

« The Quest for Happiness »

By Deepak Bansal

The quest for happiness is a timeless journey deeply woven into the fabric of human existence. It likely began with *Homo sapiens*, when the dawn of self-reflective consciousness granted us the ability to make choices, necessitating an overarching aim or purpose to guide those decisions. This purpose, for many, became the pursuit of happiness.

This pursuit is enshrined as an inalienable right, standing proudly alongside life and liberty within the U.S. Declaration of Independence. But what exactly are we chasing?

Aristotle, in his seminal work "*Nicomachean Ethics*," was among the first Western Philosophers to explore the nature of happiness, setting a reflective philosophical foundation for understanding this elusive state. Since then, happiness has remained a central theme in both philosophical debate and scientific investigation.

Notably, figures such as Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize laureate; a Harvard psychologist renowned for conducting the longest study on happiness ("the Good Life" project); advocates of Positive Psychology like Martin Seligman; and researchers such as Sonja Lyubomirsky have significantly contributed to our understanding of happiness, offering tangible insights into its nature and how it might be achieved.

In this essay, drawing upon the insights of these pioneers, we will delve into the essence of happiness. We will explore whether happiness can be cultivated intentionally and outline steps individuals might take toward leading a happier life.

1. The Essence of Happiness

Aristotle's exploration of the ultimate good for humans led him to the concept of "*Eudaimonia*," which translates to a state where one's "good spirits" reside within. This notion encompasses happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing, grounded in the belief that like all creatures, humans have a distinct purpose. Unlike animals, our unique capability lies in our rationality, which Aristotle posits should be directed towards noble actions. Happiness, then, emerges from the pursuit of virtue and excellence.

Aristotle's inquiry is rooted in his ethical considerations, proposing that true happiness is derived from fulfilling our rational potential through virtuous living. This concept challenges us to distinguish between transient pleasures and lasting fulfillment, leading to the identification of four potential sources of happiness: *sensual pleasures, achievements, intellectual contemplation, and wealth*. However, Aristotle argues that wealth, being a means rather than an end, does not constitute true happiness unless it is pursued as an end in itself.

The immediate gratifications of sensual pleasure, while pleasurable, offer short-lived satisfaction. Some term this "hedonistic happiness," which, unlike rational or uniquely human pursuits, is also sought by animals. Aristotle, renowned for his systematic approach to categorization, delineated the other two sources toward achieving true happiness: the virtues of character and the virtues of intellect. Virtues of character are the bedrock of moral achievements, guiding actions with ethical purpose and integrity. Meanwhile, virtues of

intellect lead to philosophical contemplation, enriching the mind with wisdom and insight. These pillars, according to Aristotle, constitute the essence of a genuinely fulfilled life, steering us beyond the transient towards the transformative.

Achievement through virtues of character:

Aristotle posited that genuine achievements are those pursued with the virtues of character under the guiding principle of the goddess “*Arete*”—the embodiment of excellence. In this context, each virtue represents a fundamental "good," serving as both the means and the end of virtuous activity. This concept applies universally, whether to the creativity of an artist, the melodies of a musician, or the craftsmanship of a carpenter. The essence of happiness in achievement is found in connecting deeply with this inherent "goodness," manifesting through both our actions and their outcomes. To embody moral virtues effectively, Aristotle outlined several key principles:

- **Moderation in Virtue:** Virtue is realized in moderation, adhering to Aristotle's concept of the "golden mean." This principle advocates for a balanced approach, exemplified by courage, which navigates the middle ground between recklessness and cowardice. Each virtue maintains its essence, offering a spectrum of expression that hinges on our choices. Similarly, temperance calls for moderation between indulgence and abstinence, illustrating that the nature of virtue lies in balanced action.
- **Pleasure in Virtuous Activity:** The attainment of virtue is often accompanied by intrinsic pleasure derived from the act itself. Engaging in benevolent actions or creating art are examples of virtue-executed activities that naturally bring joy. This satisfaction is indicative of having achieved a state of virtue, where the activity not only aligns with moral principles but is also fulfilling in its own right.
- **Creating Favorable Conditions for Virtue:** The practice of virtue requires conducive conditions, yet a person of virtue possesses the capacity to thrive even when circumstances are less than ideal. Through deliberate thought and action, a virtuous individual can either forge these conditions or adapt to flourish within them. This adaptability and resilience underscore the profound impact of deliberate action in cultivating and expressing virtue.

Contemplation as virtues of intellect:

In Aristotle's view, the apex of happiness is found in the realm of intellectual virtue, where the mind engages in deep contemplation and the pursuit of wisdom.

- **Practical Wisdom:** This aspect of intellectual virtue involves the art of deliberation, where one contemplates the best course of action in pursuit of a good life. Practical wisdom is about making choices that align with our virtues, fostering a life that is not only ethical but deeply satisfying. It requires us to step back, assess our happiness, and deliberate on what will truly enrich our lives.
- **Philosophical Wisdom:** For Aristotle, philosophical wisdom stands as the ultimate form of happiness. It engages the rational soul in the pursuit of truth, blending empirical knowledge with intuitive understanding. This wisdom transcends the practicalities of daily life, offering insights into the nature of existence, the cosmos, and the metaphysical underpinnings of reality. In this contemplative state, one achieves a profound connection with the rational aspect of humanity, fulfilling the highest function of human life.

