

THE CONUNDRUM OF HAPPINESS

CHIRAG SANGANI



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We live our lives, often without knowing why. Every hour of every day is spent fulfilling the obligations of life that fetter us since we were born – eking out a living to maintain a bare existence whose definition is summarised by its existence and little beyond. The people with a more philosophical bent of mind would try to attribute a purpose to our lives, to give a sense of direction, a final destination to our daily actions, and then spend their years trying to contextualize daily life so that it aligns with the goals that they have imagined. Through multiple generations of philosophers thinking their way to old age so that others might live more purposefully, it had been observed pretty early onwards that, in a self-centred view point of existence, happiness of being tends to be a very powerful driving motivation.

This is nothing new. That man lives to be happy is a very obvious, yet oxymoronic statement. For if he lives to be happy, it implies that he is not already so; yet if he is so, then what does he live for? Happiness is a state of mind – many tend to confuse it with a purpose – and their goal becomes “happiness”. This acquired happiness is, however, fleeting, since, once acquired, you no longer have a purpose, and the lack of purpose will make you dissatisfied; your life becomes a vicious circle of acquiring happiness and then losing it by virtue of acquiring it.

What is happiness? To be thorough, let us begin by analysing the dictionary definition. As per the Oxford Dictionary:

happiness: *noun*

- the state of being happy:
 - o she struggled to find happiness in her life
 - o Tom’s heart swelled with happiness

Not a very helpful definition. A look up for “happy” reveals:

happy: *adjective (happier, happiest)*

- feeling or showing pleasure or contentment:
 - o Melissa came in looking happy and excited
- [with clause]:
 - o we’re just happy that he’s still alive

- [with infinitive]:
 - o they are happy to see me doing well

It sounds deceptively simple and obvious. Let us forsake the argument of feeling vs. showing for a moment and concentrate on the aspect which is truly personal and private. Pleasure is something that is a source of happiness, as is contentment. Biologists would tell you that pleasure is nothing but the feeling that you get when certain parts of your brain are zapped with electricity, by chemical reactions or otherwise. These chemicals include dopamine and various endorphins that are released either during physical exertion or sexual activity, or via consumption of chocolate or certain families of spices. Recreational drugs work in a similar manner: they directly induce euphoria in your brain.

De-romanticizing happiness into a jumble of unintelligible reactions hardly seems to be the happy thing to do. Yet, it is the stark reality. Plenty of people are aware of this fact, or read it somewhere, and yet after wondering about it or doubting it they pass it along as yet another piece of mildly interesting trivia, not realizing that their disbelief or failure to recognise its implications is actually a sign of deep rooted misconceptions about happiness.

At its very essence, happiness is yet another state of mind, like physical pain or hunger.

How does one understand happiness the same way as one understands pain or hunger? When you get pricked by a needle, the cells in the skin tissue which are connected to the nervous system get disconnected. These disconnected links then start transmitting random signals due to a phenomenon known as static electricity. The brain interprets these signals as pain. Similarly, when you are hungry, your stomach sends signals to your brain which are then interpreted as “I am hungry.”

The brain is a complex, multi-part organ. Some parts work in unison, some behave as independent organs. When you experience an event that makes you happy, your “happiness” part of the brain receives signals from that part of the brain that figures out the event is taking place. Whether you are supposed to feel happy or sad about it is decided by the “happiness” part, and in fact depends on multiple factors, such as your previous experiences and conditioning. This is why masochists enjoy what others might be possibly horrified by – their “happiness” parts have learnt to recognize pain as a “happy” thing.

Does this mean we should all start consuming recreational drugs, just because happiness is “some chemical reaction inside the brain?” Not necessarily. These drugs have a tendency to teach the “happiness” part of the brain that only the drug will make it happy – this leads to addiction and dependency. The “happiness” part is designed to receive signals only from events: such as getting a promotion or winning the lottery. Drug abuse changes the physiological make-up in such a way that nothing else begins to matter – only the desire to be constantly euphoric. And the euphoria can be obtained only from the drug.

