

## An analysis of the Indian perspective on Subjective well-being

**Dr Garima**

Applied Psychology Departement

SPM C University of Delhi

garima@spm.du.ac.in

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the concept of Subjective Well-Being (SWB) through the lens of ancient Indian philosophy and Eastern traditions. Unlike the largely individualistic, hedonic approach prominent in Western thought, Eastern perspectives on SWB emphasize transcendence, self-realization, and a deep connection with the universe. Indian philosophies like Charvaka, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita provide a diverse range of views on happiness, from hedonism to spiritual fulfillment. The paper also touches on the role of Buddhism and Yoga in fostering well-being through mindfulness and self-regulation. The discussion contrasts the Eastern emphasis on harmony, contentment, and acceptance of suffering with Western ideals of mastery and satisfaction. The paper concludes by arguing that a holistic understanding of SWB requires integrating these diverse perspectives to better understand happiness in a global context.

### **Introduction**

Subjective well-being (SWB), defined as individuals' self-assessment of their happiness and satisfaction in life, has been extensively studied in psychology. However, much of this research has been grounded in Western frameworks, which often focus on hedonic pleasures, life satisfaction, and individual success. Ancient Eastern philosophies offer a radically different perspective, where happiness is viewed as both an internal state and a spiritual pursuit. Indian philosophical traditions—ranging from the materialistic Charvaka philosophy to the transcendental teachings of the Upanishads—illustrate how diverse understandings of happiness have shaped cultural attitudes toward well-being. Additionally, spiritual practices rooted in Buddhism, Yoga, and the Vedas offer unique pathways to achieving a sense of contentment and equanimity. This paper examines these Indian perspectives, contrasting them with Western notions, to show that a more complete understanding of SWB must account for the transcendental, collectivist, and spiritual elements that Eastern traditions emphasize.

Indian views are germane to the present study. There are various perspectives on well-being in ancient Indian philosophy.

**Charvaka Philosophy** comes first. According to this wholly materialist perspective, the only criterion of wellbeing that determines a person's orientation toward pleasure is the satisfaction of their demands, especially those of a sensory kind.

The second viewpoint, which is completely at odds with the first and lies on the opposite extreme of the spectrum, is founded on a transcendental understanding of reality. It is the notion that Indian tradition supports as the pinnacle of health. According to this perspective, happiness and well-being are subjective in the view that they are independent of one's body-mind state as well as any other objective conditions of reality.

The collectivist perspective, which is the third perspective and sits between both the hedonistic and transcendent perspectives, recognises that everyone has very different wants and objectives. While a small number are totally spiritual and some are purely hedonistic, the great majority falls somewhere in the between. Depending on the worldview that is imposed upon them, they are the ones who might plunge into the abyss of hedonism or reach the pinnacle of transcendence.

### **Taittiriya Upanishad's theory of happiness and well-being**

Ananda, or bliss, was regarded by Upanishadic sages as the initial state of humans and the essence of Atman, the transcendental Self. But a number of coverings or sheaths, known as kosha, prevent us from experiencing this initial situation. Five of these sheaths exist. The five koshas are: “(1) annamaya kosha (2) pranamaya kosha (3) manomaya kosha (4) vijnanamaya kosha (5) anandamaya kosha.”

The Annamaya kosha, the ‘strangest’ sheath of them all, is a representation of food since it is tangible in character and hence alludes to the physical body. The term "pranamaya" denotes the life energy. Manomaya alludes to the psychologically studied mind processes. The term "vinnanamaya" alludes to the instinctive faculty, which is undervalued in contemporary psychology. The term "anandamaya" refers to that innate state of happiness.

## **Bhagavat Geeta on happiness and subjective well being**

Bhagavad Gita, as a classical epic of the Indian literature elucidates beautifully on the concept of happiness in the form of *sukha*. As Bhagavad Gita charts a middle-of-the-battlefield discourse between Lord Krishna and his disciple Arjuna in Kurukshetra (where the fierce battle was fought), it confers relevant insights on wisdom, duty, joy and a sense of happiness (Prabhupada, 1972). The concept of happiness in Bhagavad Gita has been charted in the context of happiness as captured by the senses (external happiness), happiness experienced by the spirit (inner happiness, that closely relates to the construct of SWB), happiness as a manifestation of archetypes of behaviour, and relationship of happiness with the *gunas* (Moreira, 2018). Furthermore, Bhagavad Gita exemplifies the attainment of non-attached outlook and a sense of “equanimity” in disparate life-situations through the practice of “*Sthitapragnya*” (Sanskrit word for a “high order of self-regulation”, also called “*atma-niyantana*” in Sanskrit). An individual who is able to practice self-regulation, fortified with the enlightenment of intrinsic and robust/stable well-springs of happiness results in higher subjective wellbeing and development of a blissful personality (Nagar, 2017).

## **Vedas on Happiness and Subjective wellbeing**

The concept of happiness and wellbeing can be traced

to the ancient “Vedic and Upanishad periods” (about 3000-1000 B.C.) (Nagar, 2017). Ancient Indian scriptures take a somewhat-transcendental view of reality, and the highest human pursuit is one of self-realization, that is of attaining the knowledge of self as *Atman* (an indestructible, transcendental spirit) and *Brahman* (the ultimate omniscient, omni-present, and omnipotent principle permeating the universe) which brings an eventual and ever-flowing *Ananda* (bliss; joy) (Banavathy and Choudry, 2014). Crucially, *Vedas* exemplify bliss, abundance, and a pure life as the highest form of human ideals, with one of the prayers “*Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah*” (“May everyone become blissful”) being a routinely chanted one in the Indian context, a prayer that highlights the deep-rooted substructure of happiness, bliss and wellbeing in Indian traditions (Nagar, 2017).

### **Buddhism and subjective wellbeing**

In Buddhism, there are several practices that are known to engender joy, and thus augment a sense of subjective wellbeing (Casioppo, 2019). These practices include the construction of “Gates to raptures of Joy”, *mudita* (or unselfish joy), and mindfulness. These “Gates to raptures of Joy” include trust, wholesomeness, thankfulness, generosity, mindfulness, and connectedness, traits which are also reflected in character strengths of honesty, kindness, self-regulation, and social intelligence among others (Kornfield, 2019). *Mudita* or unselfish/ sympathetic joy implies taking pleasure in the good fortune of others and sharing that joy with others (Kornfield, 2019). Lastly, the practice of mindfulness augments a sense of joy, bliss and happiness through concentration and meditation (Hanh, 2010).

### **Yoga and subjective wellbeing**

Notably, a sense of joy and wellbeing has also been elucidated in yogic tradition wherein a sense of supreme wellbeing can be engendered through a sustained yogic practice (Casioppo, 2019). In his words, Tigunait (2017) avers that the goal of yoga is “mastering of mind and its roaming tendencies which empower us to attain victory in both our inner and outer worlds.” Crucially, Bhagavad Gita also has a chapter titled “The Yoga of Meditation” and throws light on the benefits of yoga as attaining supreme peace and joy eventually (Murthy, 1985); thus, showing the positive impact of yoga on wellbeing.

### **Self-Enhancement vs. Self-Transcendence**

Indian traditions typically view the self as a minor component of the community and the universe, in contrast to the western comprehension of the self, which largely rests on individualistic values. Developing agency, independence, liberty, high self-esteem, and a strong ego are seen in occidental cultures as essential components of a successful existence, which is consistent with the overall western notions of the self (Chang & Dong-Shick, 2005). A mature self in Hinduism is one who gives up their individuality and becomes engrossed in the Transcendent. This foundational distinction between the the western and eastern ideas surrounding well-being and happiness has significant implications in establishing what sort of psychological traits they value.

### **Hedonism versus Eudaimonism**

In modern western psychology, the domain of subjective well-being, that was developed based on a hedonic interpretation of well-being, is where empirical analysis of people's QOL and mental health is mostly conducted. Positive feelings and joys are viewed as too fleeting and insignificant in these traditions to serve as a yardstick for measuring happiness. In order to proscribe people from pursuing pleasures at the expense of sacrificing fundamental ‘‘sacred’’ virtues, eastern schools typically instruct ‘‘desire management’’ techniques. It could be appealing to use western eudemonistic concepts and assessments in eastern contexts because the eastern sense of happiness is essentially eudemonistic. The positive traits promoted by eastern eudaimonism, on the other hand, are absolutely distinct from the ones acknowledged in modern western psychology; Eastern Eudaimonism primarily emphasises selflessness, environmental adaptation, and relational values.