Ultimately, Aristotle envisions happiness as a deliberate and virtuous life, rich in activities that reflect excellence. Happiness, therefore, is not merely an emotional state but the result of engaging in the noblest activities defined by virtue heralded as the highest and most noble goal of human existence.

2. Can Happiness be cultivated intentionally?

Aristotle unequivocally stated that happiness is the result of the habitual practice of moral virtues in our lives. He went further to assert that the integration of moral virtues into our daily actions significantly enhances our happiness. According to him, this is not merely an outcome but an art that necessitates deliberate and choice-driven actions to cultivate these virtues consistently.

Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, in her groundbreaking research detailed in "The How of Happiness," presents a compelling analysis that about 40% of our happiness is within our control, dependent on our actions and decisions. This contrasts with 50% determined by our genetics, over which we have limited influence and approximately 10% dictated by external circumstances, which may be beyond our control. The 40% under our control, though separate, signifies a substantial portion that can be shaped by our personal choices, underscoring the significant role of deliberate actions in fostering happiness.

Dr. Martin Seligman, a proponent of Positive Psychology, elaborates on this in his book "Flourish," where he identifies five critical components of Well-Being, in his *PERMA* model, that individuals have the capacity to cultivate:

- **Positive Emotions:** Experiencing and embracing pleasant emotions, such as excitement, warmth, and comfort, contribute to a "Pleasant Life." These emotions can arise from various sources, including meaningful connections with loved ones, physical well-being, or even the simple joy of observing a leaf fall. By recognizing and valuing these positive emotions in our lives, we forge a deeper connection to happiness.
- **Engagement:** This component is about achieving a state of "flow," where our engagement with activities is so deep that time seems to expand, and our actions and awareness merge, leading to the disappearance of self-consciousness. Steven Kotler's work on flow states echoes this, suggesting that complete engagement in an activity is indicative of being deeply immersed and fulfilled.
- **Relationships:** The importance of nurturing positive relationships is paramount. The longest-running study on happiness, conducted by Harvard over 85+ years, highlights that the quality and frequency of our relationships are pivotal to a happy and healthy life. It was found that individuals who were most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80, underscoring the critical role of social connections in our well-being.
- **Meaning:** Seligman defines meaning as the sense of being part of and serving something greater than oneself. This can be achieved through various means, such as volunteering, altruistic endeavors, or any activity pursued for its inherent value, providing a subjective sense of purpose and contribution.
- **Accomplishments:** Like Aristotle, Seligman acknowledges the significance of achievements in fostering a sense of flourishing. Engaging in endeavors that align with one's essence and values provides a profound sense of fulfillment. However, it's crucial that these accomplishments are driven by inner preferences rather than societal expectations, as pursuing externally imposed goals may not yield true happiness.

Although these five components may appear distinct, they are interconnected by a common thread that Aristotle recognized over 2,500 years ago: the pursuit of virtues. This enduring wisdom suggests that following a path of virtue-engaging in ethical practices and personal development-is a timeless and universal formula for achieving happiness.

C. What steps shall I take to be happy?

Addressing happiness encompasses both individual and collective dimensions, delving into subjective experiences and broader societal implications. At its core, happiness is shaped by the decisions and actions we undertake daily. Drawing from philosophical insights and empirical studies, several strategies can enhance one's sense of well-being:

- **Live Your Values:** Identifying and living according to your core values is fundamental. Understanding what drives you - be it justice, kindness, or integrity- allows you to align your actions with these principles. For example, if justice is paramount to you, explore what it means personally and how you can embody it, possibly through engagement in community service or advocacy. Realizing these values in action contributes to a sense of achievement and meaning.
- **Invest in Relationships and Communities:** The significance of robust, meaningful relationships cannot be overstated. Research on well-being consistently shows that even one substantial relationship can profoundly impact our happiness. The depth and frequency of these connections are crucial; dedicating time to nurture relationships can lead to a happier, healthier, and potentially longer life.
- **Prioritize Physical Activity:** Maintaining physical health through regular exercise, wellness practices, healthy eating, and medical check-ups plays a pivotal role in overall well-being. The discipline and habit of engaging in physical activities contribute significantly to mental and emotional health.
- **Foster Optimism and Resilience:** The insights from the "Good Life" project highlight the importance of optimism and resilience through life's fluctuating circumstances. Embracing a positive outlook, even in the face of challenges, fosters long-term happiness. This perspective, underscored by the principle of positive psychology, echoes the sentiment of finding the silver lining in every situation, as humorously advised by Monty Python's "*always look on the bright side of life.*"
- **Practice Gratitude, Kindness, and Service:** A common thread among happiness studies is the profound impact of altruism. Expressing gratitude, engaging in acts of kindness, and serving others not only benefits those around us but also enhances our own sense of satisfaction and well-being. These acts of generosity extend beyond the self, contributing to a more fulfilling life.

Eleanor Roosevelt famously remarked, "*Happiness is not a goal; it's a by-product of a life well lived.*" This suggests that the pursuit of happiness should evolve into active engagement in practices that foster well-being. The concept of "*Eudaimonia*," or living with a good spirit, encapsulates this approach. By infusing our lives - our health, relationships, values, decisions, and actions- with positivity and virtue, happiness naturally follows as a by-product. This holistic view encourages us to cultivate happiness not as an end goal, but as a natural outcome of a life rich in purpose and connection.

Reference:

- a) The Nicomachean Ethics; Aristotle
- b) The Good Life; Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz
- c) Flourish; Martin Seligman
- d) The How of Happiness; Sonja Lyubomirsky