



HEALTH, HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING AS EMBEDDED IN INDIAN TRADITION

Dr. Mamta Sharma, Associate Professor

Department of Psychology

Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Degree College, Gonda – 271001 (U.P.)

ABSTRACT

Health and well being are most significant aspects of life. Happiness and well-being are interconnected feelings. Health holds different meaning across time, culture, society, social class and even age groups. Health has been understood as a harmonious function of physical organs. It is also seen in relation to lifestyle of the individual and environmental factors. Health is not taken as mere absence of disease but an increased capacity of realization and fulfillment of self. WHO proposed that health incorporates, complete physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being. The term well-being, also called subjective well-being is closer to the concept of mental health, life satisfaction and happiness. Well-being is a subjective feeling which involves evaluation of affective and cognitive aspects of life, as ill-health, happiness, sense of contentment, sense of belongingness, achievement and being without any distress and discomfort. The conceptualization of happiness and well-being primarily depends on the worldview one holds that leads to differing assumptions on the nature of reality and of human nature. While ‘hedonic’ and ‘eudaimonic’ concepts of well-being limit them to bio-psycho-social aspects of human nature, the spiritual perspective of Upanishads is oriented towards consciousness and self and encompass bio-psycho-social and spiritual aspects. One's notion of happiness and well-being is intrinsically bound with one's sense of identity of terms of one of the five koshas. The notion varies, as one's identity shifts from one Kosha to another, from empirical to spiritual level. Happiness and well-being is subjective in the sense that they do not depend on any objective conditions of reality, including one's state of body-mind. Rather, this subjective feeling involves a sense of giving up and letting go, rather than controlling, identifying and holding on. Well-being and good life filled with happiness can be achieved through minimization, restraint and detachment. The ultimate or ideal contentment is to be contented within one's self.

Key words: Health, Well-Being, Koshas, Spiritual, Self, Happiness, Contentment.



Generally viewed, health means the absence of symptoms of disease, physical capability to do things and a general sense of well-being (Bauman, 1961). Among older persons, health is an ability to perform physical functions and vitality (Benyamini, Leventhal & Leventhal, 2003). The frame of reference for judging one's health is different in older and younger persons. Older persons refer to health as the absence or presence of health problems, whereas younger persons refer to health as health promoting behaviours. Thus, health is a very subjective experience and it changes with social factors with age playing a significant role in judging one's health. Health has been derived from an old English word 'Hoelth' that denotes, 'the state or condition of being whole or sound.' (Melquiades, 2015). In 5th Century B.C., health was defined as 'harmonious functioning of organs' (Svalastog, et. al., 2017). This means that physical aspect of health is important which includes functioning of physical organs as well as absence of any pain or discomfort. Hippocrates gave the term 'positive health' which focuses on diet and exercises. Lifestyle of the individual and environmental factors, as, climatic conditions, quality of air, water and food and lifestyle habits, all denote health. Moreover, health is also expressed in the person's ability to adapt and adjust to the environmental influences (Svalastog, et.al., 2017). The modern view defines health as not mere absence of disease but an increased capacity for realization and fulfillment of self. World Health Organization, 1946 came up with the new of health as a complete physical, mental and social well-being. In 1998, WHO defined health as , ' a dynamic state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity'. Thus, health is dynamic in nature and is not equivalent to the absence of disease or symptom of any kind. Our health is a combination of physical, mental, social and spiritual aspects and a well-being of these aspects denotes health. Health is thus, a movement towards well-being or wellness. Ill-health, contrary to health, is characterized by decreased functioning of physical, mental, social and spiritual aspects, presence of ill-health symptoms, diminished ability to function in daily life and also subjective feelings of wellness. Dalal & Misra (2012) proposed three domains of health-restoration, maintenance and growth. Restoration is recovering from the state of illness. Maintenance is maintaining good health and protection from diseases. Good diet, exercise, yoga are all helpful in maintenance of good health. Growth, sees health, not in just physical terms but it considers social factors and spiritual development as well. Thus, these three domains are helpful in gaining good physical and mental health and also help grow in all spheres of life.



