

Editorial

In Pursuit of Happiness

The pursuit of happiness is a preoccupation and has probably been since the dawn of mankind. "Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence" is an often mentioned Aristotelian perspective. This year the UN declared and celebrated March 19 as International Happiness Day. The UN has a plan to utilize GNH (Gross National Happiness) instead of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as a measure to evaluate nations' progress, standing, success and society's real wellbeing. In fact, GDP was never meant for the job. In 1934, the Harvard economist and Nobel Laureate Simon Kuznets devised GDP to help the US climb out of the Great Depression. However he was clear about GDP's limits, warning congress that "the welfare of a nation can... scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income..." An increase in per capita income does not always correspond to the happiness of individuals. The introduction of a 'happiness index' or GNH could be a game changer. It is a multi-faceted metric system devised to measure the wellbeing that incorporates sustainable human progress that does not harm the environment or future generations. On this basis the Gallup Millennium World Survey was conducted in which almost 60,000 people from 60 countries participated. Gallup ranked ten things that matter most to people. At the top were health, a happy family life, and a job, while 'Standard of Living' - what the GDP supposedly captures - was one of the least important. In this survey Bhutan came first in GNH. Henceforth, there is increasing political interest in using measures of happiness as a national indicator in conjunction with measures of wealth. When asked to rate their life satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, the members of the Amish community (a self-styled religious sect in the US who turn their back on all modern facilities and conveniences and leads a simple life) expressed their level of satisfaction

equal to that of the members of the Forbes 400. There are, of course, many ways to explain the contentment of the Amish (The community has strong ties, deep religious faith and stable families, all of which reliably correlate with high levels of well-being). A recent BBC survey found that 81% of the population thinks the Government should focus on making people happier rather than wealthier. On the basis of such findings a number of countries like Britain, Canada and France have added measures of citizen happiness to their official national statistics.

The World's First Happiness Map

Adrian White, an analytic social psychologist at the University of Leicester's School of Psychology, analyzed data published by UNESCO, the CIA, the New Economics Foundation, the WHO, the Veenhoven Database, the Latinbarometer, the Afrobarometer, and the UNHDR, to create a global projection of subjective well-being: the first world map of happiness. It indicated that a nation's level of happiness was most closely associated with health levels, followed by wealth, and then provision of education. Surprisingly, Asian countries with a strong sense of collective identity, which is often regarded as an important factor in well-being, scored very low, with China 82nd, Japan 90th and India 125th. It is equally noteworthy that many of the largest countries in terms of population do quite badly. As per this study, the 10 happiest nations in the world are: 1 - Denmark, 2 - Switzerland, 3 - Austria, 4 - Iceland, 5 - The Bahamas, 6 - Finland, 7 - Sweden, 8 - Bhutan, 9 - Brunei, and 10 - Canada. Other notable results include: 23 - USA, 35 - Germany, 41 - UK, 62 - France, 82 - China, 90 - Japan, 125 - India, and 167 - Russia. The three least happy countries were: 176 - Democratic Republic of the Congo, 177 - Zimbabwe and 178 - Burundi.

The Paradox of Happiness

In an attempt to clear the vagueness surrounding the notion of happiness Matt Killingsworth conducted an extraordinary feat of monitoring moment to moment emotional status of 15,000 people, living in 80 countries, belonging to 86 occupational categories and engaged in 22 different activities. He managed to collect 650,000 real time reports on their state of mind at the given moment. The finding of his statistical analysis may not surprise those who are familiar with Pathanjali who recommend *yoga for chitta vrutti norodhaha* (stop mind wandering). Stay focused in the present moment or stop mind wandering is the remedy that Killingsworth suggests to avoid unhappiness. The enormous data he managed to assemble shows that 47% of the time people are thinking about something other than what they are currently engaged in. The levels of mind wandering while people are engaged in different

