

The Enigma of Human Existence: An Odyssey of Survival



Dr. Priyanka De

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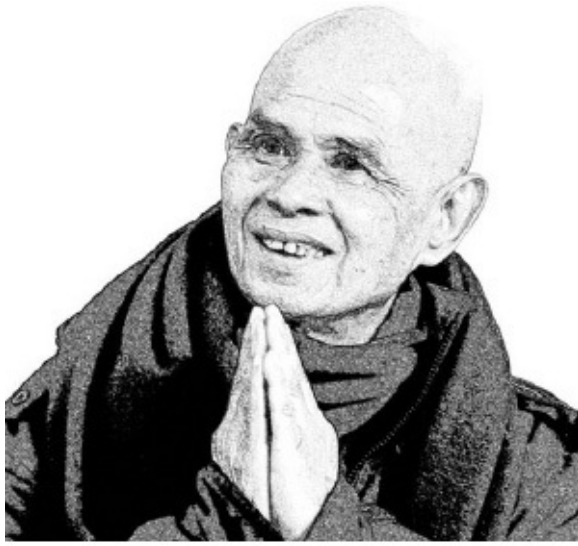
Chapter 1

Enigma of Happiness

We are sustained by the virtue of happiness. Happiness is a relative term. A matter of happiness may be the ultimate gift to one person while the same fact of happiness may not fetch the same level of happiness to another person. The intensity of happiness also varies with the situation and the mood of the person concerned. All these are really a matter of enigma of human life. We witness such turbulence of happiness in our life. It is the innate human nature to be overstruck by negativity rather than positivity in life. Giving away negative feelings such as selfishness, lust, hatred, sorrow and embracing positive feelings such as love and care, will unlock the doorway of the paradise of happiness. Our life must be in that pursuit of happiness by the practice of judgement and truth. 20th March is designated as the 'International Day of Happiness', highlighting the impact of happiness and well-being as the universal goal of human life.

