

Exploring the Significance of Vedānta Darśana in Cultivating Happiness and Well-Being in Human Life

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of Vedānta Darśana and its teachings in cultivating happiness and enhancing well-being. Eastern and Western philosophies approach the pursuit of happiness differently, a universally recognized goal. While Western perspectives, influenced by individualistic and capitalist values, dominate the current understanding of happiness, Eastern traditions such as Vedānta offer alternative insights. This paper critically analyzes the prevailing Western perspectives on happiness, focusing on psychological and economic viewpoints and discussing the limitations of these approaches. The study utilizes a review-based methodology, drawing from the scholarly literature on Vedānta and happiness. It examines its core teachings and concepts as presented in the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, and Brahma Sūtras. The paper also delves into the theoretical and philosophical frameworks of happiness and well-being, encompassing psychological perspectives, economic viewpoints, and the capability approach. Exploring the concepts of *Ānanda* (ultimate happiness) and *Sukha* (general happiness), the paper argues that these two constructs provide a deeper understanding and a sense of enlightenment, emphasizing the concept of 'Brahman' as the ultimate truth. While the study may not provide an exact framework for an alternative perspective on Vedānta's teachings, it does contribute to a foundational framework that explores the potential impact of Vedānta in fostering purpose, well-being, and inner transformation.

Keywords: Vedānta, philosophy, happiness, well-being, human life, society

Introduction

Happiness has an aesthetic connotation. Eastern and Western theological traditions offer divergent worldviews on the concept of happiness, rooted in their distinct philosophical and cultural heritages. The Creator of Nature appears to have wanted happiness for humans and all other rational beings (Haakonssen, 2002), yet the interpretations regarding this have been diverse and contested (Geuss, 2014). Therefore, happiness and well-being are timeless pursuits of human beings. The dominant perspective on happiness comes from the Euro-American cultural background (Lu, 2001), yet Eastern traditions like India and China offer valuable insights (Banavathy & Choudry, 2014). It's important to note that Western philosophies heavily influence current interpretations of happiness, their weight felt in every aspect of our lives, partly due to the expansion of capitalism, which emphasizes an individualistic approach (Misra et al., 2024). The idea of pursuing happiness has played a significant role in shaping the formation of modern states and market economies. Critics maintain that many Western countries, such as the United States and Western European nations, have individualistic cultural values that prioritize personal achievement, autonomy, and self-fulfillment (Haybron, 2013). The principle is exemplified in the United States Declaration of Independence, where it is stated

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that all individuals are created equal and have inherent rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America, 1776).

Additionally, consumerism and neoliberalism drive modern economic theory, which emphasizes material development as a key determinant of human well-being, as measured by indicators like economic growth and income (Sapkota, 2022). However, the results of conventional measurements like economic growth, gross domestic product (GDP), gross national income (GNI), and subjective assessments of happiness and well-being reveal a growing recognition of the need for alternative measures to assess and understand happiness and well-being. This need is not just a theoretical consideration but an urgent call to action. Happiness is a subjective and multifaceted experience that varies among individuals. Individual perspectives shape it, and experiences and personal thoughts construct it (Gilbert, 2009).

The capitalistic and materialistic view has heavily influenced individuals' personal thoughts and sense of well-being. Therefore, Vedānta in the modern world can serve as an alternative perspective on understanding happiness and well-being as it addresses profound inquiries regarding human existence, including the origin of life, the purpose of creation, the connection between mind and body, the nature of happiness and sorrow, and the quest for eternal liberation from suffering (Das, 2021; Suar et al., 2019). Therefore, the paper critically analyzes the current perspectives and explores the potential benefits and practical implications of adopting a Vedāntic perspective on happiness, including its potential for fostering a sense of purpose, well-being, and inner transformation. Analyzing these philosophical frameworks, the common point about happiness and well-being is inner fulfillment and the absence of suffering.

Method and Material

The objective of the paper is to critically analyze the current perspectives on happiness and well-being primarily influenced by Western philosophies and economic theories and explore the potential benefits and practical implications of adopting a Vedāntic perspective on happiness. The paper aims to examine the impact of Vedānta Darśana on happiness and well-being and understand its core teachings and fundamental concepts. The study utilizes a review-based approach. It draws upon publications, scholarly literature, and theoretical aspects of Vedānta and happiness to analyze and synthesize philosophical frameworks, psychological and economic perspectives on happiness and well-being, and economic viewpoints. It also includes studying the fundamental teachings of Vedānta as presented in the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad-Gītā, and the Brahma Sūtras.

Reviewing literature can be academic work, undertaken systematically, or as a regular process for creating a specified systematic reviewing approach for nominative research theme – “Exploring the Significance of Vedānta Darśana in Cultivating Happiness and Well-being”. Firstly, a systematic search involving the utilization of Google Scholar, JSTOR and PubMed and using other keywords like Vedānta Darśana, happiness, well-being, and spiritual philosophy. Print versions of the classical texts were consulted and reviewed at the central library of Tribhuvan University. While reviewing both print and online materials, priority was given exclusively to scientific and authentic sources, such as peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books, with a particular focus on philosophical and empirical studies addressing Vedānta philosophy and its application to human life and happiness. The collected data were then systematically analyzed to identify emergent themes and subthemes, including the philosophical framework, psychological and economic perspectives, interpretations of Vedānta

philosophy, teachings of the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā on happiness, and the contemporary implications of Vedānta. Following the PRISMA Statement for systematic reviews, the review process was conducted in a fully blind and systematic manner to ensure replicability. Ultimately, 60 studies out of a total of 93 were screened and endorsed for final review and synthesis.