activities are surprising to say the least. Even intimate activities, on account of repetition, slowly run out of their emotional content and end up mechanical and dry. Killingsworth also noticed the tendency of the mind to pursue unpleasant things rather than revitalizing things during its wandering spree. Matthieu Ricard, molecular scientist turned Buddhist monk, during his TED talks on 'The Habits of Happiness' points towards the need of reformatting our mindset to refocus it to happiness. Citing the smiling images of unborn babies in womb he claims that the natural state of the mind is happy. Quoting Pascal he says that even those who hang themselves are in fact looking for the cessation of suffering. He makes a distinction between happiness and pleasure. Pleasure depends on external factors like persons, objects, place, time, periodicity, etc., while happiness or wellbeing is not subservient to or dependent on pleasurable situations. It is a state of serenity and contentment emerging from compassion, generosity, loving kindness, selflessness and benevolence. According to Ricard it is our mind that decides the quality of our experience. However, in pursuit of happiness we try to improve our outer conditions while improving the inner condition is a prerequisite to attain peace and serenity. Based on statistical evidence Professor Diener suggests that happy people live longer than depressed people. Founded on a study conducted on Baseball players in the US, Ron Gutman also says that smiling can predict longevity. In his analysis he noticed that the average life span of players with no smile was 72.9, those with slight smile was 75 while those with beaming smile was 79.9. Gutman in his TED talk on 'The hidden power of smiling' also points out that children laugh and smile on an average 400 times a day while the grownups much less. According to him 14% of the elderly people laugh less than four times a day!

Science and Happiness

The neuroscience of happiness and wellbeing is still in its infancy. However, scientists say they have begun to measure happiness. So far, the focus of research has been on two related but perhaps somewhat distant cousins: pleasure and desire. Reward would seem to be central to both of these states and so has been studied in other animals by behavioral psychologists since at least the beginning of the 20th century. In studies during the 1950s psychologists James Olds and Peter Milner working at McGill University in Canada, found that rats would repeatedly press levers to receive tiny jolts of current injected through electrodes implanted deep within their brains. In fact they would stop almost all other normal behaviors, including feeding, drinking and sex. These findings seemed to suggest that Olds and Milner had discovered

the pleasure centre in the brain, and it turns out that these overlap with the regions damaged in Parkinson's disease. The main chemical aiding neural signaling in these regions is dopamine, and so it was quickly dubbed the brain's "pleasure chemical". Human studies during the 1960s by Robert Heath at Tulane University in the US eventually pinpointed the pleasure zones in the brains of human patients. However, the question still remains, Could happiness be best described as pleasure without desire, a state of contentment and indifference?

Synthesizing Happiness

Since the dawn of time we have sought short-cuts to happiness. Early man got high on psychotropic drugs. Alcohol has been around since the Stone Age. The designer drugs of today promise ecstasy in a pill. If an individual is not genetically predisposed to being a happy person, is it possible for him/her to emulate the habit of being a happy person? The answer is yes according to Dan Gilbert, who claimed in his TED Talk, that we can manufacture our own happiness. According to the father of positive psychology, Professor Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, it is possible to lift our biological set range of happiness, at least to some extent if we work at it. Dan Gilbert claims that we have a psychological immune system that springs into action during circumstances that may make us feel pretty miserable initially. He tries to prove his proposition on the basis of a comparative study he conducted on the happiness levels of paraplegics and lottery winners. Astonishingly, one year after both of their remarkably different life-altering experiences, they exhibited the same level of happiness! According to a study published by the US National Academy of Sciences people who express more positive emotions as teenagers and greater life satisfaction as young adults tend to have higher incomes by the time they are 29. In this assessment process researchers measured a number of factors known to contribute to financial success, including education level, IQ, height and self-esteem. It was noted that whether smart or simple-minded, tall or short, self-confident or insecure, happier people earned bigger paychecks than their mournful peers. The difference was so great that when measuring life satisfaction on a 5-point scale, a 1-point jump at age 22 made a \$2,000 difference in income down the line. Between the gloomiest and the happiest brackets, that amounts to an \$8,000 earnings swing. The findings suggest that interventions to encourage more positive thinking in kids and teens could greatly improve their future success. Researchers then looked at all sorts of things that can make people happier. They found spending money for the sake of others seems to give people a boost, as does actively engaging in humanitarian activities.

Happiness Attracts Abundance

It is our “inner” emotional world that attracts to us the “outer” physical world we experience. The world in which each individual lives is the creation of his/her emotional life. As long as a person puts conditions on being happy s/he pushes it away because of her/his desperate craving. We do not in fact need conditions to be happy. We can decide to be happy now and happiness will happen. When we are happy, that attitude changes our environment. The first step to happiness is stopping the search for it. Enjoy the flux and flow of this very day. The present moment is the only time we can be happy because now is the only time available to us. Be happy right now! Actively enjoy the blessings we receive, and cultivate a welcoming and happy attitude towards everyone.

