-American conceptualization
1	<i>Annamaya</i>	Physical	<i>Rati</i> (longing), <i>Priya</i> (desire) <i>Moda</i> (Joy) <i>Pramoda</i> (Excitement)	Exciting Fleeting Exhausting Momentary	Object based (External)	<i>Viśayānanda</i>	Hedonic Happiness
2	<i>Prāṇamaya</i>	Vital	<i>Harśa</i> (Delight) <i>Ullāsa</i> (Merriment)	"	"	"	"
3	<i>Manomaya</i>	Mental	<i>Santoṣa</i> (Contentment) <i>Śānti</i> (Peace) <i>Tīpti</i> (Satisfaction)	Satisfying Pacifying Transient	Lower ego based	<i>Kāvyānanda</i>	Eudaimonic Happiness
4	<i>Vijñānamaya</i>	Intuitive	<i>Ānanda</i> (Relatively lasting happiness)	Refreshing Calming Creative Harmonious Relatively enduring Transcendental happiness in parts	Higher ego based	"	"
5	<i>Ānandamaya</i>	Blissful	<i>Bhuma-ānanda</i> (unlimited happiness or bliss)	Transcendental Existential Liberating Enduring	Self based	<i>Brahmānanda</i>	Nil

section will present a synthetic view of the nature of happiness that has been discussed at various places with the focus on transcendental happiness as it forms the core contribution of Indian thought. Though each source approaches the topic in its own unique way, they all share a common ground of understanding which may or may not be mentioned explicitly. For instance, the texts on aesthetics mention the category of *Brahmānanda* but do not venture to explain it as it comes under the scope of spiritual texts. In another example, the equation of dreamless sleep with absolute bliss cited in the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is dealt with in greater detail in *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. However, the point is that all these sources provide us with necessary insights into the concept of happiness from which a comprehensive theory on happiness can be constructed. Based on the material available and presented thus far, the following characteristics of happiness with the concept of the transcendental one at its core are presented here.

1. Happiness is the primary motivator and guiding value of human life

The *Upaniṣads* declare that ‘all beings emerge from happiness, live by happiness and to happiness they return’¹⁰, ‘an individual endeavours with the prospect of finding happiness, and does not do so when there is no happiness’¹¹. Even folk literature reiterates the same idea when it says ‘all beings act with the motive of attaining happiness and getting rid of unhappiness’¹². Accordingly, happiness is the greatest good that an individual considers in

all activities and engagements. In addition, it is not only the highest value against which all other possessions, accomplishments and experiences are evaluated but also the supreme goal which brings meaning to all endeavours of life.

2. Lasting happiness is realizable

The experience of happiness may be difficult to describe, however, the sources assure us that it can be realized effectively by everyone¹³ and in a lasting manner depending on the kind of happiness one strives to experience. This must be noted in contrast to early Western thinking that happiness could be attained only by the ‘virtuous – the happy few’ (McMahon 2009). After having stated in unequivocal terms that happiness is attainable by all, elaborate road maps are provided to attain the same. The following aspects are beneficial in understanding the roadmap.

- a. Wisdom/knowledge framework

The philosophical and spiritual traditions of India talk of several seekers who have undertaken rigorous practices to experience deep and lasting happiness. Furthermore, the very fact that the Indic tradition considers that lasting happiness is attainable implies that there have been people who have walked the path and described their experiences in great detail along with the methodology they followed in order to arrive at it. There is therefore, an extensive body of documented knowledge which serves as a useful manual to discover the different stages of happiness in one’s life by providing a framework as well as practical guidelines on the roadmap to happiness.

¹⁰ *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 3.6

¹¹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.22

¹² *sukhaṁ me syāt duḥkaṁ me mā bhūit iti lokapravṛttiḥ*

¹³ *sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ*

At this stage, it would be appropriate to look into the Indian philosophical framework in order to briefly understand the position of happiness and its pursuit in life. In simple terms, it is considered that every individual has to choose between two paths in life – *preyomārga* (path of worldly life) and *śreyomārga* (path of spiritual life). Though both paths are quite different and demand different disciplines in adhering to them, both of them are equally valid and accepted. The goal of *śreyomārga* is *apavarga* (liberation or self-realisation) and of *preyomārga* is *bhoga* (worldly enjoyment or gratification). Hence, the path of worldly life sanctions an active pursuit of *kāma* (desires) while the path of spiritual life demands an active pursuit of *tripti* (contentment). Nonetheless, both paths aim at happiness of different kinds. Further discussion on this topic declares that contentment leads to *ānanda* (bliss) and the pursuit of desires leads to *sukha* (pleasure) (Fig. 1).