Debates and Discussion

Philosophical Framework of Happiness and Well-being

Happiness and well-being have gained increasing interest (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) in fields like psychology, philosophy, policymaking, anthropology, economics, and public health. Scholars and experts in these disciplines have contributed to understanding happiness and its implications. Scholars such as Haybron (2013) in philosophy and Thin (2012), as well as Mathews and Izquierdo (2009) in anthropology, have contributed to our understanding of happiness. Arcidiacono and Di Martino (2016) concluded that happiness is a subjective and nuanced experience encompassing emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and a meaningful existence. Happiness is a dynamic and multifaceted concept (Haidt, 2006); therefore, a philosophical perspective can only settle the question of what happiness is and is not (Haybron, 2013). The philosophical framework of happiness and well-being encompasses various schools of thought and perspectives: hedonism, eudaimonia, utilitarianism, existentialism, and stoicism. According to Brickman (1971), happiness is a subjective experience that involves positive emotions, pleasure. Meanwhile, some others also conceive happiness as the absence of negative emotions or pain (Diener & Sim, 2024; Kahneman et al., 1999).

Adam Smith was a key figure in happiness and well-being. His works go beyond a particular philosophical framework and focus more on human nature, yet lean towards Stoicism. In his popular publication, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1776)*, Adam Smith further explains happiness, tranquillity, and enjoyment. It is, indeed, here that Aristotle provides insight into the thesis that happiness is the middle ground between pleasure and wickedness. However, it is undeniable that without being at ease, we cannot experience pleasure. Despite the Greeks' lack of a term to distinguish between pleasure and amusement, they understood that a man can only amuse himself if he is at ease. However, Smith notes that the human mind eventually calms down, regardless of the environment. At the alternation of rise and fall, the mind fixes itself in this condition and then gradually recovers it again (Haakonssen, 2002; Kousi et al., 2023). The paper will focus on the Hedonism philosophical framework, specifically from a psychological and highly influential economic perspective, and present a critical analysis from the perspective of Vedānta teachings.

Psychological and Economic Perspectives

The psychological perspective presents subjective well-being (SWB) as a means of defining and measuring happiness and well-being. The SWB refers to the scientific understanding of happiness and life satisfaction, reflecting an individual's perception of their life going well. Researchers commonly employ self-report surveys to assess an individual's happiness (Diener, 2023). The challenged subjective notion highlights that one may find pleasure in life but also encounter stress and negative emotions. Additionally, some individuals may engage in enjoyable activities yet feel dissatisfied and perceive a lack of fulfilment in their lives, where different types of internal and external factors can impact individual happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2013). Subjective well-being considers individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions of well-being and happiness. We measure it by asking individuals about their thoughts, feelings,

and evaluations of various aspects, such as life satisfaction, dignity, identity, emotions (hedonic well-being), and meanings (eudaimonic well-being). This approach recognizes the importance of subjective and psychological factors in understanding well-being beyond materialistic considerations (Sapkota, 2022).

The economic perspective of well-being is emerging in the current world, and it has a well-established structure to suggest (Bruni, 2006; Brickman, 1971; Easterlin, 1995; Nikolova & Graham, 2021) while being criticized for inclining towards external achievements and short-term material gains. Along with Adam Smith's early recognition of the link between happiness and principles such as justice, beneficence, and prudence, well-being has expanded beyond GDP-based measures (Arcidiacono & Di Martino, 2016). Additionally, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach provides a valuable contribution to understanding happiness and well-being from an alternative standpoint.

In this regard, Sen emphasizes that life consists of a range of functioning states, encompassing both being and doing. These states can vary from basic necessities like food and health to more complex aspects like happiness and social integration within the community (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). Sen posits that justice entails removing various freedoms and capabilities that impede individuals from leading fulfilling lives. Access to necessities like food and shelter is crucial for enabling individuals to pursue happiness and well-being (Frediani, 2010; Sen, 2009). This perspective has given rise to the Human Development Index (HDI), which aims to assess the level of human development and the subsequent status of a country or society based on three key dimensions: health, education, and living standards. Thus, HDI has become a popular index of development frameworks for promoting ethical governance practices that enhance capabilities and human freedom (Arcidiacono & Di Martino, 2016). However, the ontology of human happiness is less theorized with the premise of 'human development', nor is the discourse of sustainable development aligned.

It is worth noting that the capabilities approach, although less individualistic than other perspectives, has not escaped criticism for its person-centred evaluative nature (Gore, 1997). While the approach emphasizes capabilities and the freedom to choose, it still depends on individual judgments regarding personal achievement and choices (Robeyns, 2005 and 2021). For example, individual judgments are often subjective. In "*Comparison Income*," Clark and Oswald (1996) examine how income relative to others, as well as absolute income, affects well-being. Paul (2022) further argues that the focus on income from an economic perspective limits the role of external achievement and social comparisons.