Happiness is a Choice

Often people are not very clear about what they want. Even while claiming that they are looking for happiness they are going after money, success, status, respect, etc. They want other people to think they are happy more than they really want to be happy. Money is surprisingly bad at making people happy. Happiness is not success either. Possessions are a poor measure of happiness. Possessions are subjective and relative to the individual and the individual’s viewpoint. When we stop caring about everything that could be and focus completely on enjoying what is, we are happy. It is not having things; it is ceasing to want things. We are unhappy when we think our life is not the way it should be; that we need to change X and Y and then our life can really begin. If we maintain such a limiting belief about our reality, that negative attitude will spoil our possibility of being happy. We should maintain an attitude that this reality is anything less than heavenly. We are not actually judging reality with such beliefs because we only have access to our limited perceptions of it, and those are 100% within our mind. By labeling reality negatively, we are actually labeling a part of our own mind in the same way. That is a trap – a huge trap that we must avoid at all costs.

The Trap of Labeling Reality Negatively

Subconsciously our mind will respond to negative beliefs by crippling our self-esteem and strangling our ability to leverage our skills and talents. Once we realize that our perceptions of reality are all we have to go with, the most sensible approach is to permanently rule out the idea of casting aspersions on our reality, since we are actually ridiculing our own perceptions. It can only take us down a path of self-destruction

and ruin. Accepting the reality as it is and cultivating a harmonious and supportive relationship with it is the positive step we can take. Refusing to accept the reality or imagining things that do not correspond to the reality is not going to change the reality. Accepting and befriending the reality alone is the way forward.

How to Take Control of Reality

The present reality is actually as good as it can get in the present circumstances. Since our relationship with this reality exists entirely within our mind, it is under our control. Whatever we think we can create, we can create and experience here and now. Reality is functioning perfectly within its established parameters. It is we who are slacking off in the imagination department. Instead of dwelling on what we would love to experience and summoning it, we often muddle our mind with thoughts of perpetuating more of what we do not want. If we want to break the pattern of what we are already experiencing, we need to shift our energy from observation and prediction to unfettered imagination and creation. Essentially that is a time management challenge, spending less time observing and more time imagining. If we love what we are experiencing right now, we can just keep observing that, and it will self-perpetuate, or else start creating a heaven in our mind right now. Be confident that reality is 100% on our side. This confidence need not be based on any evidence but on our choice. The evidence comes after our choice, not the other way around. If we believe that reality conspires to go out of its way to help us we will be able to see evidence for it constantly. Reality will be full of pleasant surprises. If we maintain a positive belief, people frequently will help and support us on our path. No one is going to do that for someone who thinks this reality is somehow lacking or damaged - that belief will only get a person drained, beaten down, and abused. If we have a love-hate relationship with reality, then we are the abusers. If one insists on being negative; no one can stop him/her, especially when s/he derives satisfaction from that negative belief.

To bring about a positive turn in our life we should start enjoying our life immensely; feeling deep appreciation and gratitude for this experience. Never miss a chance to laugh and smile. Maintain a deeply positive, loving, and supportive relationship with reality. Try to develop our skills, talents, and habits to genius level and shamelessly express and share our creativity and brilliance. Search, study, travel, learn, and discover, guided by curiosity, desires, and intuition. Open our hearts and actively invite and experience delicious connections that we desire. Become more capable and free; release and shed fears and limitations.

Create and enjoy tremendous prosperity and abundance. There is no need to wait for an afterlife to achieve all these. These are achievable here and now.

How to be Happy Every Day

Put things into perspective: Most people feel that they can only be happy when things are going well in their lives. These people need a reason to be happy, something to make them happy. However the fact is that we can be happy any day we choose, whether we have a 'reason' for it or not. Putting things into perspective is an essential step to our everyday happiness. Unless our life will definitely come to an end today, there is always hope that tomorrow will be better. And when there is hope, there is a reason to be happy. When things are at their worst, they have to get better. So cheer up, and before we know it, life will get better and better. Even if our life will end today we can think positively about it since the pain and suffering will be over. We can be happy simply because we have come to the end of our journey and it is time to rest. When we put our life into perspective, we can see that it is not as bad as we may think it is.