It must be noted that, as per the texts, the pursuit of desires and enjoyment in *preyomārga* also needs to be done in a regulated manner on the basis of *Dharma*¹⁴ (righteousness) (Salagame 2003). There are numerous discussions on this front which are beyond the scope of the present paper. However, it is worth noting at this point that Indian tradition which is often labelled as otherworldly or pessimistic has an extensive literature on happiness clearly establishing it as a cornerstone of life's philosophy and thereby disproving any such notion which suggests otherwise.

b. Individual as the agent of happiness

All the discussions about happiness lead to the conclusion that, eventually, the individual is solely responsible for her own happiness. All others – persons, situation and objects are only instrumental causes for that experience. To add to this, the choice of being happy ultimately rests with the individual. She has to finally decide whether she wants to be happy or unhappy in any given situation. She can either allow external circumstances to overpower her or use her discretion and exercise control over their effects on her. Indian tradition suggests that individuals can systematically cultivate the capacity of exercising such a mastery and freedom.

c. Self-cultivation as the means

A very important contribution from Indian thought to the existing discourse on happiness is the detailed and practical methodology developed therein for self-cultivation leading towards self-mastery. The entire world of yogic knowledge provides various exercises for self-cultivation. Branches of *Yoga*, like *Jñāna Yoga*

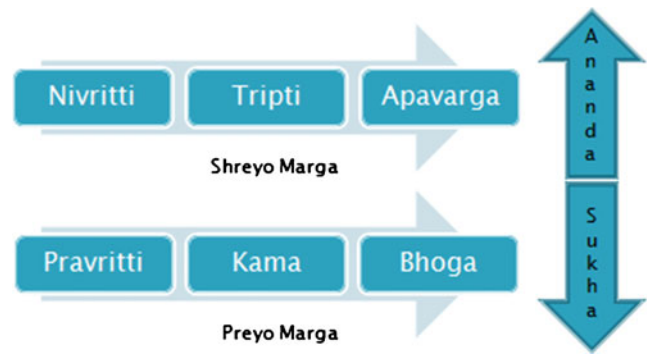


Fig. 1 Two paths of life

(path of knowledge) suggest ways of working on oneself from a cognitive point of view; *Karma Yoga* (path of action) follows the conative path; *Rāja Yoga* (path of psychic control) adopts the psychic way and *Bhakti Yoga* (path of devotion) offers techniques to work on the emotional being of the individual. In addition to these, the much encouraged virtues like *dāna* (alms giving), *dhanyatā* (gratitude), *prapatti* (surrender), *vairāgya* (non-attachment), etc. are very beneficial in preparing oneself to realize happiness. Self-cultivation is an important aspect necessary for the transformation of an individual as the Indian thought emphasizes that all knowledge has to necessarily culminate in experience¹⁵.

d. Favourable conditions for experiencing happiness

Though happiness is considered to the psychological state of the individual it has been acknowledged, there are certain conditions which are favourable in experiencing happiness. One of the popular verses¹⁶ of Sanskrit literature identifies them as follows:

- i. Physical and psychological health
- ii. Good, worthy and positive engagements in life
- iii. Absence of sorrow

3. Happiness is subjective

Happiness is a subjective phenomenon. It has to be experienced within. Often there is a mistaken understanding that things outside the being cause happiness. The Indian thought tradition very clearly states that happiness has to be sought from inside. The external factors may or may not be conducive to evoke happiness within the individual. It has to be experienced from inside only. In one of the verses in *Bhajagovindam*, Shankara says, 'One may revel in *yoga* or pleasures; in the company of people or bereft of company. Only the one whose mind steadily delights in Brahman revels; He cannot but be happy'¹⁷. The idea here is that objects, situations, people who are

¹⁴ *Mahābhārata* 18.5.49

¹⁵ *Brahmasūtra sāṅkarabhāṣyam* 1.1

¹⁶ *sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu nirāmayāḥ, sarve bhadrāṇi paśyantu, mā kaścit dukṣabhāḡ bhavet*

¹⁷ *Bhajagovindam* 19

normally considered to be sources of happiness are at most stimulants or catalysts and not its essential causes. A wise person is happy irrespective of the external circumstances as she has discovered the source of happiness within herself.

