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The Concept of Happiness in Cārvāka and Bauddha Philosophical Tradition

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, human development is measured through various indices that evaluate quality of life, standard of living, environmental conditions, freedom, rights, and human well-being. These indicators aim to assess human progress by focusing on the fulfillment of human needs and capabilities. In recent decades, however, happiness has also emerged as an important dimension of development and human flourishing. Although it is universally accepted that every human being seeks happiness, the nature and conditions of true happiness remain deeply debated. In this context, the concept of happiness occupies a significant place in Indian philosophical discourse. This study examines the nature and meaning of happiness in these philosophical systems, particularly within the Cārvāka and Buddhist traditions. The Cārvāka school, known for its materialistic and empirical orientation, identifies happiness primarily with sensory pleasure and worldly enjoyment. It rejects metaphysical assumptions such as karma, rebirth, soul, and liberation. The Cārvākas advocate a pragmatic philosophy centered on direct perception and immediate experience. For them, human life is finite, and therefore the pursuit of pleasure (sukha) becomes the highest attainable goal.The Bauddha tradition offers a deeper understanding of happiness grounded in the realities of suffering (duḥkha), impermanence (anitya), and non-self (anātman). Buddhist tradition does not deny worldly pleasure but regards attachment to transient desires as the root cause of suffering. True happiness, according to Buddhist philosophy, emerges through moral discipline, mental purification, compassion, and mindfulness. Thus, this study highlights how the Cārvāka tradition advocates for a pragmatic, pleasure-centric life within a finite material existence. The Buddhist tradition highlights inner transformation to transcend suffering and attain nirvāṇa.

Keywords: Happiness, Sukha, Duḥkha, Cārvāka, Bauddha, Bhāratīya, Darśana, Nirvāṇa

Introduction

Happiness has been one of the most enduring pursuits of humankind. From the earliest stages of human civilization, the search for happiness has remained one of the most fundamental concerns of human life. Every individual, irrespective of culture, religion, or historical period, aspires to attain happiness and avoid suffering. Human actions, moral choices, social relationships, economic pursuits, and spiritual practices are often guided by the desire to achieve a meaningful and satisfying existence. Happiness, therefore, is not merely an emotional state but a philosophical, ethical, and existential concern that shapes human life and thought. Bhāratīya Darśana, with its rich and diverse intellectual traditions, offers profound reflections on the nature of happiness, its sources, and the proper way to attain it.

There are nine major schools of Indian philosophy. Among these, the Cārvāka and Bauddha traditions present two distinctive interpretations of happiness. While the Cārvāka school advocates a materialistic and worldly understanding of happiness rooted in sensory pleasure, Buddhism proposes a conception of happiness based on

the cessation of suffering and inner transformation. Both traditions emerged as nāstika (heterodox) systems that do not accept authority of Vedas.

The Cārvāka darśana, also known as Lokāyata, is considered the earliest materialistic school in Indian thought. It accepts direct perception (pratyakṣa) as the only valid source of knowledge and rejects inference and verbal-testimony. Moreover, it rejects the metaphysical conception of karma, rebirth, soul, heaven, and liberation. According to the Cārvākas, the material world alone is real. The consciousness arises from the combination of physical elements only.. Since human life is temporary and there is no existence beyond death, one should seek happiness in this present life through the enjoyment of worldly pleasures. They famously argues "Yāvajjīvet sukhaṃ jīvet" ("As long as one lives, one should live happily"). It reflects their emphasis on sensual enjoyment and pragmatic living. Happiness, for the Cārvākas, is closely associated with bodily comfort, pleasure, wealth, and freedom from pain.