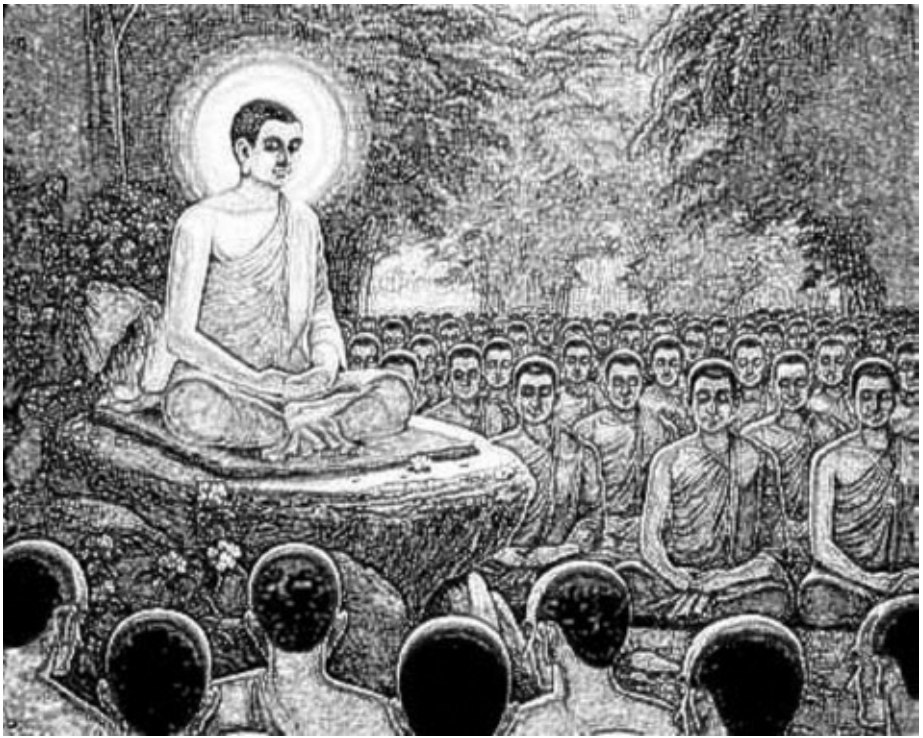
Essence of sorrow

According to Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous Buddhist monk and peace activist, change occurs constantly in everything and change is always for the good. Impermanence is not misery, but we do not want to face it. When our mind is unable to accept the change, the episode of sorrow initiates. We observe children remaining happy, playing and enjoying, even in difficult circumstances. On the other hand, they are seen to cry when their mothers cry. The innocent consciousness in the child's heart instinctively senses that unhappiness is not good at all and that the phase of sorrow must terminate soon. Much harm is done by encouraging children to learn about the sex distinctions and showing any kind of violence. The intimidated will to brood sadness and the act of refraining from spontaneous happiness are indeed matters of enigma. The enigma of unhappiness encompasses the enigma of sorrow that varies with person as well as available circumstances. It is said that we must not react to adverse situations or misbehave with bad folks as both seem to be powerless without our reaction.



Thich Nhat Hanh

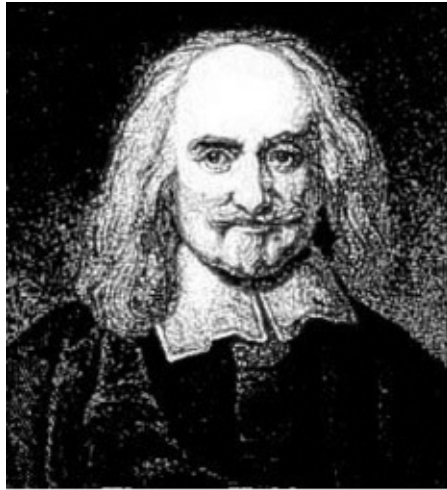
Adversity and misfortune are the terms which are given greater emphasis by people who make only excuses and retain a series of misconceptions regarding their inherited ill-fate. The present generation always grumble of their situation and become frustrated easily. We have seen the real hardships of our grandparents, who had retained their smile even in the face of the toughest impediment of their life. They used to believe that our skin is the impervious layer not only for microbes, but also for external turmoil. Futile longings, expectations, sad memories, illusions, ignorance are harbingers of sorrow and strife. If we can remain indifferent to all aspects equally and be calm and unruffled, our life will have no sorrow. The essence of Buddha's teaching is found in the famous 'Eightfold Path of Buddha', emphasising the pathway to the cessation of sorrow, namely, (i) '*Samma-Ditthi*' or perfect vision and understanding the path of transformation, (ii) '*Samma-Sankappa*' or right emotion, thought or attitude, (iii) '*Samma-Vaca*' or perfect speech and harmless communication, (iv) '*Samma-Kammanta*' or right action, (v) '*Samma-Ajiva*' or right livelihood, (vi) '*Samma-Vayama*' or right effort or conscious evolution, (vii) '*Samma-Sati*' or complete awareness and mindfulness and (viii) '*Samma-Samadhi*' or holistic concentration and enlightenment.



Our life has become a graveyard for happiness. Happiness is not the result of a specific situation or an event. It is indeed a myth that happiness is something that needs to be achieved or acquired. The agitations of bickering mind can bring us confusion and misery rather than peace and happiness. We must realise that unhappiness may be our neighbours residing in our close by neighbourhood, but happiness is our family member residing along with us. Greed for power, wealth or pleasure is a great instance of materialism that can bring only misery and suffering. Sufferings come in the form of poverty, ill-health and failure. The narrow and selfish personal interest of a few people deprives the unvoiced majority of decent living and peace loving people. Selfishness and egocentricity prevail at different levels of the society in varying degrees. Thus we see communal riots, social crimes, robbery, bribery, deceit, strained relationship, disputes at office and consequent associated pain and sufferings. The immense treasure of nature is exploited recklessly by the greedy people giving rise to the concept of inequality in the imposed social structure.

Essence of pleasure

People often become confused between pleasure and happiness. Pleasure is the common gratification of our need and appetite. It may lead to happiness, but the reverse may not be true. The sensualist seeks pleasure in the gratification of his senses and the ambitious in the possession of his power. To satiate our perverted pleasures, we are always in chase. But happiness may elude them all. Trust brings sensitivity, the quality of heart. If we are sensitive to others' feelings, then we can lessen our own pathos too. It is the heart that leads to joy, peace, understanding, compassion, wisdom and so happiness lies where the heart rules the mind. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), the founding father of modern political philosophy, believed that the fundamental characteristic of human nature is the impulse towards self-preservation or egoism.