Understanding the Concept of Vedas and Vedānta Darśana

The Vedas are ancient sacred scriptures (sastras) in Hinduism (Siddheswarananda, 2000), considered the foundational texts of knowledge and revelation (Dalal, 2014; Das, 2021). The Vedas consist of hymns, rituals, prayers, and philosophical teachings. We divide the Vedas into four main sections: Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. These texts contain vast knowledge on various subjects, including rituals, ceremonies, cosmology, metaphysics, and ethics (Das, 2021). We can divide the Veda into two sections: Karma Kanda (Purva Mīmāṃsā) and Jnana Kanda (Uttara Mīmāṃsā). Jaimini, a prominent philosopher, authored Purva Mīmāṃsā around 500 B.C. to 200 B.C., which focuses on interpreting Vedic rituals and duties. Uttara Mīmāṃsā, also known as Vedānta, was developed by Vyasa, another significant figure, and explores more profound philosophical concepts and knowledge beyond rituals and offers a more profound understanding of the nature of reality, self-realization, and the ultimate truth (Aurobindo, 2005; Banerji, 2022). The concept of "Dharma" plays a significant role in pursuing

happiness in the Vedas. Dharma refers to the righteous and ethical way of life, fulfilling one's duties and responsibilities just and morally. Following Dharma is believed to bring inner contentment, peace, and happiness.

On the other hand, Vedānta is a philosophical system that arises from the Upaniṣads. 'Vedānta' is derived from two Sanskrit words, 'Veda' knowledge and 'anta' end, indicating the end or culmination (anta) of the Vedas. Therefore, Vedānta is the conclusion of the Vedas, which are concisely narrated into different Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads are a collection of philosophical texts that explore the deeper metaphysical and spiritual aspects of the Vedas, and they are considered the most profound and esoteric part of the Vedic literature (Das, 2021; Prabhavananda & Campbell, 2002). Indeed, Vedānta is the essence and the ultimate goal or conceiving message of the Vedas. This philosophy encompasses a range of philosophical ideas that either stem from or reinterpret the teachings of the Upaniṣads, centering on themes such as devotion, knowledge, and liberation, with differing degrees of emphasis. It focuses on the interpretation and philosophical teachings found in the Upaniṣads, which discuss concepts such as the nature of the self (*Atman*), the ultimate reality (*Brahman*), the relationship between the individual and the divine, and the path to liberation (*Mokṣa*) (Radhakrishnan, 1992; Banavathy & Choudry, 2014). Ultimately, Vedānta encapsulates the core teachings and ultimate purpose of the Vedas.

Three principal texts, known as the Prasthanatrayi, primarily contain the fundamental teachings of Vedānta Darśana. These texts include the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad-Gītā, and the Brahma Sūtras (Radhakrishnan, 1992). These sacred texts provide profound insights into happiness and guide attaining true well-being. To comprehend the concept of happiness and well-being in Vedānta, it is crucial to grasp the fundamental distinction between *Ānanda* and *Sukha*. "*Sukha*" denotes happiness and pleasantness. It represents comfort, prosperity, and pleasure. People commonly associate it in everyday language with "*Duḥkha*" (pain, sorrow or suffering). The "*Ānanda*" refers to ultimate happiness or bliss (Radhakrishnan, 1996) in Vedantic literature. It signifies joy, enjoyment, and pure happiness. It is associated with the essential nature of the self and transcends pleasure and pain. While "*Ananda*" represents the highest form of happiness beyond dualities, "*sukha*" is a more general term encompassing various levels of happiness and comfort (Banavathy & Choudry, 2014). According to the Upaniṣads, there is a non-dual ruler of the actionless many; the rules makes the one seed manifold. Henceforth, eternal happiness belongs to the wise, who perceive Him (the ruler) within themselves and not to others (i.e. subjects) (Nikhilananda, 2007).

The essence of the quote is that within the realm of actionlessness, there exists a single, non-dual ruler who manifests the multiplicity of creation from a single seed. Those wise individuals who recognize this Ruler within themselves experience eternal happiness, whereas those unaware of this truth do not experience it (Chakrabarti, 2016). The theory of non-dualism strongly asserts that within every individual, there exists an inherent essence of existence (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and pure, undiluted happiness (*Ānanda*). Non-dualism posits that reality fundamentally lacks division into distinct entities or dualities, like subject and object, self and other, or mind and body. Instead, non-dualism suggests that an underlying oneness or interconnectedness transcends these apparent distinctions, fostering a sense of harmony and unity (Radhakrishnan, 1996; Veeraiah, 2015). This interconnectedness is a key aspect of non-dualism that we must explore.

Table 1: Schools of Vedānta and their worldview of happiness

	Major proponents	Interpretation of happiness
Bhedābheda Vedānta	Bhāskara, Yāmuna	Happiness is partial unity with Brahman while maintaining individual distinction.
Dvaitādvaita (Svabhāvika Bhedābheda)	Nimbārka, Srinivāsācārya	True happiness lies in the soul's simultaneous difference and non-difference with Brahman.
Advaita Vedānta	Gauḍapāda, Śāṅkarācārya	Bliss is realized through non-dual knowledge: the ātman (self) is identical to Brahman.
Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta	Nāthamuni, Yāmuna, Rāmānuja	Happiness is loving union with a personal Brahman (Vishnu) while maintaining individuality.
Akshar-Purushottam Darshan	Swaminarayan	Eternal happiness is achieved through realization as Aksharbrahman and devotion to Purushottam.
Tattvavāda (Dvaita Vedānta)	Madhvācārya, Jayatīrtha, Vyāsatīrtha	Bliss is attained by eternal devotional service to a Supreme Being completely distinct from the soul.
Śuddhādvaita Vedānta	Vallabhācārya	True happiness is pure devotion to <i>Kṛṣṇa</i> , recognizing the soul's inherent divinity.
Achintya Bhedābheda Vedānta	Chaitanya Mahāprabhu	Happiness emerges from devotional love, acknowledging the soul's inconceivable oneness and difference with <i>Kṛṣṇa</i> .