4. Happiness is a psychological state

Happiness is a profound psychological state of satisfaction and contentment and is irrespective of the external circumstances. It is also accompanied by positive feelings of joy, comfort, hope etc.

a. Satisfaction and Contentment

The satisfaction of one's needs, from material to spiritual, is one of the means for happiness. Fulfilment of needs and gratification of desires are the most acknowledged causes for happiness. However, Eastern thought, especially the Indian, stresses on the need for developing a deep sense of contentment as a practical means to realize happiness. This highlights the intimate relationship between the sense of contentment and the feeling of happiness. In fact, Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtra* contends that by practising '*santoṣa* (contentment) one can attain the highest state of happiness'¹⁸. One of the verses of folk wisdom states that 'contentment is the greatest wealth that a man can possess'¹⁹. In the *Mahābhārata*, the virtue of contentment is brought out in unambiguous terms as it states that 'contentment is the highest heaven, contentment is the highest happiness. There is nothing (in the world) that is higher than contentment'²⁰. In a similar manner, one can go on enlisting several sources that brings forth the need for practising contentment in order to realize happiness.

b. Positive emotions

Though happiness, in transcendental terms, is going beyond emotions, the texts add that the sense of contentment makes one capable of experiencing many other positive emotions frequently. While delineating certain characteristics of happy people as documented in Indian tradition, Srivastava and Mishra note that 'they (happy people) are bestowed with the company of the wise, are loved by the close ones, remain free from debts, and have certainty of livelihood. They are magnanimous, not plagued by bad or negative thoughts, are optimistic, and full of enthusiasm.....Bliss is said to give rise to knowledge (to self) and love (for others). People enjoy every aspect of life if they are happy inside.' (Srivastava and Misra 2011). The striking feature of the emotions

mentioned in the passage above, do not include feeling of excitement or those associated with high arousals that give a momentary 'kick' as in the case of hedonic pleasures. The positive feelings that have been described that accompany the sense of contentment make the individual composed and anchored in herself, free from any hankering for anything from outside, as the *Gītā* points out, 'for one who is fully content in oneself, there is nothing to strive for'²¹. This kind of happiness is regarded as being long lasting and beyond all conflicts.

c. Internal harmony

Happiness is also intimately linked to a state of harmony: harmony at various levels, as a conflict-ridden mind will never experience happiness. The process of *yoga* employed in self-cultivation is itself defined in terms of balance or equanimity²². Proceeding further, it is to be noted that harmony has to be achieved at various levels of the being from *annamyakoṣa* to *ānandamayakoṣa*, at individual and social levels and from natural to the spiritual. The idea of achieving internal harmony as a correlate to happiness is an important aspect in many Asian cultures and traditions as noted by Lou Lu and Gilmour (Lu and Gilmour 2004).

5. Happiness is the essential nature of the Self

One of the singularly significant contributions of the Indian thought to happiness studies, as noted earlier, is the recognition of happiness as the essential nature of the Self. The central epithet used to describe the nature of the self is '*Sat-Cit-Ānanda*' – 'Existence-Consciousness-Bliss'. Accordingly, every individual represents blissful and conscious existence. The innermost essence of one's being is bliss or absolute happiness – *ānandamaya* – full of bliss, as depicted in the *pañcakoṣa* model of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. This being the nature of the Self, Self-discovery or Self-realization necessarily culminates in the realization/experience of happiness. Such happiness is regarded as pure as it is absolutely independent from the presence or absence of every conceivable external object of happiness. This is the highest kind of happiness one can experience referred to earlier as *Brahmānanda* (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*) and hence it has been termed as transcendental happiness.

The Vedantic tradition highlights this particular notion of happiness as worthy of pursuit and encourages people to channelize their energies towards recognizing their real nature which is almost/usually 'forgotten'. Shankara in the series of verses called '*Ātmaśaṭkam*' brings out this idea in unequivocal terms when he declares that 'I am