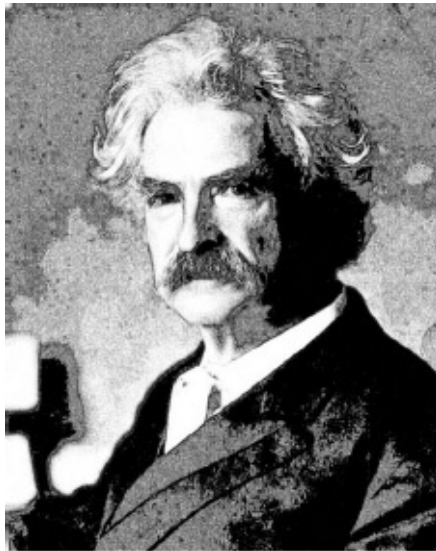


Thomas Hobbes

Humans are egoistic creatures, unlike animals. They are bestowed with the power of thinking and reasoning. If our thoughts are directed towards ego building aspects, all our rationality and potential will lead to enormous problems and unhappiness. Happiness lies in transcending the egoic self with open mind and pure heart. The waking-up and insightful mind is what we have to look after. Awareness brings about a moral responsibility that fetches happiness and joy to all and for all. We must be happy not because everything around us is perfect, but because we see perfection in everything. Affection is always greater than perfection. The good and bad acts of a person affect the quality of consciousness, either uplifting or downgrading it. Chasing pleasure at any cost and to any extent is a worse problem than deprivation and those who are running after various forms of amusements are no better off than those who are living in abject poverty. The significance of living

modest but comfortable life depends on the selective action of mind, so that the good willpower is siphoned in and the evil automatically repelled.

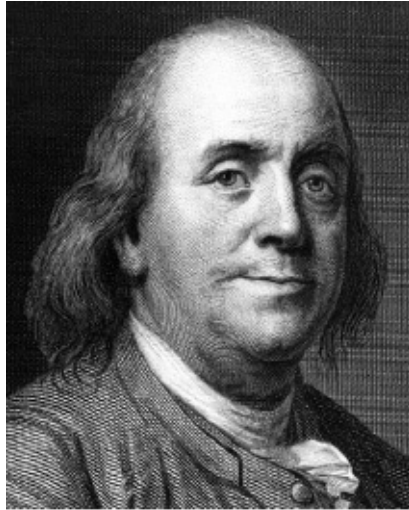
In this mundane world, people often speak of getting involved in social service projects and volunteer work, but few make the real effort to get involved wholeheartedly. If you ask most of them to do something, the typical response will either involve the remuneration of the service or the negative response showing the list of their busy schedule. When people are overjoyed, their eyes sparkle and become naturally kind to others. But, when something goes wrong, they can see only the dark side of the nature. Even if they see others happy, they become depressed and devise methods to make them unhappy. In this turbulent world, man can never be happy until his aspirations for perfection is fully realised in every aspect of human life. The disposition to be pleased and to please others is of great virtue to the humanists. Happiness is a blessing of nature and brings freedom from suffering. Our genes may predetermine about fifty percent of the happiness we feel, the rest being determined by age, health, income and our conscious thoughts. Living and acting from within eventually take us beyond the ignorance of our ego and uncover the secret splendours of our inner life.



Mark Twain

Laughter is considered as a medicine from time immemorial onwards and is undoubtedly linked to happiness. Laughter increases the level of endorphins which are natural pain killers and plays wonder in arthritis, migraine and spondilitis. A good belly laugh is a perfect heart exercise. Laughter keeps blood pressure at bay,

reduces the release of stress hormones and improves lung capacity and oxygen level in blood. Laughing increases the count of natural killer lymphocytes and strengthens immune system. Laughter even acts as a confidence booster. So laughter therapy is a novel therapy indeed. Mark Twain, the famous American writer, rightly said: *“Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.”* Mixing with people who laugh a lot, watching a pure comedy movie or program, reading a laughter journal can help us in wiping away the dust of doom and gloom from our life. A smiling face attracts people and makes interaction with others easier and enjoyable. Laughter is contagious, making others feel happy and rendering the ambience full of positivity. We must therefore try to laugh passionately from the core of heart and make laughter a deliberate hobby. I hereby recall another wonderful quotation by Benjamin Franklin, one of the architects of American independence: *“If you would not be laughed at, be the first to laugh at yourself.”* Such positive attitude to face criticism is a striving force to happiness.