Cultural notions significantly affect our conception of health. Culture never remains constant, it changes with time. Western view on health, believes that the cause of illness are germ and bacteria and removal of them leads to optional health achievement. This view ignores the feelings, beliefs and cultural background of an individual. Eastern perspective, believes that health means experiencing happiness, well-being, satisfaction with life, optional social functioning and setting goals for oneself and achieving them. The cause of illness does not lie outside but it is inside our body and harmony between physical, mental, social and spiritual components, leads to optional health. Talking about India, culture play a significant role in Indian life, so the traditional Indian view on health is important. The Sanskrit word for health is 'Swastha', 'swa' means 'inner self' and '-sth' means 'conscious'. Thus, in Indian tradition, being healthy has been considered equivalent to being conscious of your inner self. It means the cause of all illness lie within a person and if a person becomes conscious of inner self then optional health can be achieved. All traditional Indian systems like 'Ayurveda' and 'Siddha' consider, physical, psychological, philosophical, ethical and spiritual well-being of mankind. A harmony with the cosmos, nature and science is a necessary condition for well-being. Conceptualization of health in traditional Indian system is in contrast to the bio-medical health model. Instead of only treating symptoms of the disease, all traditional Indian treatments aim to heal from within the individual and improve the well-being. Thus, health is dynamic in nature, as it moves back and forth, with optimum health or complete disability. Health never remains constant and it changes or fluctuates throughout one's life. Our adaptation or response to that change matters the most because it affects our health directly. For a same stressful situation, one person may response positively while another might get anxious. The person with a positive response will have better health. Thus, biological mechanisms are alone insufficient to maintain and promote health and well-being. The idea that psychological state influences the health of a person has a long history in the Indian thought system. The ancient Vedas texts proposed an essential unity of mind and the body. Atharvavdeya and the Yajurveda, provide ample description of mental disorder and their remedial measures (Mondal, 1996). In Ayurveda, psychological treatment was integral to entire treatment process.

A human-being is not merely a physical body but it has its existence in social, moral and spiritual space also. The human existence is supposed to be in five sheaths (*Koshas*). A related aspect is balance (*sama*) or equilibrium. Health is like a dynamic field in which



different elements operate in communion and harmony. The nutritional status, immunity from diseases and better quality of social life, denotes health. The concern lies in healing the person, that is, regenerating a sense of well-being and fitness to deal with one's life conditions. In the backdrop of the expanded definition of health, the terms health and well-being are often used interchangeably. Diener & Suh (1997) viewed well-being as comprising of peoples' evaluations, both affective and cognitive, of their lives. The conceptualization of the state of well-being is closer to the concept of mental health and happiness, life-satisfaction and actualization of one's full potential. General well-being is the subjective feeling of contentment, happiness satisfaction with life's experiences and of one's role in the world of work, sense of achievement, utility, belongingness, and absence of distress. The text of Taittiriya Upanishad has elaborated that happiness, joy and well-being are the moments when there is an unobstructed manifestation of *ananda* (bliss) which is our original or true nature. It is the opaqueness of our mental faculties that obstructs the manifestation and experience of *ananda*. The principle behind opaqueness, dullness, darkness is *tamas*. The principle responsible for brightness, illumination, transparency is *sattva*. Greater is the transparency of mental faculties (*sattva*), greater is the experience of *ananda*. (Kiran Kumar, 2002). This view constitutes health and well-being as a state of mind which is peaceful, quiet, serene and free from the conflicts and desires. The nutrition (*ahar*) world of leisure (*vihar*) and thoughts (*vichar*) need to be synchronized in proper order. Health and well-being are both personal as well as social. The desire for the well-being of everyone has been a core Indian concern that has panhuman relevance.