¹⁸ *Pātañjala Yoga Sūtram* 2.32

¹⁹ *santoṣa eva puruṣasya paraṁ nidhānam*

²⁰ *Mahābhārata* 12.21.2

²¹ *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.17

²² *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.48

That Pure Consciousness and Bliss. I am *Śiva*; I am *Śiva*'.²³

Furthermore, understanding *Brahman* as the source of all happiness as described by *Vedānta*, offers the scope to explain the most ordinary sorts of pleasure and happiness experienced in life. 'All (worldly) joys experienced by all beings are just a minute fraction of this (*Brahmānanda*)',²⁴ and are 'doorways to experience the ultimate bliss'.²⁵ This position is all-inclusive in the sense that every other pleasure or happiness, gross or higher/subtle finds its due place in relation to this highest happiness. However, this position stands quite at the other extreme to Freud's contention that the origins of all forms of happiness including the higher ones are nothing but the expressions of sexual pleasure. Such a theory would fail to explain the basis of even simple joys that would arise out of watching a smiling baby or a rising sun. Alternatively, this meta-theory of happiness can not only accommodate all pleasures, joys described in terms of both the hedonic and eudaimonic views but also reconcile them harmoniously with the conceptualization of the third one, i.e. transcendental happiness.

6. Happiness is active interconnectedness with others

Another significant aspect of happiness brought out by the *Upaniṣads* is that it is not just self-directed. It extends to others as well, as it is based on the perception of an underlying interconnectedness with others and everything else in this creation. Others are seen as an extension of oneself. The experience of happiness related to self-realisation does not perceive individualized/compartmentalized spaces but see themselves as part of a common larger space which is temporarily demarcated for functional purposes. Speaking from a philosophical perspective, as one deeply loves oneself and others, being the extension of the same self, there is a natural tendency 'to love and to be loved'. In the *Rāmāyaṇa Advayam*, it is noted 'that coming into a state of self-sameness with all beings is the source of happiness of the wise people'.²⁶

Relating to others becomes both a consequence and a source of happiness. As a result of this view, a high premium is placed on '*satsaṅga*' – company of the wise people in the process of discovering happiness. Shankara claims that '...in all the three worlds, only the company of the wise will help one to cross the hardship of life'²⁷ and move towards happiness.

Furthermore, a significant feature to be noted of the Indian concept of happiness is that, while relating to

others, others interests are to be taken into consideration as they become important determinants for one's overall experience of happiness unlike in individualistic cultures/societies of the West. Kautilya, in his work on polity, advocates that the 'king's happiness lies in the happiness of the people'.²⁸ There are many verses in the spiritual, scholastic and folk traditions that vividly drive home this point that individual interests are subordinate to the interests of the family which in turn are subordinate to those of the society and so on. This is very much in line with similar notions present in Eastern cultures as Luo Lu et al. points out that 'self-restrain and consideration for the other's welfare are vital for achieving a harmonious Chinese relationship' that would make way for enduring happiness, based on a comparative study of the Eastern and Western conceptions of happiness (Lu and Gilmour 2004).

7. Happiness as freedom and completeness

Freedom is defined as the 'possibility to choose' from the given set of choices (Veenhoven 2000). At a personal level, an individual is said to be free if she can exercise her freedom to select, to act without being inhibited by her internal conditionings, opinions, prejudices, conflicts, doubts etc. provided the environment offers her the 'opportunity to choose'. In the natural course, the individual's *saṁskāras*²⁹ and the *vāsanās*³⁰ act as determinants of one's character/behaviour. It is similar to the subconscious and the unconscious in Freudian terms or 'conditioning' according to the behaviourists. These restrict the individual's ability to exercise freedom in selecting her response to the given situation. For instance, of the given ten responses an individual can choose, if she is compelled by her internal/mental frame to make a particular choice, it amounts to limiting the choice of the individual. This limitation imposed on the self of the individual curtails the freedom of the individual and narrows down the cognitive, functional and emotional ability of the individual. In short the being becomes constricted.

On the other hand, the Indian thought emphasizes that a human being can consciously outgrow her limitations and overcome the shadow effect of her *vāsanās* and *saṁskāras* and thereby exercise full control over the situation and also exercise human freedom to a large extent as she is essentially free from such limiting factors. These limiting factors, according to it, are incidental and not essential features of the individual. It demands that one has to discover that freedom within and exercise it in the given circumstance. Nevertheless, it stands firmly as a

²³ *Ātmaśaṭkam* 1

²⁴ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.32

²⁵ *Pañcadaśī* 15.1

²⁶ http://www.krishnamurthys.com/kvforp/Appa/Ramayana-advayampage4.html#_ftnref2. verse no. 203