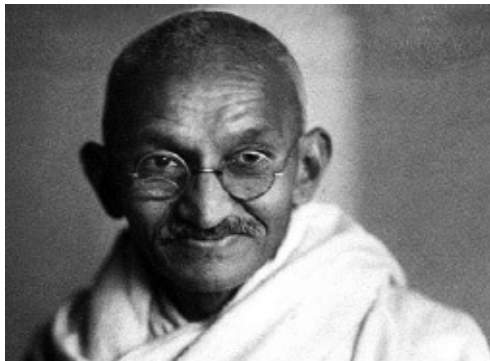
Benjamin Franklin

Essence of love and harmony

We must be able to value our relationship. All forms of good relationships are major source of happiness in our lives. Happiness lies in giving time and respect to our relationship. Relationship is a feeling of closeness and an absence of resistance, in which barriers fall and disappear, leading to a sense of harmony. There is no such thing like isolation or independence. No object, whether living or non living, can sustain alone. All kingdoms of nature are interlinked in a harmonious relationship.

Stable relationships are considered as a strong predictor of happiness. Happiness increases with age since people become more content and more settled in life. Retirement often boosts happiness in life and improves overt health. Our fellow feeling is a powerful informing principle. The people to whom we are attached to include our parents, siblings, friends, relatives and all those we revere. We are also attached to some places we love to visit again and again. Thus we feel happy in such associations and attachments. Realising the sanctity of relationship is the foundation of true perception of life.

Love is the hallmark of happiness. We aspire for love, a passionate reality, all through our life. The parental or filial love helps us to blossom in life. Love is not an abstract concept or physical sensation, it is a spiritual experience. Love is vindicated in happiness which involves agreeable emotions or gratification of mind. It is an inward joy felt by satisfaction of natural impulses that are always tended to be good. The gift of love and the act of benevolence pave the doorway of receiving love and create a world of happiness within oneself and among others. Love can conquer an enemy. Love shines on all and its tenderness falls on everything and reveals unseen and unfelt beauty. Love breaks the conflict between likes and dislikes or attraction and repulsion. Love is worth cherishing providing an impetus for meaningful goals. It gives the endeavour to make things happen and grow and makes the best health insurance we can think of Mahatma Gandhi once said: *“Fear and love are contradictory terms. Love is reckless in giving away, oblivious as to what it gets in return. Love wrestles with the world as with the self and ultimately gains mastery over all other feelings.”*



Mahatma Gandhi

Whenever we see a wound, we must try to heal it, where ever we see a sorrow, we must try to lessen it, whenever we meet a pain, we must try to relieve it. Loving and cherishing everything in our environment will directly lead us toward the path of contentment. Living a life of altruism and being a good listener make a man

happy automatically. Our happiness lies in the way we adapt ourselves to the changing world. The more we are flexible and adjustable, the more we will be happy and intermingling. Mahatma Gandhi stresses on the profound impact of love in his famous quote: *“The law of love will work, just as the law of gravitation will work, whether we accept it or not. Just as a scientist will work wonders out of various applications of the law of nature, even so a man who applies the law of love with scientific precision can work greater wonders....”*