Happiness and well-being

Hedonia and eudaimonia are two distinct conceptualizations of happiness and well-being offered by ancient Greeks (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Underlying any concept of quality of life, happiness and well-being is a worldview. This view provides a perspective on human nature, the nature of universe and the relationship between the two. Within Indian tradition, material and spiritual worldviews, lead to three different perspectives, hedonic, collective and transcendental. (Kiran Kumar, 2002 a, b, 2003, 2004). An issue related to the hedonic view is whether materialistic enjoyment can really bring happiness and well-being. Many studies conducted on subjective well-being (Diener, 2000; Diener & Diener, 1995; Myers, 2000) show that no significant difference exists in the index of life satisfaction between



economically poor and rich nations. A number of cross national studies reveal that national wealth and economic growth has no positive correlation beyond a certain point with indices of life satisfaction and happiness. Diener & Diener (2002) observe that some reorientation is required in material goals, from acquiring money to enjoying the process of work and contributing to society. The focus thus, shifted to other kinds of happiness and well-being.

Our Indian seers and saints endeavoured to take man beyond all dualities of life, like, birth and death, pleasure and pain, good and evil, and, in a leap of transcendence from the ordinary consciousness to the spiritual dimension they spoke about *ananda*. Ananda is the basic condition of happiness and well-being. Indian traditions recognize two aspects of spirituality – (a) experiencing paranormal and supernatural phenomena (b) leading a value oriented life. Within Indian traditions, the former is referred to as *anubhuti* and *vibhuti* and the latter as *dharma*. These two aspects of spirituality lead to two different perspectives – transcendental and collective (Kiran Kumar, 2002a, 2004). Hedonic perspective emphasizes on materialism, and uphold *artha* and *kama* as the chief source of happiness and well-being.

Though hedonism did not gain roots in the Indian soil, our rishis prayed for the happiness of all-

Sarve bhavantu Sukhinaha

Sarve Santu niramaya

Sarve bhadrani Pashyantu

ma kaschid dukhabhagbhavet

Let everyone be happy, let everyone be healthy, let everyone perceive good and let not anyone suffer from pain. This prayer reverberates in the Indian homes and ashrams even today. The highest good and purpose of human existence was considered as liberation (*moksha*). *Atman* was regarded as *satya* and *nitya* and realization of this truth lead to escape from all kinds of misery and to gain a permanent bliss (*ananda*). In this lies the true well-being and welfare of one and all because at this height of non-dual consciousness, there is no difference of self and the others in a narrow sense. This is the transcendental perspective. This perspective upholds the view that happiness and well-being are subjective and do not depend on any objective condition of reality. Western researchers have also shown concern



for subjective well-being Kasser and Ryan (1996) have noted that the more people strike for extrinsic goals like money, more would be their problems and less robust their well-being. Kammann (1983) suggested that ‘objective life circumstances have a negligible role to play in a theory of happiness.’ (cited in Myers, 2000). The transcendental view analyzes the nature and conditions of happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment. Indian thinkers have provided an elaborative understanding of temperament and personality in the feeling of well-being and the ideal state of well-being. Ananda, is the ideal uphold in our tradition and is the ultimate goal in achieving well being (Kiran Kumar, 2003, 2004).

The collectivist perspective is socially oriented and is governed by the concept of *dharma*. Dharma is used with different shades of meaning, in a context specific way, in Indian traditions. Dharma was conceptualized as a dynamic concept and the content of dharma often changed with changing contexts of time, place and social environment (Dandekar, 1963). Broadly, the concept of dharma stands for the fundamental order in social affairs and in moral life and, is a principle which maintains the stability of society (Kuppuswamy, 1977). The collectivist perspective views enormous individual differences in the needs and aspirations of people. While some are purely hedonistic in their approach, few are spiritual, a vast majority falls in between. On this basis, Indian thinkers established a social framework and ground rules for good life, which ensure the well-being of all in a society by giving equal importance to *dharma*, *artha* and *kama* (Kiran Kumar, 2004).

The three perspectives are not only rooted in a worldview, they also involve a particular view of human nature, as understood by our Indian sages and seers. From animal to human and to divine, an evolutionary framework exists which throws light on the conception of well-being and good life that depends upon the evolutionary status of the individual. The hedonic perspective views man as another animal, the collectivist perspective views man as a social being, interdependent on others. The transcendent perspective holds that, man is essentially spiritual in nature and has divine potentialities to be actualized. Happiness and well-being are integrally related to how one views the nature of man and what perspective is valued. Thus, depending on one’s evolutionary status, people may consider pursuit of desires (*Kama*), pursuit of wealth (*artha*), pursuit of value (*dharma*) and pursuit of liberation (*moksha*) as the keynote of their lives. Indian thinkers view, pursuit of desires and wealth to the exclusion of pursuit of value and of liberation as a sign of a lower level of evolution (Kiran Kumar, 2003).