The Bauddha philosophical tradition begins with the recognition of suffering (duḥkha) as the universal condition of existence. It was founded by Gautama Buddha in the sixth century BCE. Buddhist tradition develops its philosophy around the Four Noble Truths (Cattāri Ariyasaccāni), which form the foundation of Buddhist teachings. The First Noble Truth states that "There is suffering" (Duḥkha). Human life is filled with pain, dissatisfaction, old age, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, and unfulfilled desires. The Second Noble Truth is the truth of the origin of suffering (Samudaya). Buddha explains that suffering arises from tṛṣṇā (craving or desire), attachment, ignorance, and selfish longing. Human beings continuously seek pleasure, material possessions, power, and emotional attachment, which ultimately lead to dissatisfaction and sorrow. The Third Noble Truth is the truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha). Buddhist tradition teaches that suffering can be ended by eliminating craving and attachment. When desire, ignorance, and ego are removed, a person attains Nirvāṇa, the state of ultimate peace, freedom, and true happiness. The Fourth Noble Truth is the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering (Mārga). This path is known as the Noble Eightfold Path, consisting of Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Through ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, an individual can overcome suffering and attain lasting happiness and liberation. In other words, it teaches that worldly pleasures are impermanent and ultimately incapable of providing lasting happiness because they are dependent on desire and attachment. True happiness can only be attained through ethical conduct, mental discipline, wisdom, and liberation from craving. The Buddhist concepts of impermanence (anitya), non-self (anātman), and dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda) form the philosophical foundation for understanding happiness as an inner state of peace and freedom rather than external gratification.

The importance of studying happiness in these two traditions reveals the diversity of Indian philosophical thought. The Cārvāka school emphasizes material prosperity and sensory enjoyment. Buddhist tradition highlights self-control, compassion, mindfulness, and nirvana. One seeks happiness through engagement with the world, while the other seeks liberation from attachment to the world. Moreover, it also provides valuable insights into contemporary discussions on happiness, ethics, consumerism, mental health, and human well-being. Thus, this paper attempts to holistically examine the concept of happiness in the Cārvāka and Bauddha philosophical traditions by analyzing their metaphysical foundations, ethical principles, and practical approaches to human life. It aims to understand how these traditions view happiness and how their teachings continue to remain relevant in modern society.

The concept of Happiness in Cārvāka tradition

The Cārvāka school also known as Lokāyata represents an enduring materialist tradition within Indian intellectual tradition. The Buddhist text *Divyavadana* uses the term "Lokayata" in its literal sense, that is, referring to ideas prevalent among the common people.[1] The Carvaka concept of happiness is rooted in its unique epistemology. The school recognizes only direct perception (*pratyaksha*) as a valid source of knowledge. By rejecting inference (*anumana*) and testimony (*shabda*) regarding metaphysical claims, Carvaka philosophers argue that happiness must be verifiable through the senses. Pradeep P. Gokhale in his work '*Lokayata/ Carvaka: A Philosophical Inquiry*' writes that

Carvaka-darsana, also called Lokāyata and Bārhaspatya-darśana, is popularly recognized as a materialistic philosophical system of ancient India which upholds that(a) perception is the only means to knowledge; (b)consciousness is the product of matter; (c) pleasure rather, sensuous pleasure is the only goal of life, which could be achieved even by immoral means; and (d) there is no God, no other world, and no life after death.[2]

This materialist worldview is precisely captured in well-known aphorism :

yāvat jīvet sukhaṃ jīvet, ṛṇaṃ kṛtvā ghṛtaṃ pibet, bhasmībhūtasya dehasya punarāgamanam kutaḥ?

While life is yours, live joyously :

None can escape Death's searching eye ; When once this frame of ours they burn, How shall it return again ?[3]

This explains the Cārvāka conception of happiness rooted in sensory pleasure, material enjoyment, and the present moment. It advocates living fully within the limits of one's existence rather than sacrificing the present for uncertain metaphysics. Furthermore, within the framework of Puruṣārtha, the four ultimate goals of human life are Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa. The Cārvākas tradition regarded only Kāma (sensual pleasure) as the ultimate end of human life, while Artha (wealth) was considered the means for attaining that pleasure. While Dharma and Mokṣa are altogether rejected.[4] Therefore, in the Cārvāka tradition, happiness is material, dependent on sense experience and empirical reality. It can be compared with the gross hedonism of western tradition.

The conception of Happiness in Buddhist tradition

The core teachings of Buddhist philosophy is "sarvaṃ duḥkham duḥkham" i.e the all conditioned existence is suffering. At first, this appears to negate the very possibility of happiness. However, a deeper exploration reveals that Buddhism does not reject happiness but instead offers a redefined conception of it. In contrast to the material and sensual happiness (kāma-sukha) celebrated in Cārvāka philosophy or the rational pleasure of Western hedonism, Buddhist thought presents a non-material conception of happiness grounded in the cessation of tṛṣṇā (craving) and the a ttainment of prajñā (wisdom).

