

Back to Godhead Magazine

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In Search of Happiness

There are many ways to try to find it, but only one will give us the full enjoyment and complete freedom we're looking for.

by Suhotra Swami

If you were to go out onto the streets of a typical Western city and ask the first person you met, How do you think people can achieve the most happiness? chances are you'd get an answer something like this: "Since life is meant to be enjoyed, society should let us explore all kinds of pleasures unrestrictedly, provided we don't hurt others. This will produce the greatest amount of happiness for the most people." This is the ideology of liberalism, more flippantly expressed in the common slogan, "I do whatever turns me on, and let others do their own thing."

But unrestrained pursuit of pleasure doesn't necessarily bring happiness—in fact, it brings just the opposite. What's more, my neighbor's chosen pleasure may very well bring me pain, and vice versa, despite all pretensions of letting the other fellow "do his own thing." These days, the pursuit of happiness by people we may not even know is threatening our very lives: Do we really feel secure under our nuclear umbrella? Are we really thankful for toxic waste and acid rain? Do we really want cocaine addicts repairing the planes we fly in? Obviously, in an interdependent world of conflicting interests, letting everyone "do his own thing" will bring havoc, not happiness.

So if we want to find a practical prescription for universal happiness, we'll have to discard the Utopian cliches of liberalism and delve into an analysis of the nature of happiness itself.

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All conceptions of happiness, diverse as they may be, have two basic elements in common: *enjoyment* and *freedom*. We feel we cannot be happy unless we are enjoying in whatever way we think best. And even while we're enjoying, we feel we can't be completely happy unless we can enjoy undisturbed and freely expand our enjoyment without opposition.

So, keeping this common platform of enjoyment and freedom in mind, let's turn to the three kinds of happiness described in the Vedic literature and see how much enjoyment and freedom are afforded by each.

The first kind of happiness is material happiness. This is the happiness of sense gratification, enjoyed grossly through varieties of eating, sleeping, mating, and defending, and subtly through the pleasures of the mind: accumulation of knowledge, speculation, the arts, and so on.

Those striving for material happiness generally believe they can find the enjoyment they seek in sex and that they can purchase freedom with money. For example, men look upon beautiful women as icons of all that is enjoyable. (For this reason, the Sanskrit word for woman is *stri*, "that by which pleasure expands.") Even when marketing other enjoyable sense objects, advertisers almost invariably employ a pretty girl to convince us of the pleasures inherent in their products. And in the arts, sex is an ever-present theme, as shown by some remarks attributed to the late choreographer George Balanchine: "Ballet is woman. . . . Everything a man does he does for his ideal woman. You live only one life and you believe in something, and I believe in that."

Thus material enjoyment, gross or subtle, culminates in sex. And for enjoying sex to the fullest, money is indispensable. With money, even an ugly old man can enjoy beautiful young women. Money, therefore, certainly seems the ticket to freedom and well-being in this world.

But do money and sex bring us *real* freedom and *real* enjoyment—and thus real happiness? Can we really say Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe, for example, led happy lives? "Well," one might venture, "they enjoyed the adulation of millions of admirers and a level of sense pleasure unavailable to many. Yes, they were happy—at least for some time." And yet they died before their time, in misery. Their sense enjoyment didn't bring them happiness, nor did their wealth free them from anxiety, heartbreak, disease, advancing age, and death. How about Howard Hughes, Aristotle Onassis, the Shah of Iran? Unarguably, even great wealth can't insure happiness, and every materialist, wealthy or not, must suffer a plethora of ever-mounting problems that culminate in unavoidable death.

And because no one in the material world actually obtains lasting happiness, everyone becomes frustrated and is forced by unfulfilled lust to compete for whatever enjoyable things are to be had. Of course, recognizing the futility of a "war of everyone against everyone," people do make social alliances to further their mutual goals of sense gratification. The most common such alliance is marriage, which then extends outward to family, friends, and society.

But though materialistic alliances may seem solid, they are extremely fragile and never last for long. They are destroyed from without by conflict with other allied materialists (as when nations destroy one another in war), or from within by the conflicting ambitions of members of the same alliance (as when a husband cheats on his wife, or vice versa). Or an alliance may simply disintegrate from the corrosive depravity that accompanies success, as when entire societies collapse from moral decay (witness ancient Rome). Ultimately, then, since the root of material happiness is selfishness, lasting unity among materialists is an unrealizable dream.

Thus the liberal ideal of universal material happiness—the happiness achieved by a "free" society unified on a common platform of sense enjoyment—is nothing but a mirage. Ever shimmering on the horizon, this liberal Utopia is a tempting but illusory oasis in the Sahara of material lust—a chimera ever retreating before the ever-advancing caravan we call human history, the "progress" of which is marked by the bleached skeletons of previous generations of sense enjoyers. Unfortunately, most people are convinced that this Utopia is just over the next sand dune, and they are quite content to march along in lock-step, urged on toward a "better tomorrow" by the scientists, politicians, and Madison Avenue hucksters.

Out of many such determined materialists, however, a few may see the futility of a life of illusory happiness. They break away from the slavish pursuits of materialism and seek happiness in introspection, beyond the veil of physical sense perception. This, the second kind of happiness, is called the happiness of liberation, or (in Sanskrit) *brahmananda*.

Brahmananda begins when a person understands he is not the material body and mind but an eternal spirit soul. When a person knows that his real self is undying, he's relieved of the multitude of anxieties that plague the materialist because of his fear of death. But attaining full *brahmananda* requires much more than just theoretical appreciation of the soul. A person must detach himself from worldly affairs and situate his consciousness firmly on the platform of eternal existence (Brahman). Only then can he free his self, or soul, from the cycle of *samsara*, repeated birth and death.