The different concepts of happiness and well-being are related to different sheaths (*Koshas*) or self-sense. *Annamaya Kosha-tripti* (satisfaction of sensual pleasures) *Pranamaya* and *Manomaya Kosha-harsha* (excitement associated with some events); *Ullaasa* (feeling of pleasantness associated with the experience of nature), *Santosha* (being pleased by some interpersonal interaction); *Vijnaanamaya kosha-ananda* (moments of bliss) *Anandamaya kosha- anandamaya* (pervaded by bliss) (Kiran Kumar, 2003). Modern psychology considers each sheath as a dimension of awareness. Thus human evolution is conceived in terms of a progressive realisation of these different sheaths of awareness. Hence, Indian thinkers urged people to transcend the limitation of the *annamaya*, *pranamaya* and *manomaya koshas* and the associated limited self-definitions and move to an intrinsically positive state and experience *ananda* and *shanti* (Kiran Kumar, 2003)

According to Taittiriya Upanishad, people tend to think that happiness, joy, suffering, well-being etc are due to the presence or absence of certain objects to which they attach causal significance. On the other hand, they are those experiential moments when there is unobstructed manifestation of *ananda*, which is our original nature. We experience variation of happiness and unhappiness depending on whether our mental activities obstructed the manifestation of bliss or not. So, the occurrence of happiness in association with external circumstances or objects or mental activities is coincidental not causal. Thus, *ananda* actually refers to a state of consciousness, characterized by positive feeling not dependent on any type of extra reality. Experience of *ananda*, bliss, is a qualitatively different sense of positive state and well-being from the one associated with other sheaths or koshas.

Well-being is one of the cherished goals of humanity. Bhagavad Geeta asks human-beings to remain always in *sattva*, that is to be predominated by the principle of illumination and transparency so that they can always be in touch with the bliss within. The Indian tradition advocates four types of aids for the purification of mind – *tapas*, *jnana*, *brahmacharya* and *shraddha*. It means doing penance, cultivating intuitive knowledge, restraining and turning the senses inward, dedication and devotion to realize the Self. All these enhance the principle of illumination, *sattva*, in a person and thus promote well-being. Well-being and good life can be achieved in term of detachment from bodily need fulfillment as well as by developing a mental state of letting go and giving up. Contentment is more important than seeking pleasure. Ideal contentment is feel contented within one's self, with the realization of



transcendent self. Yoga is a powerful way of self realization. Hence, the primary purpose of human existence seems to be continuous self refinement, the culmination of which is the ability to attain *moksha* or liberation. Liberation lies in transcending all kinds of limitations, that is, being free of all attachments, identifications and psychological conditioning to all external realities as well as one's own mind-body states.

Conclusions

Health is a dynamic state of complete well-being. Well-being is a state of optimal psychological functioning which defines good life. Good life is related to the feeling of happiness and life satisfaction. Well-being is subjective in nature and is a positive mental state. It is found that material security and luxury alone are not sufficient for experiencing well-being. Viewing well-being in terms of pleasure or happiness is one perspective only. The other perspective put an emphasis on actualization of human potential or one's true nature. The former presents the hedonic view while the latter reflects eudaimonic view. The relationship of personal well-being and collective well-being needs to be investigated. Social well-being is a positive state associated with optimal functioning within one's society. Well-being may be related positively to emotions, physical health, self-esteem, social class, wealth etc. Such relationships are also being investigated. In Indian thought, there are two kinds of pleasure described – *Preyas* (mere pleasure) and *Shreyas* (pleasure that is good or desirable) In this context happiness is being studied. Seligman (2002) talked about 'Authentic Happiness' and personal traits associated with various virtues. Well-being and happiness is a widely researched area today and Indian traditional views are very helpful in learning and understanding about these concepts and making them a way of life. Thus, life can be lived peacefully, successfully and with contentment which is the true nature of human being.

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