Vedānta Darśana cannot be generalized into a single framework of analysis. Therefore, the teachings of Vedānta about happiness vary. They have been developed into several distinct sub-schools based on differing interpretations of the relationship between the individual self (Ātman) and the ultimate reality (Brahman). The three principal schools are Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta (qualified non-dualism), and Dvaita Vedānta (dualism). However, there are other versions of such interpretations as well. Table 1 summarizes key aspects of Vedānta schools and their philosophy of happiness along with their key thinkers. Each school offers a unique metaphysical and epistemological framework for understanding liberation (mokṣa) and getting the ultimate pleasure and happiness (Jafarzadeh & Amin Kalibar, 2024).

Teachings of Happiness in the Upaniṣads

The prefixes 'upa' (near or approaching) and 'ni' (certainty or steadfastness) combine with the root 'sad' (to destroy, sit down, go to, or decay) to derive the term 'Upaniṣad'. Thus, students who sit at the feet of their teachers attain knowledge that destroys the seeds of worldly existence (Das, 2021; Prabhavananda & Campbell, 2002; Veeraiah, 2015). The Upaniṣads' core teaching undeniably emphasizes absolutism, referring to the Absolute as Brahman. While the total

number of Upaniṣads may vary depending upon different classifications, traditionally, there are considered to be 108 Upaniṣads that cover a wide range of topics, including metaphysics, cosmology, ethics, meditation, and self-realization. Ten principal Upaniṣads are widely studied and considered the most important among the 108 Upaniṣads. The comprehensive nature of the Upaniṣads challenges us to engage with a wide range of topics, fostering intellectual growth and understanding.

The Upaniṣads primarily convey the message of a single divine source, Brahman, serving as the fundamental essence of the diverse universe. Almost all Upaniṣads agree that Brahman (i.e. *Brahma-tattva*) is the ultimate, unchanging truth and that the individual who understands Brahman unites with Brahman (Abhedananda, 2011; Radhakrishnan, 1996). The significant statements in the Upaniṣads are: "*mahāvākyas*" or Great Sayings, such as "*Prajñānam Brahma*"² (i.e. Consciousness as Brahman), "*Ayam Atma Brahma*"³ (i.e. This Self as Brahman), "*Tat Tvam Asi*"⁴ (i.e. You as That), and "*Aham Brahmasmi*"⁵ (i.e. I as Brahman). These expressions exemplify the highest ideals of Vedānta.

In Indian philosophical tradition, the '*Brahma-Sūtra*' is popularly known as the Vedānta Sūtra (Sivananda). It is a part of *Uttara Mīmāṃsā*. The *Sūtra* is a dialectical text which presents Vedānta Darśana systematically and logically. It serves as a comprehensive guide for scholars of the Vedānta systems, establishing a cohesive understanding of the Upaniṣads by demonstrating that their central theme is Brahman. The *Sūtras* are short and intriguing statements that offer commentators the freedom to analyze and interpret them extensively. They condense complex philosophical ideas, aiding scholars in exploring various aspects of thought.

The Upaniṣads offer profound and extensive reflections on the themes of happiness and well-being, underscoring their central importance in the philosophical inquiry into human existence. The concept of *Ānanda* is commonly translated as bliss or ultimate happiness. It appears frequently and is elaborated upon in various contexts. Notably, the second chapter of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, titled *Brahmānandavallī*, is dedicated to the exposition of *Ānanda* as the essential nature of *Brahman*. This text posits that at the innermost core of human existence resides *Ānanda*, inseparably united with *Sat* (Existence) and *Cit* (Consciousness), forming the ultimate reality (Deutsch, 1980).

Within this framework, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* introduces a threefold classification of experiential happiness through the concepts of *priya*, *moda*, and *pramoda* (2.5-2.8). Symbolically, *priya* is described as the 'head', *moda* and *pramoda* as the left and right 'wings', *ānanda* as the 'soul', and *brahman* as the 'foundation' or 'base'. In his commentary on this section, Śāṅkarācārya offers critical insights into the gradations of happiness: *priya* is identified with the initial joy experienced upon the mere perception of a desired object; *moda* refers to the deeper satisfaction upon acquiring the object; and *pramoda* denotes the highest delight experienced through the enjoyment and utilization of the object (Banavathy & Choudry, 2014;

² प्रज्ञानम् ब्रह्म [Mantra of Aitareya Upaniṣad (R̥gveda) which refers that Consciousness itself is Brahman and remains as the ultimate reality]

³ अयम् आत्मा ब्रह्म [Mantra of Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad (Atharvaveda) indicating that This Self (Ātman) is identical with Brahman remaining an equivalent embeddedness]

⁴ तत् त्वम् असि [Mantra of Chāndogya Upaniṣad (Sāmaveda) which means That (Brahman) you are — you are not separate from the ultimate reality]

⁵ अहम् ब्रह्म अस्मि [Mantra of Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (Yajurveda) referring to 'I am Brahman — the individual self and the ultimate are one to be united and non-dual']

Radhakrishnan, 1953). To provide a comprehensive reference, Table 2 summarizes the major contents and philosophical implications of various Upaniṣads.