You are happy when you do something you really like. This is a simple, powerful way of looking at life. Many people have preconceived notions of happiness that it is “true” and “pure” only when it is obtained in a particular manner; that other forms of happiness are somehow inferior. But truly, all forms of happiness are equal, only *if you allow them to be*. When you have a notion such as “happiness is serving” or “happiness is money”, you are actually hankering after the happiness itself, and not the service or the money. You will be happy only if you are happy, which is a vile paradox. It is only when you truly desire, and achieve, the opportunity of service or the abundance of wealth that you will be happy, though the permanence of that happiness is

yet not guaranteed.

What is then needed is a knowledge of what you truly desire, and then acquiring it – day after day, year after year. At this point, if you realise that your true desire is a goal, a final destination, then reaching that destination will leave you directionless and hollow. The initial euphoria will wear out in a few months and you will feel wasted and purposeless. On the other hand, failure to reach that goal will cause utter devastation, since none of your efforts bore any fruit. Everything becomes vain, and all will to make another attempt disappears.

Your life, then, needs a purpose, for that purpose is something that you know you are destined for and you desire to do, and the very act of doing it gives you happiness. To be able to dictate the purpose of your life, however, is not easy. You need to *believe* that you desire what you want to, you need to be able to change that drive inside you. Many people consider this change superficial, and the entailing happiness “synthesized” and inferior. However, if it does feel good, then your brain will learn to enjoy it. This is a powerful technique to set your priorities in life right and directing your efforts towards achieving them – by controlling our desires, we control our subconscious, and our subconscious then merges with the conscious to put in the maximum effort possible, and to push the boundaries of that maximum.

When we decide our priorities, it is easy to be affected by our mood and our environment, to whimsically make a choice from a static point of view. Life is a stack of phases that pass one after the other – periods of joy and sorrow, of changing priorities and perceptions. To be able to differentiate between a right decision and a wrong decision is difficult, and virtually possible only in hindsight. But human beings have a special gift, unique in that no other beast or bird possesses it, and that is intuition. When you know you are doing something right, even when you can’t explain it, it is your intuition that is telling you that you were meant to do it. No matter the outcome, you will always consider it the correct decision, because the happiness that you obtain in doing the thing that feels right always overshadows any other loss you might have incurred. In retrospect, *right* or *wrong* depends only on what you think matters most, so if you do what you feel matters to you, it automatically becomes *right*.

Another gift that is unique to the human race is the gift to imagine. Over the last few million years, which from the perspective of evolution is no more than the blink of an eye, the size of our brain has increased by more than three times. This increase in size, as per biologists, can be attributed to the addition of new “centres” to our brain that allow us to function and think better. One such new “centre” is the “imagination centre” – that part of our brain which allows us to experience something, or imagine the experience, without actually going through the process. This fascinating gift is yet something we ignore, and sometimes, actively suppress. Our imagination is often a subconscious and an active process, one that constantly conjures up images and fantasies fed by our repressed desires. These images assert themselves as dreams, as visions or even hallucinations. Sometimes, these dreams are more figurative in nature. Sometimes, a random image somehow acquires importance, and becomes a deep desire. In any case, our dreams, figuratively and sometimes literally, show us the path to our deepest desires, and we would be wise to heed them, for the path to realize that dream is the true path to happiness.

Finally, to conclude, we are happiest in being *who we are*. In our attempts to fit in with the world, we sacrifice a great deal of ourselves just to meet the expectations of others. These expectations give neither a sense of achievement, for they are not your own, nor a sense of happiness, for they do not address your desires. When we walk on the path of our inner purpose, we acquire the true happiness we so perpetually desired, and then we learn the final great lesson – the happiness somehow doesn’t matter, it’s the walking that does.

*People are often unreasonable, illogical and
self-centred. Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish
ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
If you are successful, you will win some false friends
and some true enemies. Succeed anyway.
If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you.
Be honest and frank anyway.
What you spend years building,
someone may destroy overnight. Build anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness,
people may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
The good you do today, people will
often forget tomorrow. Do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never
be enough. But give the world the best you have anyway.
You see, in the final analysis, it is all between you
and God; it was never between you and them anyway.*

*— Mother Teresa
Quoted from the book
“Spiritual Capital: Wealth We Can Live By”
by Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall*