

Spiritual Happiness

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Abstract

Interestingly enough, studies have demonstrated that those with a spiritual practice or who follow religious beliefs tend to be happier than those who do not. Research after research has found that religious people tend to be less depressed and less anxious than nonbelievers and better able to handle the vicissitudes of life than nonbelievers. It is as if a sense of spirituality and an active social and religious practice is an effective vaccine against the virus of unhappiness. Some experts think that believing in a religion gives you a greater sense of purpose and meaning than a secular viewpoint alone does. Scientists who study this phenomenon hypothesize several possible reasons for a link between religiosity, spirituality, and happiness. When it comes to religion and spirituality, it may not be what you believe or how you believe it that protects you from unhappiness so much as the fact that you believe at all and that you practice those beliefs. Believing in something greater than ourselves helps us stay positive in times of sadness and foster resilience in its role as a coping strategy. Spiritualism is a search for something sacred. Individuals approach spirituality through religion, meditation, yoga, or personal reflection. It can be regular deep breathing meditation - focusing on the present moment rather than getting caught up in regrets about the past or fears about the future.

Keywords: happiness, spiritual happiness, divinity, religion, meditation

Happiness is a fuzzy concept. According to Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Happiness is as a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which, if you sit down quietly, may alight upon you" (Thagard, 2010: 146). It is not only hard to measure but is also challenging to define singularly. We cannot define happiness without a synonym, and we can't interpret it to everyone's satisfaction. It can mean different things to different people. So many people believe that happiness is the excitement of new experiences, it is having fun at a party, it is the thrill and passion of sex or

the delights of a fine meal. But these are all fantastic experiences to be enjoyed and appreciated. These are not happiness. These experiences are the definition of pleasure, not happiness. From the

past few decades, the science of happiness has received a fair bit of attention now because everybody would like to be happier, of course, and possibly more now than ever because studies show modern life is depressing. The purpose of this paper is to inquire into a more expanded view of what it truly means to have happiness and, in particular, spiritual happiness.

It is not proper to say that materialism matters to happiness and that people who live in a safe and wealthy country are, on the whole going to be happier than those who do not. Henrik Ibsen said, "Money can buy the husk of things, but not the kernel. It brings you food but not appetite, medicine but not health, acquaintances but not friends, servants but not faithfulness, days of joy but not peace or happiness" (Vaswani, 2013: 85). In fact, the happiest folks do not have the best of everything; they just make the best of everything. Whereas unhappy people focus on what is missing, happy people focus on what they have. An article published as *Norway is the world's happiest country* in *The Hindu* documents that in a recent UN report, Norway was declared the "world's happiest country". The top of the list included Denmark, Finland and Iceland. Given the everyday stress and the alienation from social life that defines life in these nations, all I can say is that this World Happiness Report cannot be about happiness. To find something close to this notion of happiness, they would have to walk the streets of societies where people still happily smile through the rubble of their everyday world. According to Charles Spurgeon, "it is not how much we have, but how much we enjoy, that makes happiness" (Shahar, 2014:72).

The pursuit of happiness is an essential human right. Both Confucius and Socrates implied that happiness is a primary purpose of life and a central goal of education. For Aristotle educating the mind without educating the heart is no education. In the mid-18th century, the Scottish philosopher Frances Hutcheson was the first to describe the best society as the one that had "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Blumenau, 2002: 421). Similar ideas were held by his friends Adam Smith and David Hume. But the genius who carried the concept much further was Jeremy Bentham. However, it took the deepest root in the New World where Thomas Jefferson, who famously incorporated "the pursuit of happiness" into *The American Declaration of Independence* in 1776 (the phrase had initially been used by the English Enlightenment thinker John Locke), asserted that "the care of human life and happiness... is the only legitimate objective of good government" (Abrahams, 2016: 16). The Federal Papers of U.S. Constitution read that, "a good government implies two things: first, fidelity to the object of government, which is the happiness of the people; secondly, knowledge of how that object can be best attained" (Horowitz, 2010: 2). But we are so much busy in cultivating our intellectual skills in the pursuit of wealth and status, that we have neglected the pursuit of happiness.

Before jumping into the refreshing waters of spiritual happiness, let us visit what science and social scientists say about happiness. In medical circles, the experience of being happy can be

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ascribed to having a true abundance of the chemical neurotransmitter serotonin in your brain. When the levels of serotonin in your brain are too low, you can also be expected to experience a decrease in a particular sense of subjective well-being that is generally described by the word "happiness". Many common anti-depressant medications work either by increasing the amount of serotonin in your brain or by increasing your brain's receptivity to serotonin. However, having an excessive amount of serotonin in your brain can also generate feelings of sadness and unhappiness. Therefore, seeking refuge in "chemical happiness" alone can be quite a challenging activity in the long term. In addition to making us feel good, studies have found that happiness improves different aspects of our lives. We know happiness can predict health and longevity, and happiness scales can be used to measure social progress and the success of public policies. Behavioural scientists have spent much time finding out what makes us happy and what does not. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology researcher, in her 2007 book, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, describes happiness as "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile" (2008: 32). Based on her research, Lyubomirsky has concluded that roughly 50 per cent of happiness is determined by our genes and 10 per cent by our life circumstance, but 40 per cent depends on our daily activities.