Table 2: Major Upaniṣads and their key contents regarding happiness

	Ontological position on happiness	Philosophical implications
Brhadāranyaka (Śukla Yajurveda)	Concept of the Self (Ātman), immortality, reality (Brahman), neti-neti (not this, not that).	Foundational text for Advaita Vedānta; concepts of ātman.
Chāndogya (Sāmaveda)	Doctrine of Brahman, "Tat Tvam Asi" (Thou art That), meditations on Om, ethics, and rebirth.	Highlights identity of Self and Brahman; basis for monism.
Taittirīya (Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda)	The five sheaths (pañca-kośa), nature of bliss (Ānanda), the path to Brahman.	Introduces layered view of self; focuses on existential joy.
Aitareya (R̥gveda)	Origin of the universe, creation of beings, realization of the Self.	Emphasizes mind/consciousness as primary in creation.
Kaṭha (Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda)	Dialogue between Naciketā and Yama (Lord of Death); immortality of the soul (Ātman).	Central to discussions on death and immortality.
Īśa (Śukla Yajurveda)	Concept of unity of the Self and world; renunciation and action.	Blends Karma and Jñāna paths; concise metaphysical vision.
Muṇḍaka (Atharvaveda)	Two types of knowledge: higher (parā vidyā) and lower (aparā vidyā); realization of Brahman.	Stresses higher spiritual knowledge (parā vidyā).
Praśna (Atharvaveda)	Six philosophical questions about creation, senses, prāṇa (life force), and meditation.	Clarifies cosmology and paths to Brahman through inquiry.
Māṇḍūkya (Atharvaveda)	Analysis of Om (AUM) and the four states of consciousness (waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and turiya).	Fundamental to Advaita Vedānta; foundation of Gaudapāda's Karika.
Śvetāśvatara (Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda)	Theistic interpretation of Brahman, meditation, and concept of personal God (Īśvara).	Moves towards qualified monism (Theistic Vedānta).
Kena (Sāmaveda)	Inquiry into the source of mind, senses, and consciousness; knowledge of Brahman beyond intellect.	Advocates intuitive realization beyond intellect.

Teachings of the Bhagavad-Gītā

The Bhagavad-Gītā, known as the Lord's song and Gitopanishad, is a significant spiritual text comprising 18 chapters and 700 verses (Chakraborty, 2022; Das, 2021). It provides a significant source for addressing various questions about life, particularly offering valuable

insights into the categorization of happiness, which appears highly pragmatic for both householders (gr̥hasthas) and renunciants (sannyāsis). In the Gītā, happiness is defined as ‘something which the individual rejoices having attained with effort and which also marks the absence of unhappiness’ (Bhagavad Gītā, 18.36). It emphasizes that true happiness arises through conscious effort based on Dharma and is characterized by the complete absence of suffering or dukha. This conception suggests that happiness transcends material conditions and states of unhappiness, positioning it instead as a form of subjective ontology rooted in the deeper realization of the Self.

In the Bhagavad Gītā, Krishna symbolically compares the Vedas to a cow, the Upanishads to the milk, and the Gītā to the clarified butter (ghee), suggesting that the Gītā is the purest and most essential extract of Vedic wisdom (*Gītā Dhyānam*, verse 4)⁶. The Gītā primarily focuses on imparting non-duality teachings within the Vedānta darśana. Hindu mythology reveres Lord Kṛṣṇa as one of the ten incarnations, and he imparts these teachings to his devotee and disciple, Arjuna. The discourse occurs on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, as depicted in the epic Mahabharata, a revered text among Hindus (Veeraiah, 2015). The Bhagavad-Gītā teaches that the *Atman* (refers to the true self), the core of consciousness, remains constant, eternal, and infinite, and identifying the self with *Brahman* is the ultimate reality. In contrast, the physical body is in a state of constant change and is susceptible to decay (Omana, 2025; Rama, 2004).

Happiness and Well-Being in Vedānta

The science of Vedic Darśana, which focuses on cultivating happiness and well-being, has been an emerging field of study for a long time. Eastern and Western authors such as Svāmī Vivekananda, Svāmī Abhedananda, Svāmī Sivananda, Christopher Key Chapple, and Jeffrey D. Long have contributed to this discussion. However, due to the lack of a concrete framework for classifying and measuring different levels of happiness, this field of study has been largely neglected. In the Vedānta view, happiness is an inherent aspect of our true nature. Our true self, known as 'Atman', is said to be fundamentally blissful and eternally connected to the ultimate reality, 'Brahman'. 'Atman' refers to the individual soul, while 'Brahman' is the universal soul. In the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, a second chapter called *Brahmanandavalli* talks about happiness and its connection to our innermost being. It describes this innermost core of a person as characterized by '*Ānanda*'—a state of pure existential and transcendental bliss inseparable from '*Sat*' (existence) and '*Cit*' (consciousness).