Count your blessings: Most people take for granted many of the conveniences they enjoy in their daily lives and forget those who do not have any of these blessings. The feeling of gratitude brings happiness into our life. Imagine a situation where we lack things we enjoy at present and be grateful for the things we have now. The feeling of gratitude has a tendency to attract more good things into our life. "To those who have, more will be given. But to those who do not have, even that which they do have will be taken away." There is a spiritual principle which attracts prosperity to those who feel they are prosperous, or happy events to happy people. Whatever we focus on, we magnify in our life. Focus on what is wrong, and more will go wrong. Focus on what is good, and more good will appear.

Take time for ourselves: It is important to take some time for ourselves and just have a bit of fun. To recapture a sense of balance and poise we need to have timeouts in spite of our busy schedule. We will soon start to notice a feeling of joy and happiness welling up within us, proving a point that many authors have expressed - our natural state of being is joy, and when we relax and simply be who we are, happiness comes naturally. If we are struggling to meet our current (or past) responsibilities, it may seem like we cannot afford to 'waste' time. The secret in these situations is to take small amounts of time here and there. Do anything that we enjoy doing and that will energize us to move forward.

Do something worthwhile: For being happy it is important to spend time doing something worthwhile that we can be proud of. Our physical bodies need a certain level of activity in order to remain healthy. Inactivity will lead to degeneration. It is the same with our brain as well. We should be proud of what we do; no matter what our job may be. There is no need to compare it with what others are doing. Any work done well is honorable. When we do our job well, it tends to lead to other good things, like appreciation, promotions, and a chance to enjoy ourselves more. This is truly a case where happiness leads to more happiness.

Choose to believe in ourselves: The next major step towards being happy every day is to choose to believe in ourselves. Most of the time, we are unhappy because we believe our experience of life is not good, and that we are incapable of improving it. Even if our current situation is not good, if we believe we could improve it, happiness would not be too far away. Being depressed means that we believe our life situation to be bad with no hope for anything better. If we get trapped in that mindset suicide may seem the only way out. By repeating over and over again to oneself, "It's not as bad as I think it is" it is possible to come out of such negative traps. Maybe we have misinterpreted what people meant by the things they said and did. Maybe there was an opportunity we failed to see. Through affirming that we can solve whatever problems we are facing we can motivate ourselves to move forward.

Make a firm decision to be happy: Abraham Lincoln once said, "A man is about as happy as he makes up his mind to be." Most of the time, shifting ourselves into happiness is as easy as making the decision to do so. Other times, we may need to make small adjustments to release the bonds holding our happiness inside. Music is a great way to shift the energy in our environment. Dressing up in good clothes is something that works for many people, when they look good, they feel good.

Burt Goldman's 5 Rules to Happiness

If you like a thing, enjoy it: Though this rule seems outrageously simple, it is not so. There are many things in life that we like but do not enjoy. The reasons we do not enjoy things we like are (a) guilt, and (b) fear. We will not enjoy something we like if we feel guilty after having done the thing, or if we are fearful of the consequences of doing it.

If you do not like a thing, avoid it: This second rule too may seem simple, but of course not. Often people are forced to accept things and situations they do not like and are unable to avoid them for valid reasons.

If you do not like a thing, and you cannot avoid it, change it: Following this third rule too may lead us into difficult situations. Dire needs like money, time, security, etc., may force us to bear with certain situations without attempting to change it even though we do not like it, or cannot avoid it.

If you do not like a thing, cannot avoid it, and cannot or will not change it, accept it: This acceptance too has a catch. How can we accept something we do not like or is 'unacceptable'? How can we accept a situation or a person that we are not happy with? If we cannot, then we are destined to remain unhappy forever. There are, however, five rules to the secret of happiness, and within the fifth lies the key.

You accept a thing by changing your attitude towards it: We are the aggregate of our viewpoints and attitudes. Everything is relative to the person experiencing it. There are no absolutes - nothing is good, nothing bad, except as it relates to you. Nor is life good or bad. Life simply is. We change those things we wish by changing our viewpoint about them. Our attitudes and viewpoints are all part of our mind and once we develop control of our mind we will be the master of our destiny, our attitudes and viewpoints. Using these five rules we will soon find ourselves on the right path on the pursuit of happiness.

Dr Kurian Perumpallikunnel, CMI