Essence of forgiveness and gratitude

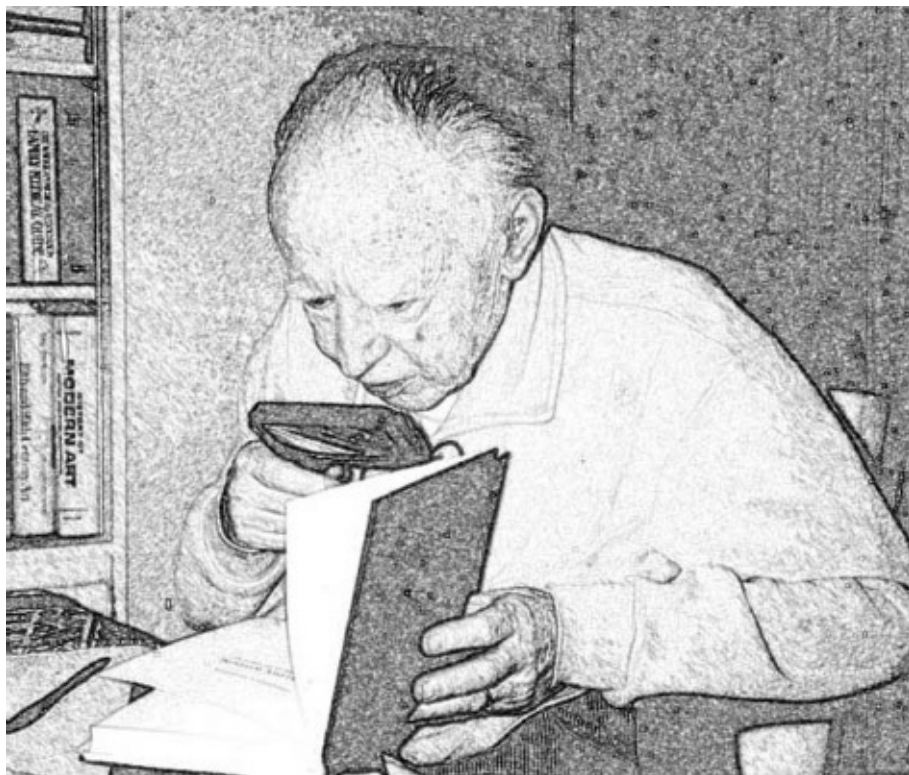
Forgiveness is another positive virtue with the help of which we may change a person and motivate him to get over his mistakes. The wonderful instance of forgiveness is given by Lord Christ who, even at the time of crucifixion, showed his forgiveness to the sinners. A forgiving and loving person will always get the happiness of forgiving and love, even when he is a sufferer himself. By forgiving, we experience a vast expansiveness and inner freedom within ourselves. Peace and happiness are inseparable terms, both being the cause and effect of each other. Our mind is always tormented by the waves of exogenous turmoil. Life is a continuous flow of physical, emotional and intellectual experiences. We can upgrade the quality of our life by improving the frequency as well as the quality of our experiences. Action without attachment or outcome is divine, leading us to the pathway of perfection, grandeur and renunciation.



Lord Jesus Christ

We have always heard about the joy of giving. But we have become highly calculative beings. The modern society focuses on receiving and acquiring, rather than giving and there lies the root of unhappiness. Giving does not mean giving money or materialistic gift; giving also includes giving affection, love and care. Helping others fetches blessings, gratitude and personal satisfaction. Nowadays, we rarely hear the word 'thank you', the common phrase of gratitude. Anything we acquire is often taken for granted and hence do not feel happy to reciprocate. We must be able to have whole hearted gratitude towards everything. Similarly, we hardly hear the phrase 'I am sorry' as we do not repent for any wrong act and go on creating a series of wrong deeds. The feeling of gratitude and being thankful provide amazing impact on our body and mind. We must be grateful for our human life on this planet, for the resources we exploit knowingly and unknowingly and for the people who surround us with positive vibes. We may simply exchange greetings with a stranger, appreciate the beauty of nature, empathize with a colleague or neighbour, congratulate them on their achievement and simply give a smile. The

gift of gratitude has direct physical benefits to the giver, mostly through the immune and endocrine system. When we appreciate others, our parasympathetic nervous system is triggered and this has a protective impact on the body, including decreasing cortisol levels and increasing the levels of beneficial chemicals in our body such as oxytocin and dopamine. In this regard, we may recall one of the famous quotes of Johannes A. Gaertner (1947–1977), an educational theorist and professor of art history at Lafayette College, Pennsylvania, United States. He mentioned: *“To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch Heaven.”*