### **Mastery vs. Harmony**

In the modern worldview prevalent in the West, human beings are seen as a privileged beings whose intelligence obligates them to rule over other forms of existence (Sibley, 1973). Hinduism views humanity as an inherent part of the nature that enjoys no uniqueness above nature’s other components (Gardner and Stern, 1996). The whole of biosphere, including humans, wildlife, plants, or even non-animate objects, are viewed as being a part of an underlying unity in eastern traditions. As a result, unlike many western institutions of learning, eastern institutions do not draw a clear line between humanity and the creation as a whole.

### **Satisfaction versus contentment**

In the past four decades, the significance of life satisfaction has been accentuated in western psychology research on mental wellbeing (Diener, 2012). For instance, according to the SWB hypothesis, satisfaction with life is one of the pivotal elements of overall well-being. In the Eastern psychology, the construct of ‘‘contentment’’ includes satisfaction in addition to a wide range of other traits and circumstances. Hinduism distinguishes between contentment and passive acceptance of circumstances. As opposed to this, ‘‘it is a very dynamic acceptance of one's efforts in the minute battle of existence’’ (Shamasundar, 2008). It entails accepting any setbacks or suffering with ‘‘complacency, dignity, and grace.’’ According to Salagame (2003), the realisation of the transcending self is what leads to this feeling of contentment.

### **Avoiding versus valuing suffering:**

From an Eastern perspective, a likely drawback of the hedonistic notion of pursuit of happiness that is apparently prevalent in the West and one that emphasises the maximisation of SWB (which invariably warrants an *absence of all manner of unpleasantness*) is that it may make it challenging to acknowledge adversity, negative affect, and even sadness as potentially integral to a “satisfying”, wholesome life (Shamasundar, 2008). From an eastern perspective, one must be able to accept the bad with the good, life in its totality, warts and all. Hinduism views a state of happiness as incomplete if it has not been tested by adversity and illness (Shamasundar, 2008).

### **The Relevance of Indian perspective of well-being**

According to some, the roots of modern western conceptions of wellbeing can be found in both old and new schools of thought in the west. Ancient Greek philosopher Aristippus (435 to 356 BC) presents the hedonic perspective on happiness (Döring, 1988). Aristotle introduced the idea of eudaimonia as an ancient Greek philosophy (384 to 322 BC). A worldview, which offers an existential understanding of the character of man, his role in the universe, and the very essence of our cosmos, is foundational to any conception of the quality of life or of wellbeing generally (Salagame, 2003). Modern mainstream psychology is largely built on liberal individualism's ideas, which include a stable self-concept with distinct borders from the non-self.

These western conceptions have served as the main guiding principles for the majority of happiness research to date. However, the foundations of wellbeing-related ideas vary greatly around the globe. According to recent studies, the indicator of life satisfaction is not considerably different between economically wealthy and impoverished countries (Diener & Diener, 2009). This shows that each culture has its own conceptual foundations for wellbeing and varied wellbeing determinants. Therefore, in order to comprehend what will decide people's well-being, we must examine the philosophical foundations of well-being in each region of the world.

### **Conclusion**

The examination of subjective well-being from an Eastern perspective reveals a multi-dimensional approach to happiness, one that integrates physical, psychological, and spiritual elements. Indian philosophies present a rich framework, with concepts like self-realization, transcendence, and the acceptance of both pleasure and suffering as integral to the human experience. The discussion of

happiness in the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and Buddhist and yogic traditions underscores the emphasis on inner peace, mindfulness, and collective well-being. In contrast to Western paradigms that often prioritize individual achievements and material success, Eastern views promote a balanced, harmonious, and spiritually grounded approach to life. The integration of both Western and Eastern perspectives offers a more nuanced understanding of well-being, one that could lead to a more globally relevant framework for understanding happiness in the modern world.

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