Nevertheless, numerous layers or coverings surround this fundamental essence, hindering the direct experience of the original state. These coverings are classified into five sheaths: the physical sheath (*Annamaya kosha*), the vital sheath (*Praṇamaya kosha*), the mental sheath (*Manomaya kosha*), the intuitive sheath (*Vijñanamaya kosha*), and the blissful sheath (*Anandamaya kosha*). They can distract us from realizing our true nature and the happiness that comes with it (Jafarzadeh & Amin Kalibar, 2024; Salagame, 2003). The *Kathopanishad*, a dialogue between Yama and Nachiketa, sheds light on happiness. When Yama tries to tempt Nachiketa with riches and sensual pleasures, the young boy is persistent in pursuing knowledge about immortality. Instead, he acknowledges that wealth cannot bring him happiness (Banavathy & Choudry, 2014).

⁶ सर्वोपनिषदो गावो, दोग्धा गोपालनन्दनः। पार्थो वत्सः सुधीर्भोक्ता, दुग्धं गीतामृतं महत्॥ (Transliteration: *Sarvopaniṣado gāvo, dogdhā gopālanandanah | Pārtho vatsah sudhīrbhoktā, dugdham Gītāmṛtam mahat ||*)

In Vedantic philosophy, the conditions of sukha (happiness) and dukha (suffering) are deeply associated with the nature of our food. Food is not merely sustenance for the body but also a significant determinant of mental and spiritual well-being. The classification of food aligns with the three gunas (fundamental qualities of nature) that shape human consciousness and behaviour. In the Gita, happiness is classified into three types—Sātvika (Sattvic), Rājasika (Rajasic) and Tāmasika (Tamasic). These categories contribute to human happiness in distinct ways (Pramod, 2023; Singh, 2021). For cultivating true and lasting happiness, Vedānta emphasizes a Sattvic diet, which promotes physical health, mental clarity, and spiritual elevation. Through conscious dietary choices, individuals can actively align their food consumption with higher states of consciousness, thereby fostering a balanced and fulfilling life.

In terms of happiness, Sātvika is noble (but hard to attain), Rājasika is dynamic (but complicated) and Tāmasika is heavy (but lethargic). This has been well articulated in Bhagavad Gītā (18.39). The sensory interaction with objects generates *Rājasika sukha*, which is initially pleasurable but ultimately unsatisfying, leaving a sense of longing. The third category, Tāmasika *sukha*, refers to delusional happiness that remains illusory from the beginning to the end, stemming from factors such as sleep, laziness, ignorance, or illusion (Banavathy & Choudry, 2014). '*Sātvika Sukha*' has a positive correlation with self-awareness. It promotes the unity between individuals and their innermost selves, allowing them to attain a state of profound tranquillity and pure happiness (Vivekananda, 1990). This type of happiness requires spiritual effort (where bodily effort is not sufficient) but ultimately brings immense pleasure. It arises from intelligent and creative endeavours transcended by self-awareness.

The *Pañcadaśī* is a significant text in the Vedantic tradition. The text of this classic work is organized in fifteen chapters elaborating the teachings of Advaita Vedānta, derived from the Upaniṣads and further elaborated upon by various philosophical treatises. It is authored by Vidyanarāya Svāmī, a 14th-century Advaita philosopher and scholar, though some say it could also be attributed partly to his disciple Bharatitirtha. The *Pañcadaśī* extensively explores the concept of happiness (Radhakrishnan, 1996; Banavathy & Choudry, 2014). Thematically, *Pañcadaśī* covers three sections: Viveka, i.e. wisdom (Chapters 1–5); Dīpa, i.e. Illumination (Chapters 6–10), and Ānanda, i.e. Bliss (Chapters 11–15). The third theme, in particular, teaches us how to overcome the illusion (Māyā), develop higher consciousness, and attain the experience of liberation (mokṣa), leading to enduring bliss and happiness.

Vedānta's teachings classify happiness into three major categories. The first level is Viśayānanda, representing a lower degree of happiness, primarily attained through sensual pleasures and material well-being. The second level is Kāvyaṇanda, associated with aesthetic happiness, which arises through psychological perceptions, dedication, offerings, and the pursuit of *bhakti mārga* (the path of devotion). The third and highest level is Brahmānanda, characterized as existential, transcendental, and enduring. This form of absolute happiness can only be realized through the *jñāna mārga* (the path of knowledge), transcending the dichotomies of *sukha* (pleasure) and *dukkha* (pain), as well as material and non-material distinctions, thereby moving beyond all forms of categorization.

Understanding these categories of pleasure in human life helps individuals find a way out for eternal happiness and the importance of fostering a sense of purpose, well-being, and inner transformation. The ultimate peace and happiness are associated with the knowing of 'self' and ignoring of 'non-self', which exists in this material world. Ultimate sukha (happiness) and ananda (bliss) in Vedānta transcend sensory and ego-based experiences, culminating in brahmananda, the bliss of self-realization. While sukha at lower levels arises from external objects or mental states, true ananda is self-existent, unconditional, and eternal, rooted in the

realization of the atman (Self) as brahman (Absolute Reality). This ultimate state is beyond fleeting pleasures and suffering, leading to *Mokṣa* (liberation), where the individual merges with infinite, unchanging bliss. As the Bhagavad-Gītā 5.21 offers that true happiness is not in fleeting pleasures, but in the eternal Brahman⁷.