Johannes A. Gaertner

The more we become self-centred and narrow-minded, the more we move away from the goal of happiness. This is also the logic behind a rich person being unhappy and a beggar being happy. The act of relinquishing oneself opens the door to happiness. Lust and craving for reward and profit make us anxious and discontented. Irrespective of fame and wealth, regret can ravage the mind of

anyone. Studies show that the worst concern is about what could have been. We are always tensed and anxious thinking about our future, and there lies the root of discontentment. Our anxiety for future stems from a feeling of insecurity; we are afraid of the unknown, unexpected future. Problems are part and parcel of human life, but the art of solving problem varies from person to person. Silence is the most powerful kit that works as a healer and some clever people love to practise the art of silence till the problem fades away like the passing clouds. Considered as the highest eloquence in life, the power of silence rejuvenates our mind and body and generates an overt relaxation, reinforcing our faith and will power.

Reflecting on ourselves

In this world of chaos, it is very difficult to stick to the principle of positivity. There are many slander mongering and gossip loving folks in this society. They can never tolerate happiness of others and get immense pleasure seeing perils of others. Such people must be avoided so that none can ruin our happiness. Gossip not only leads to negativity, but also breeds competition. We will remain happy if we can appreciate others, ignoring the ugly and unpleasant aspects of others. We should also refrain from judging, criticising and condemning or retaliating. Let us recall the famous episode of '*Amrit Manthan*' of Hindu mythology. The story deals with the churning of the ocean of life by *Devas* (Gods) and *Asuras* (Demons) with the help of the mountain *Mandara* (Mandarachal Parvat) and many-headed snake *Vasuki* to obtain '*amrit*'—the elixir of life or immortality. The *Devas* symbolise our strength while the *Asuras* symbolise our weakness, mount *Mandara* our soul, *Vasuki* the pole pulling in one direction and *amrit* as the state of enlightenment. We always face conflict between good and bad and we must resolve it through love and care. The full consciousness and awareness in our motives, thoughts and actions bring out our happiness and leads to a peaceful world. Self-realization helps to realise our true potential and help us to grow within ourselves.



Amrit Manthan of Hindu mythology

We may have an awful day, but at the end of the day, we must examine, reflect and reorient ourselves so that we do not sleep with any guilt or negative feeling. We must fix an appointment with ourselves at the end of the day. Happiness will naturally flow into our life and life will be in complete tune with nature. Nothing lasts forever in this world and this is something to contemplate. None can achieve happiness through someone else's suffering. Our mind is meant to probe, excavate and dissect out all matters, seen or unseen. Man has the capacity to grow by virtue of his own cognition and effort into the highest evolved form. We will be happy if our life reflects our nature and values. The key to happiness may be lowering our expectations. Studies have revealed that it matters a lot whether the things are going better than expected. Lower expectations increase the probability of the fact that the outcome will exceed the expectations and will always render a positive impact on happiness. Abraham Harold Maslow (1908–1970), an American psychologist, came up with a five-stage motivational theory of psychology known as 'hierarchy of needs', in pursuit of happiness. His concept stressed on the fact that certain human needs take priority over others, the basic needs being physiological needs for physical survival. Once the first need is fulfilled, people become motivated to achieve other needs and so on. He named the first four levels as 'deficiency needs' and the top level as 'growth needs'. Once growth needs are satisfied, a person reaches the peak level of self-actualization that encompasses 'aesthetic needs' and

brings out one's personal potential and self-fulfilment. The so called self-actualizers are creative persons with strong moral character and have the capability to perceive reality, tolerate uncertainty, accept and do everything spontaneously and show concern for the wellbeing of humanity.