²⁷ *Bhāgavadgītā* 13

²⁸ *Arthaśāstra* 1.19.34

²⁹ The impressions left behind by experiences and actions that are said to shape future actions and behaviours

³⁰ Strong desires especially originating from drives or other inborn tendencies

human possibility. Some great thinkers, even in the west, have arrived at such an insight through their own experiences. Allport, in his preface to Victor Frankl's 'Man's Search for Meaning' writes:

In the concentration camp every circumstance conspires to make the prisoner lose his hold. All the familiar goals in life are snatched away. What alone remains is "the last of human freedoms"—the ability to "choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances." This ultimate freedom, recognized by the ancient Stoics as well as by modern existentialists, takes on vivid significance in Frankl's story. The prisoners were only average men, but some, at least, by choosing to be "worthy of their suffering" proved man's capacity to rise above his outward fate.

Vicktor Frankl remarks in his book,

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Happiness, on the other hand is deemed as a sense of expansion of the being. There is a constant urge for and momentum towards growth and expansion. Expansion here refers to the process of overcoming the sense of limitedness due to one's conditioning. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* declares 'that which is ever-expanding is happiness and there is no happiness in littleness or narrowness'³¹, i.e. 'happiness is plenum, happiness is completeness, happiness is totality'. Accordingly, the experience of growing or expanding towards completeness is happiness. Incidentally, in addition to the experience of expansion itself, all aids, instruments that lead one to experience the expansion are also seen as sources of happiness. Hence an ice cream in a hot afternoon, a shower at the end of the day, a touch of the beloved, possession of a new smart phone, an increment in the salary, a recognition in the community everything becomes the causes of happiness. Immediately, an equation between the objects, persons, situations, etc. is established equating them with happiness. In reality, it can be seen that these are just catalysts, that tend to make an individual feel complete though momentarily, which makes one happy. The yearning is for the experience of expansion and completeness as the very nature of the self is completeness and perfection according to the Vedantic thought. The objects, sensations, feelings, ideas, thoughts etc. aid in achieving it in the initial stage of the journey. Hence, it encompasses every form of expansion from material to

spiritual. One's ability to achieve such an expansion is freedom and that brings great joy and happiness.

Also, freedom is one of the greatest joys one can experience. It would certainly include individual freedom protected and advanced by individualistic societies, collective freedom to earn and live, and financial freedom, promised by capitalistic societies, as equally valid and essential. However, spiritual freedom nurtured by non-materialistic societies, for one to grow towards completeness and perfection internally assumes significance in this perspective. Hence, in the Indian tradition, *mokṣa* – liberation or freedom – has been presented as the highest *puruṣārtha* – objective of life.

8. Happiness is not absence of unhappiness

The relationship between happiness and unhappiness has been a matter of debate in most cultures. Indian thought, at a deeper philosophical level, posits the cyclic nature of the experience of happiness and unhappiness³². Rather than seeing them as dialectically opposite entities, it presents them as one complimentary to the other in helping the individual grow. The dualities of life, happiness and sorrow, pain and pleasure, gain and loss, fame and notoriety, etc. including life and death are seen as the necessary and complimentary experiences that make an individual's life complete. As shown earlier, the purpose of the life experience is to enable a person to grow and to evolve into a complete being. The experience of sorrow and joy is seen as contributing towards that end. Echoing this line of thought, a Sri Aurobindo remarks, 'Pain is the hand of Nature sculpturing men to greatness' (Aurobindo 1997, p. 444). At a lower plane, both happiness and unhappiness appear to be dialectically opposing one another, but at a higher plane, both are reconciled and complement each other with a singularity of purpose – to give a sense of completeness of experience. Hence, in the larger perspective of transcendental happiness, they (pleasure and pain) are to be understood as mutually qualifying and complimentary experiences.

Conclusions and Implications for the Contemporary Discourse on Happiness

Having a fragmented picture of the human being as a socio-biological entity and attempting to map all his experiences including the most significant of them – happiness, in this backdrop, have yielded little results in the mainstream approach to psychology based on Euro-American culture. Basic questions concerning human happiness as to what truly makes an individual happy remain while the issue of attaining happiness gets even more complicated. One may quote numerous