Indeed, the sacred texts of Vedānta provide limited explanations, many of which are symbolic, articulated through *shlokas*, *mantras*, and *tantras*. In this context, Banavathy and Choudry (2014) reconceptualize the Vedāntic philosophy of the five sheaths (*kośas*): *Annāmaya*, *Prāṇāmaya*, *Manomaya*, *Vijñānamaya*, and *Ānandāmaya*. These sheaths represent the layers of human existence, ranging from the gross physical to the subtle blissful level, each associated with a corresponding nature of happiness. Among them, *Annāmaya* and *Prāṇāmaya* correspond to hedonic happiness, while *Manomaya* and *Vijñānamaya* correspond to eudaimonic happiness. *Ānandāmaya*, however, transcends both hedonic and eudaimonic categories, embodying a self-based, blissful, eternal state identified with *Brahmānanda*.

In effect, all these forms of happiness constitute the foundation of our bodily, mental, and perceptual existence. The quest for happiness, according to Vedānta, is an internal process that transcends both coarse and subtle physiological forms. Vedānta distinguishes between two types of happiness: happiness derived from sensory objects and happiness rooted in the Self—the eternal consciousness. Just as understanding the functioning of individual organs and the entire body enables one to transcend the limitations of the physical form, knowledge of the *śarīras* (bodies) allows one to overcome the restrictions of the body and mind, thereby attaining the highest form of joy. This Vedāntic conceptualization of happiness—through *Viśayānanda*, *Kāvyānanda*, and *Brahmānanda*—thus contrasts with Euro-American notions of hedonic and eudaimonic happiness, illustrating a progression from transient, externally driven pleasure to enduring, self-based transcendental bliss.

Vedānta not only provides a framework for transcendental happiness but also offers practical lessons on self-realization and inner transformation. These lessons empower us to move away from fleeting pleasures that may not provide lasting happiness. According to Svāmī Vivekananda, individuals who can exercise self-control and restrain the impulsive tendencies of the mind towards sensory objects experience undisturbed peace throughout their lives. They achieve the ultimate goal of liberation by overcoming the relentless onslaught of animalistic desires, which act as formidable obstacles to spiritual progress (Radhakrishnan, 1992; Quinn, 2023). Conversely, individuals driven by sudden waves of passion, anger, pride, jealousy, and hatred consistently experience mental turbulence, restlessness, and unhappiness. It is irrational for individuals enslaved by their senses to expect happiness.

Peace and Rejoices for Happiness

True happiness, in a state of complete freedom, can only be attained through the practice of self-control. Therefore, individuals who aspire to enjoy boundless happiness and inner serenity should be inspired to pursue freedom by mastering self-control. The actual sickness lies in the insatiable desire for pleasure, as it often gives rise to negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, and hatred, thereby disrupting inner peace. Three primary methods can achieve self-control: mindfulness, concentration skills, and practising meditation (Madhukar et al., Vivekananda, 1990). The Western concept of ‘peace’ is something different from the Eastern concept of

⁷ सुखं त्विदानीमसुखं च नाश्वतं यत्। यत्तु नित्यं परं ब्रह्म तदेव परमं सुखम्॥ (Transliteration: *Sukham*

tvidānīmasukham ca nāśvatam yat / Yattu nityam param brahma tadeva paramam sukham //)

‘Śānti’, as evident in the Vedānta darśana. The Śānti is coupled with pleasure and happiness (Ānanda and Sukha). Different mantras for Śānti are offered in Upaniṣads, which ultimately aim to mitigate three types of dukkha or miseries: the physical or ādhibhautika; the divine or ādhidaivika, and the internal or ādhyātmika. For example, the following mantras offer a prayer for lasting peace and happiness to all the living and non-living beings in the world and beyond that:

(1) Om asato mā sadgamaya | tamaso mā jyotirgamaya |
mr̥tyormā amṛtaṁ gamaya || Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||⁸

[Found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.3.28.; Trans. Away from the illusion and bondage of māyā lead us to the real and good; away from the darkness and ignorance, lead us to the light of awakening; away from death and mortality, lead us to life and progression. Om peace, peace, peace!]

(2) Om saha nāvavatu | saha nau bhunaktu | saha vīryaṁ karavāvahai |
tejasvināvadhītastu mā vidviṣāvahai || Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||⁹

[Inserted in the Taittiriya and Katha Upanishads; Trans. Om! May the God bless that both of us together remain blessed; that both of us together become well fed; that both of us together act with strength and vigour. May our study be powerful and successful, and may we not argue with each other (or may we not have hatred for each other); Om! Let there be peace in me! It is high time that I began to have some control over the things happening around me, or in other words: There should be no more war in my surrounding and that peace in the forces that exist in it may be let there be.]

(3) Om sarveṣāṁ svastir bhavatu | sarveṣāṁ śāntir bhavatu |
sarveṣāṁ pūrṇaṁ bhavatu | sarveṣāṁ maṅgalaṁ bhavatu |
Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||¹⁰

[Offered in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*; Trans. Here let there be blessing; here let there be health; here let there be contentment; here let there be auspiciousness; Om Peace, Peace, Peace!]