Abraham Harold Maslow

Happiness is improving our self-esteem, our own way of evaluating ourselves physically, mentally and spiritually. It is the worth we give ourselves in terms of appreciating our own life and is definitely influenced by people around us. Self esteem fetches joy, confidence and overall feeling of well being. A self-esteemed person can live happily even after confronting hardships in various spheres of life. We must try to speak well to others so that others may also speak well to us. Verbal affirmations may bring happiness to our subconscious mind. Our subconscious mind is indeed a very powerful abode, working day and night, tirelessly, weaving threads of thoughts and rendering unlimited creativity. At least five minutes of outdoor exercise elevates mood and increases self-esteem. Happiness is a wonderful feeling that transcends into optimism, the belief that our future will be all good. Studies show that the optimistic people are less susceptible to heart disease and hypertension, less likely to be rehospitalized after some types of major surgeries and live longer for an average of about ten years more than pessimistic counterparts. The scientists of Harvard School of Public Health have noted that overt happiness can reduce one's risk of experiencing a cardiovascular shock by about fifty percent.

Aristotle's philosophical concept of happiness includes personal expressiveness (*eudaimonia*) and hedonic enjoyment, of which the former is a signifier of success in the process of self-realization. Such hedonic enjoyment is observed in shopping experiences which are associated with increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions. According to the research work of Dr. Martin Seligman, founder

of Positive Psychology, the most contented and positive people are those who have utilised their unique combination of their signature strengths, such as humanity, restraint and perseverance. According to him, happiness needs to be cultivated in three dimensions of life, namely, pleasant life (life encircled by positive emotions all the time), good life (obtaining abundant satisfaction in the main spheres of life) and meaningful life (greater glory of one's life or life beyond oneself). His theory of happiness embraces both individualistic approach emphasising own care and nurturing own strengths as well as the altruistic approach, emphasising on sacrifice for the greater goal of life. The field of positive psychology aims to decipher various ways of making ourselves better and happier individuals. It focuses on positive aspects of life such as positive emotions and relationships and innovative accomplishment.



Dr. Martin Seligman

Science of happiness

Researchers from the University College London (2014) came up with the mathematical equation of happiness, with results emphasising on the moment-to-moment happiness. Also known as 'in-the-moment inequality', the equation gives an accurate prediction of happiness of people, varying from moment to moment. The stimuli of happiness under study include the relevance of recent events, getting rewards or having any positive expectations. The subject of comparison or inequality reduces happiness in general. We are happy when we share the similar conditions with other people; but if our neighbour is more prosperous or having a better life, our happiness gets reduced. Using functional MRI (fMRI) technique, researchers have demonstrated that such changes in moment-to-moment happiness during decision-making task occur in the striatum of our brain.

Research has excavated various neurobiology markers of happiness. Our limbic

system of brain is the master player of emotions and generally, increase in the metabolism of limbic system has been found to bring depression in individuals. Dopamine and serotonin are two well-known neurotransmitters involved in mood regulation. Dopamine, the reward molecule, is thought to be involved in reward-driven and pleasure seeking behaviour and play an important role in rendering happiness and positivity. Serotonin is an important mood-booster that also augments self-esteem and feelings of worthiness. The anti-anxiety molecule, gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), is known to slow down the neuronal firing and creates a sense of calmness. Endorphins are endogenous opioid peptides that are known to relieve pain and boost happiness and an overt mood of well-being. Oxytocin, the cuddling hormone from the posterior pituitary gland, is directly linked to human bonding, love and loyalty. Our left cerebral hemisphere is considered to be more adept at language, logical thoughts and creativity and is more active while experiencing pleasant or positive emotions. The right hemisphere is more apt at pattern recognition, abstract or intuitive thought and emotional processing and is found to be more active while experiencing unpleasant or negative emotions. An important subcortical structure of brain, known as nucleus accumbens, is primarily associated with positive emotions and is a critical component of the reward system. Happiness is an important emotional state reflecting greater endorsement of positive endowment characteristics and hence utilised in the field of medicinal therapy. As part of positive psychology, happiness is considered a vital ingredient in the mental health promotion and corresponding treatment proceedings. The increase in the patient's level of happiness has been found to bolster the improvement in the health status in subjects suffering from neurological diseases such as cerebral stroke, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, Huntington's disease, Parkinson's disease.