³¹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.23

³² *Adhyātmārāmāyaṇam* 2.6.1

studies that have been conducted in the areas of Subjective and Psychological well-being. However, neither can one claim that the world is getting happier day by day, nor can one deny the fact that the world seems to be slipping into a darker shade with pain, suffering, agony, conflicts, and violence at all levels from individual to international. The increasing crime and violence rate around the world is no less empirical an evidence than the data collected in a laboratory or in an artificial set-up. Furthermore, one who sticks to the third-person methodology and statistics even when their effectiveness in enhancing human happiness and well-being is questionable is no more rational than who seeks alternative tools. Rats might be happy with more cheese that one might have provided them (they also would eventually seek freedom) but a human being cannot be happy with a little more of everything that she needs and wants – food, sex, wealth, security, belongingness, recognition. ‘More the merrier’ philosophy works to a certain extent but fails to deliver the most essential – the key to lasting happiness. This compels one to question the basic premise on which the dominant theories of human happiness have been developed and also the methods adopted therein to study them. Not that the painstaking research in the field deserve any less merit, but it could be probable that some critical aspect of happiness might have been overlooked in the process. The point, then, is how do we supplement that essential character and where to do we find it.

At this stage, considering the insights on happiness provided by the Indian perspective delineated above, we can reasonably argue that the Vedantic approach can offer such an essential unifying element as Ananda Coomaraswamy rightly notes, ‘The heart and essence of Indian experience is to be found in a constant intuition of the unity of all life, and the instinctive and ineradicable conviction that the recognition of this unity is the highest good and the uttermost freedom’, (Coomaraswamy 2013). However, it needs to be examined how best we could integrate them with the existing body of knowledge to build a meta-theory of happiness that could without undermining the grossest form of happiness, provides central space for the subtlest and most enduring kind of happiness and allow one to evaluate various kinds of happiness from the standpoint of transcendental happiness while providing her with efficient tools to explore and experience it.

Furthermore, happiness being the fundamental experience and primary motivator of every human action, it influences all other fields of individual and social life. It might appear that one is stretching the argument too far, however, if we observe carefully, all our social and economic institutions and their policies, both at national and international levels, are largely influenced by the perceived notion of what makes a human being happy. Happiness Economics, an emerging field of knowledge that attempts to integrate the understanding on happiness from psychology with other fields such as

Economics and Sociology is a frontrunner in determining the policies on governance and welfare of states. While arguing for integrating the insights from Buddhist and Eastern Psychologies with eudaimonic concepts, Tomer notes that the economists, in determining human happiness, ‘have largely emphasized the hedonic, utilitarian, material and tangible aspects of human life’ (Tomer 2010) so far. Hence it becomes important to identify what insights are supplied from psychology to other academic and social disciplines. In all likelihood, a partial or skewed understanding might yield limited results. On the other hand, with the larger picture in view, with the acknowledgment of transcendental happiness, one could estimate the possible outcomes and its impact on various fields including economics and development. A simple shift of focus from hedonic to eudaimonic happiness would also call for a shift in private and public policies concerning the welfare of the state. Gross National Happiness (GNH) (Priesner 2006) of Bhutan, largely echoing the eudaimonic notions of happiness, is an outstanding example of one such major shift in measuring the progress of a society in deviation to the GDP based growth assessment followed by most nations which is again dependent on the hedonic conception. And in all likelihood, a shift towards transcendental happiness would only brighten the prospects of better governance and welfare systems with more holistic and integrated approaches.

Moreover, introducing insights from not only Indian but cultures outside the Euro-American world would enable the discourse on happiness to be more culturally informed. Despite the presence of universal underpinnings of happiness, the study would be incomplete unless culture dependent factors become an integral part of it, as many empirical studies have provided considerable evidence to claim that ‘happiness and well-being are significantly grounded in socio-cultural modes of being a person and interacting with others’ (Uchida et al. 2004).

Finally, there are many issues that are to be effectively resolved after having admitted transcendental happiness into the theoretical discourse, such as: What are its parameters? How to ensure its tangibility while retaining its essential intangible character? What kinds of instruments, both qualitative and quantitative, are capable of measuring those parameters and how to construct them? What are the systemic ways of achieving lasting happiness? And would it be possible to demonstrate with compelling empirical evidence that such an approach accomplishes what it claims to do - providing key to lasting happiness universally? Besides, the challenges in building such a meta-theory of happiness are many as it demands collaborative efforts on behalf of psychologists, phenomenologists, philosophers, sociologists, economists and other social science researchers. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort if it could make an individual sing in ecstasy ‘I am bliss’, ‘I am bliss’ irrespective of the circumstances.

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