(4) Om sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ | sarve santu nirāmayāḥ |
sarve bhadraṇi paśyantu | mā kaścīd duḥkhabhāg bhavet |
Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||¹¹

[No original source is claimed; Trans. May all the beings be happy, may none be touched by any kinds of illness. Let all have the blessings of good fortune, pleasure and may none of them undergo any suffering. Om peace, peace, peace.]

⁸ ॐ असतो मा सद्गमय । तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय । मृत्योर्माऽमृतं गमय ॥ ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

⁹ ॐ सह नावतु । सह नौ भुनक्तु । सह वीर्यं करवावहै । तेजस्विनावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै ॥ ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

¹⁰ ॐ सर्वेषां स्वस्तिर्भवतु । सर्वेषां शान्तिर्भवतु । सर्वेषां पूर्णंभवतु । सर्वेषां मङ्गलंभवतु ।

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

¹¹ ॐ सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः । सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु मा कश्चिद्दुःखभाग्भवेत् । ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

Nevertheless, Vedānta darśana, from this viewpoint, challenges the hedonistic philosophy of happiness, which also deals with the sensory pleasures—good and bad elements that give pleasure. Hedonism emphasizes the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain; it recognizes sensory pleasures, such as enjoying delicious food, engaging in pleasurable physical experiences, or indulging in sensory gratification, as important contributors to overall well-being and happiness. Within the framework of hedonistic philosophy, individuals can seek and experience happiness through sensory pleasures, yet the concept of well-being remains subjective. On the other hand, the eudaimonic approach takes a different stance. It argues that not all desires or outcomes that an individual may value would necessarily lead to well-being when attained, thereby providing a clear contrast to the hedonistic philosophy (Misra et al., 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Implications of Vedant Perspective of Happiness in the Contemporary World

The analysis of the relationship between the scientific concepts of well-being and the Vedānta philosophy of happiness and well-being provides a fruitful discussion of how two different outlooks confront the issues of contemporary living. The scientific approach, with its focus on the individual's positive, objectively measurable mental state, is limited in its understanding of well-being. It is heavily influenced by the enduring legacy of Anglo-Saxon civilization, which has shaped its understanding of psychological well-being as linked to social connections, professional accomplishments, and material belongings. While this framework is useful for quantitatively measuring happiness, it may quickly become anchored to external conditions of experience, lacking a stable foundation against the unpredictability and changeability of life in a world rapidly becoming more materialistic and consumer-oriented (Negribs, 2025).

On the other hand, Vedānta tends to view happiness more as a state of spiritual enlightenment. It insists that happiness can arise regardless of caste, wealth, age, or gender, making its view on happiness truly universal. According to Vedānta, happiness is the realization of self-identity with the universal spirit (Brahman), not the acquisition of things or the enjoyment of pleasures. Nor is it merely a managerial victory (Kapadia & Dagar, 2022). The notion of *Mokṣa*, or the state of liberation, means overcoming such attachments as objectification, regarding them as the primary source of worry and discomfort. In Vedic understanding, happiness cannot be the sentiment that results from conditions extrinsic to the personality but rather the condition in which man indeed 'is' conditioned by the ultimate reality. Upon realizing this, one achieves a state of *Sukha*, characterized by enduring peace and joy that remain untarnished by the ups and downs of material existence.

A greater understanding of the directions of the modern worried world and connecting the Western desire for external happiness with Vedāntic introspection might be helpful in the modern world. The mental health concern for individuals in Western societies, together with the stress of providing more social support, may benefit from Vedānta knowledge on how to master the heart and ego and make individuals support themselves. In a materialistic world that promises the kingdom of hedonistic pleasures for a short time, Vedānta proclaims the change of perspective and states that a man can be pleased only if he comes to understand that he is already happy. All the needs can be met by understanding this truth. Such a combination can help achieve sustainable happiness, where the external and internal conditions of well-being are closely intergrown.

Conclusion

When no more desires or attachments obstruct the sensation of *sukha*, or happiness, which is the feeling of oneness with the rest of the world, one achieves sustainable peace and pleasure. Within this context, there is no emphasis on accumulating and competition outside the self but

rather anger-reducing inner calm and empathy as the vehicle's goal. In other words, when individuals prioritize their interests over the overall happiness of society or a nation, it ultimately leads to sustainable peace. This perspective on happiness is more enigmatic; it is firmly rooted in the genuine science of *sukha*, which aims to provide significance, promote harmony, uphold social justice, and strive for enduring peace. Implementing such Vedānta principles in society can foster a way of life and culture that supports the comprehensive attainment of *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kāma*, and *Mokṣa*, thereby fostering cohesion and causality, essential for balanced and sustainable development.

Adopting a Vedānta perspective on happiness and well-being offers valuable insights beyond materialistic and individualistic views. Vedānta Darśana emphasizes inner realization, the absence of suffering, and the recognition of the interconnectedness of all beings. It promotes a sense of purpose, well-being, and inner transformation. By incorporating Vedānta principles into our understanding of happiness and well-being in development, we can strive for a more holistic and profound experience of genuinely fulfilling outcomes. The paper may not provide an adequate framework for addressing happiness and well-being in development. However, the discussions in the paper, which delve into the dominance of materialistic values, economic indicators, and their influence on people's perceptions of happiness, establish a foundation that inspires future research and contributions to the field.

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