

The many shades of happiness



Real happiness isn't a product that can be sold. It arises from being one with the world

In a recent UN report, [Norway was declared as the “world’s happiest country”](#). The top of the list included Denmark, Finland and Iceland. The U.S. came 14th and the U.K. was in 19th position. Given the everyday stress and the alienation from social life that defines life in the U.S. and U.K., all I can say is that this World Happiness Report cannot really be about happiness. (Disclaimer: This claim has nothing to do with the fact that India was ranked 122nd in this list.)

Happy days are here again!

Very often we use the word happy to denote something which is not happiness at all. There are a number of terms that are often used in place of happiness: pleasure, joy, contentment, satisfaction. Not all of these correspond to happiness. These are particular types of experience which overlap with the experience of happiness but are in themselves not the state of happiness.

The famous anthem of happiness, Bobby McFerrin’s song ‘Don’t worry, be happy’, was a song which had global appeal. The song has a very simple prescription for being happy: don’t worry since worrying only doubles your trouble. “*The landlord say your rent is late/ He may have to litigate/ Don’t worry, be happy,*” sings McFerrin. Is the state of not worrying all that there is to happiness? Perhaps not surprisingly, McFerrin took his anthem from an Indian spiritual guru, Meher Baba.

The contemporary way to forget worries is through shopping. Happiness is only another commercial product. Happiness as a product makes it possible for it to be designed, packaged and delivered when and where needed. Our society is full of products, most of which are designed primarily to make us ‘happy’. Not a surprise that shopping is the easiest route to happiness today.

Happiness as accumulation and consumption of goods, as a kind of product that can be sold, is endemic to modern definitions of happiness. I remember the catchy and popular slogan “Happy days are here again, Thums Up”, a theme which has sold other soft drinks too. From Happy Days we have moved to Happy Hours, a more desperate sales pitch to make people consume more alcohol.

This inculcation towards consumption as somehow related to happiness begins early in our life, in that

dreadful celebration called the Birthday. Perhaps the most famous and most abused phrase is 'Happy Birthday'. When others wish us 'Happy Birthday', are they telling us to be happy on our birthday or are they pointing out to the fact that because it is my birthday I have to be happy?

For children today, increasingly across all sections of the society, happiness on this day is nothing more than cutting a cake, singing the birthday song and wearing new clothes. Birthdays have succeeded in reducing our idea of happiness into a set of rituals of consumerism. It is interesting to contrast this with more traditional modes of celebrating birthdays which were primarily about thanksgiving and prayers for the future rather than an excuse for a 'birthday party'.

Now, we have converted religious and cultural festivals into Happy Days. Every event has to be a happy event: Happy Diwali, Happy Christmas, Happy Independence Day and so on. There is tremendous pressure to show that we are happy, whether we are really happy or not. And since we manage to be quite unhappy most of the time, it is easier to follow a ritual of happiness rather than strive for happiness. In this proliferation of Happy Days, it is only the business people who seem to have attained happiness!

The relation between shopping and happiness is a cynical continuation of the age-old relationship between happiness and freedom. We are often told that freedom is happiness and our unhappiness arises from various constraints placed on our personal and social life. But, most often, when we have 'pure' freedom, we suffer. Sometimes we do not know what to do, how to act. Many times an existential angst begins to pervade the free individual.

One of the freedoms much talked about is the one to have multiple sexual partners. Are people who are not monogamous in their relationship more happy? Those who escape commitment in a relationship — are they more free and happy? In other words, do we desire freedom in order to be happy? If so, then freedom has been an abysmal failure, since when we are free to do what we want, we end up being dissatisfied. Living in highly restricted contexts is also a sure recipe for unhappiness; so what are we to do? Like everything else about human life, there is a middle path and the real task is only to find this path.

The reality of happiness

There is truth in the observation that some poor people are happier than some richer folks, and that children are happier than adults. It is true that we discover sudden moments of happiness when listening to music or watching a beautiful sight. This experience of happiness when you listen to music or see the mountains is not akin to a psychological state of joy or the pleasure of the senses. When a parent sees her child, the happiness she gets is not in the sensual pleasure of seeing that child but in something more. Happiness is more than pleasure or joy since the poor do not find any pleasure in being poor but in spite of it they find moments of happiness.

The happiness associated with love is a good example. Love may not always be joyful and pleasurable, it

may not even be pleasant all the time but the moment of happiness that defines that love is indeed real and rare. Living in constant comfort does not lead to happiness, it can only lead to boredom.

What then is the nature of happiness? It is one which arises from the removal of ego and from being aware that there is no real difference between an individual and the world.

Happiness is just in 'being-with' somebody. It is the state where knowledge, artificial distinctions and utilitarian values do not figure. Happiness is the state where it is not possible to distinguish between the person who is experiencing and the object of experience. This is also the state of surrender — to another individual, to nature or to the divine.

Surely this is not the happiness which the UN report refers to nor is it even part of the world view of the culture of the countries high up in the list. To find something close to this notion of happiness, they would have to walk the streets of societies in which people still happily smile through the rubble of their everyday world.

Sundar Sarukkai is Professor of Philosophy at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru

More In