Research says that people perceive their left cheek to be more emotionally expressive than the right and hence, a left cheek bias exists for happiness perception. In a typical urban life, a young person's happiness involves easy accessibility of amenities that add to their quality of city life while an old person's happiness demands good quality of services such as palliative care related safety and security. The quality of interpersonal relationship dictates a happy married life. Globally, undesirable vices that top the list of marital happiness threatening causes include excessive gambling, drinking, extra marital addiction and getting rid of many of these vices can end such marital misery too. Evidence has demonstrated that people who undergo immense traumatic or stressful life experiences can experience sudden positive psychological changes in their life. Such resilient people develop a kind of self-adaptation associated with positive emotions, in the face of adversity and extreme cases of trauma and stress. This may be due to their great struggle for existence showing them new avenues of life and recognition of their inner strength. They often experience uncanny mental and spiritual upliftment. In

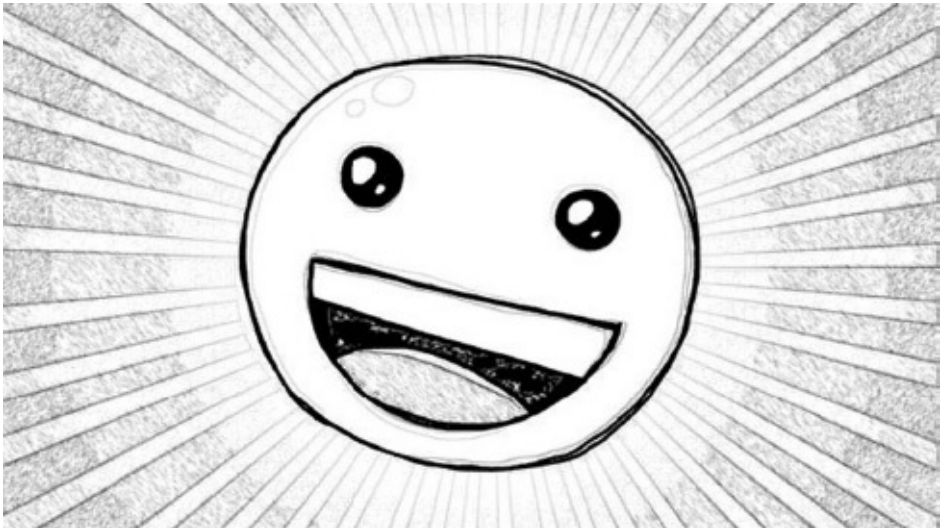
general, happiness and harbouring positive emotions help people develop long-term resources for sustaining well.



Happiness is a lifestyle that we must practise. Our mental set up may be comparable to a fulcrum so that moving it a more positive side means the lever of possibility lengthens leading to eventual success. Studies have shown that happiness of a very close contact increases our chance of happiness by about 15% and that of a second-degree contact like our friend's wife by about 10%. Happiness is an art that can be learnt and trained. Our cerebral neuroplasticity helps us to learn the skills of happiness and related positive emotions and training improves these skills gradually. Based on latest research, ten keys of a happy life are set in the form of two words 'GREAT DREAM', that include ten directives, namely, giving, relating, exercising, awareness, trial, direction, resilience, emotion, acceptance and meaning. According to 'The World Happiness Report 2016' that ranks 156 countries by their happiness levels, people seem to be happier living in societies where there is less inequality of well being and also stressed upon the fact that happiness inequality has increased significantly in the last few years. Previous available reports showed that happiness was used as a better indicator of human welfare than do income, wealth, education and health. Scientists have also unravelled an interesting concept of retail therapy in generating happiness. Fluctuating daily emotions influence economic transactions. Sadness prompts us to spend more for shopping until we are happy enough to retrieve our self-esteem.

Good deeds are not only good for our soul, but also a key to our survival in

terms of evolution. Various forms of human behavior that exist for many generations must be part and parcel of what we call 'evolutionary stable strategy', a revolutionary concept introduced by John Maynard Smith and George R. Price in a 1973 Nature publication. People are likely to reciprocate with the people who have done some good to them. Such payback reward helps to make the society cohesive and brings all under the umbrella of mutual benefit. The urge for such compensating benefits definitely favours Darwin's concept of natural selection. Even people seek for the partners who are altruistic in nature i.e. those who shall consider the other one's care and welfare as priority. The science of doing good is based on such evolutionary reward that enhances self-esteem and motivates us to do those things again for a greater glory.



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