Now, let us discuss spiritual happiness by beginning with a quote by a great spiritualist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who says, "The foundations of a person are not in matter but in spirit" (Kauffman, 2015:167). The fundamental assumption behind spiritual happiness is that everything is divine, the whole thing is a gift from God¹, and everything is your own most profound consciousness bursting forth into a unique life experience. Spiritual happiness comes from having a bigger, more long-term view of life, within which our inevitable ups and downs can be seen as hills and valleys amidst a vast, ever-changing landscape. You can use whatever religious or non-religious image or term you choose for envisioning this unknowable perfect flow of God's will. What is most important for sustaining and fostering your practice of spiritual happiness is the state of mind that comes from seeking to be in universal harmony. One of the main secrets of spiritual happiness is to make positive use of the immense power of your mind, your thoughts, and the way you view the world. If you trust that everything that comes to you is somehow a blessing, that trust will help to make it so. An optimistic view of life is essential for true spiritual happiness, with faith and trust in the loving hand of universal grace always there to hold us and guide our steps.

Spirituality and prayer also provide people with an opportunity to engage in a meditative act. It has been shown that meditation has a strong link with well-being because it calms the body, reduces stress and anxiety, and also supports positive thinking. Meditation is one of the most straightforward and potent ways to awaken who we are and to experience happiness as a state of consciousness that already exists within us. When we meditate, for example, we go beyond the

whirl of thoughts, memories and emotions that tend to keep us stuck in our ego's story of who we are. We go through an extended state of awareness and discover our inner source of joy, a source of happiness that is not dependent on anyone or anything. After we meditate, we tend to let alone our conditioned beliefs and accumulated physical and mental toxicity cloud our perception of our essential religious nature.

In *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Peterson and Seligman observed that spirituality is universal: "Although the specific content of spiritual beliefs varies, all cultures have a concept of an ultimate, transcendent, sacred, and divine force" (2004: 601). Suppose a belief in the transcendent is so much a part of the human experience. Is it not curious that research on spirituality and religion is under-represented in the field? One explanation may be that spirituality does not fit neatly into our current research moulds. Even mapping the conceptual distinctions between what we refer to as "religion" and what we refer to as "spirituality" can be difficult. In their chapter *Spirituality in the Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Pargament and Mahoney made the distinction. They said that we prefer to use the term religion in its classic sense as a broad individual and institutional domain that serves a variety of purposes, secular as well as sacred. Spirituality represents the key and unique function of religion. In this chapter, spirituality is defined as a "search for the sacred...People can take a virtually limitless number of pathways to discover and conserve the sacred. Pathways involve systems of belief that include those of traditional organized religions (e.g. Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim), newer spirituality movements (e.g. feminist, ecological) and more individualized worldviews" (2001: 647). Following the above studies, researchers conducted a survey in 2015 at the London School of Economics and the Erasmus University Medical Center in the Netherlands. They found that participating in a religious organization was the only social activity associated with sustained happiness.

Conclusion

Spiritual happiness is a deep satisfaction and cheerfulness that exists beneath all the apparent waves of short life. It is faith and gratitude that never leaves you, flourishing throughout the ups and downs of life. Having spiritual happiness does not necessarily mean letting anything fall upon you without trying to create what you want. It is a balance. You put forth sincere efforts, and if some of your efforts do not bear fruit, you nevertheless have faith that all is well, that everything ultimately happens for the best, and that God will provide whatever you need at the right time, and in the right way. The treasure of spiritual happiness is available to us with just a few shifts of understanding, a bit of expansion in our awareness, and some refinement of our thoughts and actions. In today's commercial-based society, spiritual happiness is somewhat of an acquired taste. Outer happiness can often seem more tangible than the deep, inner stream of spiritual happiness.

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Outer happiness is like a drug or junk food -quick and easy but not always good for our well-being. Spiritual happiness, on the other hand, is a delicacy that can only be tasted by a tongue that has lowered its dependence on worldly pleasures. Therefore, we may have to lower our emotional dependence on worldly pleasures before our "happiness sensors" can become refined enough to taste the more delicate flavours of spiritual happiness.

Notes

¹ In this paper, I have used the term "God" in its general sense and not as described by any one religion or tradition. If the word "God" doesn't accurately represent your image and relationship, then please feel free to replace this word with any He, She, It, form, or formlessness that works for you.

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