One can achieve *brahmananda* by practicing either *jnana-yoga* (cultivation of knowledge of the Absolute Truth through exhaustive ontological analysis), or a form of *dhyana-yoga* (meditation on the Absolute Truth in His impersonal feature), or a combination of these two. These processes entail complete renunciation of sex, minimizing all other kinds of sense gratification almost to nil, and, in the case of *dhyana-yoga*, retiring from society to the wilderness for severe austerities.

Now, referring to our definition of complete happiness—full enjoyment and complete freedom—we can easily see the dilemma faced by those who pursue *brahmananda*: to attain freedom, they must renounce enjoyment. The freedom they seek is liberation from repeated birth and death. Mr. Balanchine notwithstanding, everyone (every spirit soul) is being shunted from life to life in higher and lower species by his *karma*. To stop this transmigration by *jnana-yoga* and *dhyana-yoga*, one must repress the senses and absorb the mind in one's eternal spiritual nature, which is pure, undifferentiated consciousness. If one can quit his body while in the awareness of the Absolute Truth, he attains *brahmananda*, the joy of complete freedom.

This joy is the joy of relief. As long as one remains totally absorbed in the awareness of his eternal nature, he doesn't have to take on a physical body and experience the miseries of material life. His joyous sense of release is like the relief a man feels when he at last sets down his heavy burden after a long, painful journey.

Unfortunately, because mere negation of one's material entanglement affords no positive enjoyment to the soul, it cannot bring lasting satisfaction. Therefore *brahmananda* is flawed. The desire for active enjoyment eventually wells up in the mind and diverts the attention once again to the realm of sense gratification.

Brahmananda, then, though certainly superior to material happiness, is for most people an impractical goal. Who, especially in the Western world, will undergo the arduous austerities required to transcend body consciousness? Certainly not those who practice the fashionable form of *yoga-like* gymnastics imported from India by a number of so-called *gurus*. The "*yogis*" of the big-city *asramas* are more interested in relaxation, weight reduction, and increased sexual power than in liberation from birth and death. This corruption of the principles of *yoga* only further demonstrates its inapplicability to today's society. Most people are simply unable to suppress their desires for pleasure long enough to attain *brahmananda*.

So far, the prospect of satisfying our inner urge for real happiness seems bleak. We are confronted with the choice of either undergoing the hopeless struggle for sense gratification or, if we can muster the great stamina required, dropping out of worldly life altogether and negating our embodied existence through meditation and introspection. Neither choice affords us the optimum of enjoyment and freedom we all yearn for.

But there is a third kind of happiness—devotional happiness. At first glance, the idea of "devotional happiness" seems to contradict our definition of ideal happiness (total enjoyment with complete freedom). "If I must devote my life to God, where is my freedom?" one may ask. "And if I must offer the fruits of my work to God, how will I enjoy?" We can answer these questions by understanding some facts about God and ourselves that are given in the Vedic literatures.

According to the *Vedanta-sutra*, a book of aphorisms that embody the essence of Vedic spiritual knowledge, God is by nature full of supreme happiness, eternally situated in transcendental bliss. From the *Visnu Purana*, another authoritative Vedic literature, we learn that we, the spirit souls, are like countless tiny sparks of consciousness emanating from God, the Supreme Spirit. Just as each spark in a fire possesses the qualities of heat and light, so each spirit soul possesses the ability to enjoy the transcendental bliss Sri Krsna Himself enjoys eternally. But the tiny spirit souls cannot enjoy to their full capacity apart from Krsna, just as a spark cannot glow apart from the fire. For a spark to glow at all, it must dance within the flames; if it should leave the fire, it rapidly loses its brilliance. Similarly, the individual spirit soul realizes his full ability to enjoy only in contact with Krsna, the supreme enjoyer. Thus the secret to happiness lies in reestablishing our relationship with the Lord.

Since enjoyment originates in Krsna's transcendental personality, and since Krsna Himself is far beyond any of the constraints of the material energy placed upon our enjoyment, one who associates with the Lord through devotional service automatically experiences the happiness of complete enjoyment and freedom. This is devotional happiness, or Krsna consciousness.

On the supreme value of devotional happiness over any other kind, Srila Prabhupada writes, "The standard of comfort and happiness conceived by a common man engaged in material labor is the lowest grade of happiness, for it is in relationship with the body. The highest standard of such bodily comfort is achieved by a fruitive worker who by pious activities reaches the plane of heaven. But the conception of comfortable life in heaven is insignificant in comparison to the happiness enjoyed in the impersonal Brahman, and this *brahmananda*, the spiritual bliss derived from impersonal Brahman, is like the water in the hoofprint of a calf compared with the ocean of love of God. When one develops pure love for the Lord, he derives an ocean of transcendental happiness from the association of the Personality of Godhead. To qualify oneself to reach this stage of life is the highest perfection."

Human life is our only chance for attaining the happiness of pure devotion to Krsna and then returning to His eternal spiritual abode after death. We shouldn't miss the chance. Unlike the struggle for sense pleasure, Krsna consciousness isn't self-defeating, and unlike the struggle for *brahmananda*, Krsna consciousness is easily performed and leads to eternal, positive enjoyment. Therefore those who try to find permanent material happiness in this fleeting life, as well as those who try to negate their personhood for *brahmananda*, are only cheating themselves of the great opportunity for attaining real happiness, devotional happiness, both in this life and the next. So if you're actually serious about finding lasting happiness, you should inquire deeper into the subject of devotional service to Krsna.