

Western and Eastern Concepts of Happiness

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Abstract:

Happiness is a subjective state of well-being. The perception of attaining a state of happiness is contrastive in Western and Eastern cultures. The concept in the Western culture is targeted to individual well-being, goal-oriented and materialistic in nature. According to this, happiness is related to and dependent on the outer world, i.e. acceptance, appreciation and praise by others etc, whereas the Eastern concept of happiness is socially oriented and focused on the peace of mind, in spite of having unfavorable circumstances. Hinduism has revealed the emphasis of the feeling of the presence of God as very important in happiness. Various Saints lived their life based on Indian Culture system and gave the message that long-term happiness can be easily attained by focusing on the true self and connection with God.

Key words: Western culture, Eastern Culture, Happiness, Hinduism.

Individual difference is a basic principle of psychology. So, the term of Happiness is very subjective in nature and it is difficult to measure it objectively. Happiness means different things to different people. Similarly, to experience the happiness differs not only from person to person but even from culture to culture. Western culture has an emphasis on the standard and quality of living.

Let us have a look at the views of various Western psychologists about happiness. Happiness comes from "encountering unexpected positive events" (Leda Cosmides and

John Tooby).

"Happiness can be elicited by seeing a significant other" (Michael Lewis).

"We are happiest when basking in the acceptance and praise of others" (Mark Leary).

"Happiness" may be the label for a family of related emotional states, such as joy, amusement, satisfaction, gratification, euphoria, and triumph (Sara Algoe and Jonathan Haidt).

David G. Mayer, a well known Social Psychologist and a supporter of the positive psychology movement argues that happiness is the key to many things like- the perception of the world as a safer place, healthier and more satisfying lives, and even the ability to make decisions more easily. He gave some suggestions in his book (*The Pursuit of happiness* 1993), such as:

1. Realizing that enduring happiness doesn't come from success.
2. Take control of your time.
3. Act happy.
4. Seek work and leisure activities that engage your skills.
5. Join the "movement" movement.
6. Give your body the sleep it wants.
7. Give priority to close relationships.
8. Focus beyond the self.
9. Keep the gratitude journal.
10. Nurture your spiritual self, etc.

If we analyze this expert's views we can say that happiness is dependent on others (it could be in the form- acceptance, praise, appreciation, pleasurable events etc.) and the reason is that in the Western culture, happiness is characterized by work, relationships, and friends. It is materialistic oriented. It is concentrated or limited to individual wellness. In Western culture, the family environment and upbringing is individualistic in nature. They are less concerned about the

growth of other people's lives. They seek happiness in looking outside. This could be the reason why western culture is 'nuclear family' oriented. The other side of happiness in Western culture is 'pleasure', which is again limited only to sensations.

But Eastern culture is quite different. It is less concerned about the standard or quality of living, rather it puts an emphasis on the feeling of satisfaction about inner self. Specially the gist of all these Indian Literature (Upanishads, Bhagwad geeta, the great Indian epics- Ramayan-Mahabharat) and the life stories of various saints across the India speak to us that Happiness is not only in the outer world, but it is our inner state of mind.

Other side of happiness is Peace of mind and it is related to the feeling of contentment in Eastern culture. We can get the true feelings of happiness not only by controlling but also managing our desires, needs and long-lasting cravings. Eastern view says that all the worldly affairs are sheer illusions only, so instead of being attached or involved with it we should do it as being non-judgmental. So the outcome of the work is not going to affect our happiness. *Vairagya* and *vivek* helps to maintain our pure joy. *Vairagya* consists an abstaining from anything that would mar that pure joy, while *Vivek* consists in doing that which will bring about strength or will augment such joy.

However, Indian literature is not against the materialistic world which, to some extent it is good, even important, but this is not the ultimate happiness; all these things are just a mediator. The Eastern concept says that we should not limit ourselves to these worldly affairs but authentic happiness is much more than that.

In Hinduism and even in other Eastern culture, well-being is defined not only by individual wellness, but by the growth of other people's lives, mainly their families. This is due to the collective, rather than individualistic, nature of Indian society.

Like the Western culture, we have contracted a habit of

extracting happiness from something, i.e. keeping our happiness dependent on something or other. Every person hankers for happiness, but we seek to get it through the medium of *prapancha* i.e. medium fraught with misery. We should therefore learn to extract happiness which exists by itself, not because of something else. If you keenly yearn to be happy, then learn to be happy under all circumstances. Suppose, there is someone who delights in vexing us; our reaction should not be one of annoyance - our happiness should continue unbroken.

The Eastern view says that True and long-lasting happiness consists in doing one's worldly duty conscientiously, observing morals, and keeping contented by maintaining constant awareness of God through nama-smarana. To do our duty happily, unexpectedly, in the awareness of God, is the hall-mark of a fruitful human life. That is why the life-style of many Saints consists of satisfaction. Dnyaneshwara, Tukaram, Kabir and many other saints lived their life with full of joy, not pleasurable, though they didn't have the materialistic world. This is because they changed the perception of worldly affairs.

The interesting thing is that we are neglecting these valuable views and are open to indulge in Western therapies like R.E.B.T. which have their roots in our culture only.

The social concern of Dnyaneshwara reflects in the following line. "Avaghachi Sansar Sukhacha Karin, Aanande bharin tinhi Lok"-Saint Dnyaneshwara.

Like the Hinduism or Indian Culture, Buddhism, Sufism and many other views in Eastern culture have expressed more or less the same thing consistently, namely that Happiness is not the commodity for which we go in the market and purchase.

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