Happiness and the Doctrine of Duḥkha

In Buddhist philosophy, duḥkha serves as the fundamental starting point of philosophical inquiry. It identifies the existential condition of human suffering, while simultaneously pointing toward its resolution through the attainment of nirvāṇa (liberation). As Bhikkhu Bodhi in his work writes " the search for a spiritual path is born out of suffering."[5]

However, the Buddhist texts, such as the *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN) and *Anguttara Nikāya*, acknowledge two broad levels of happiness:

1. **Worldly Happiness (*āmisa-sukha*):** This refers to the joy derived from family, wealth, health, and social harmony. DN 31, *Sigālovāda Sutta* mentions:

"A householder who has faith, who is virtuous and generous,
who guards his family and speaks truth, and who restrains himself from evil ways—
Such a one, whose virtue is established, who is wise and kind,
shines like a blazing fire,
and is reborn in a happy realm."[6]

Such happiness, though legitimate, is impermanent and conditioned, and therefore cannot yield lasting satisfaction.

2. **Transcendent Happiness (*nirāmisa-sukha*):** This is the joy arising from moral virtue (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*), and insight (*prajñā*). It culminates in the unconditioned happiness of nirvāṇa. In the *Dhammapada* (v. 203) described as

Jighacchā paramā rogā, saṅkhārā paramā dukhā;
Etaṃ ñatvā yathābhūtaṃ, nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ.[7]

"Hunger is the worst disease, conditioned existence is the greatest suffering. Having understood this as it really is, Nibbāna is the highest happiness."

The *Dhammapada* beautifully captures this unconditioned peace as:

susukhaṃ vata jīvāma yesaṃ no natthi kiñcanaṃ.
pītibhakkhā bhavissāma devā bhasssarā yathā.[8]

"Happy indeed we live, we who possess nothing; joy will be our nourishment like the radiant gods."

This canonical verse demonstrates that the baseline of true happiness is found not in accumulation, but in letting go. By comparing the unburdened mind to "radiant gods" (*devā bhassarā*), the text shows that genuine joy is a psychological state of light, unconditioned luminosity born from the complete absence of possessive anxiety.

To guide human life toward this unconditioned peace, Buddhist psychology carries out a thorough deconstruction of ordinary, worldly pleasures (*gīhita-sukha*). The Buddha does not deny that sensory gratification (*assāda*) exists; rather, he highlights its deep structural unreliability. Worldly pleasures are subject to the three marks of existence:

- **Anicca (Impermanence):** They fade the moment they are consumed.
- **Dukkha (Unsatisfactoriness):** They are incapable of providing permanent security.
- **Anattā (Non-self):** They are empty of any enduring, independent substance.[9]

Further, in a striking medical analogy found in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha compares the relentless pursuit of sensory gratification to a leper who, afflicted by intense itching, cauterizes his raw wounds over a pit of glowing embers to find relief.[10] While the heat provides a brief, deceptive flash of comfort, the action actually deepens the infection, scorches the flesh, and worsens the underlying disease. In the exact same way, chasing fleeting sensory pleasures temporarily soothes the itch of desire, but it ultimately intensifies the underlying psychological lack, trapping the individual in a cycle of deeper craving.

Therefore, the Buddhist path embraces renunciation (*nekkhamma*) not as an exercise in painful self-mortification or grim asceticism, but as a clear, strategic letting go of the very attachments that cause suffering. Renunciation is the joyful discarding of a lesser pleasure in order to secure a greater, unconditioned well-being. This entire methodology of non-attachment is summarized in a core canonical aphorism:

sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāya.[11]

"Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to."

Now, while early Buddhist tradition prioritizes the monastic path for the direct realization of *nibbāna*, it does not ignore the material and social realities of the lay community (*gihi*). The Buddha recognized that for a householder living in the world, happiness requires a stable socio-economic and ethical foundation. In the *Anaṇa Sutta*, the Buddha provides an analytical breakdown of four types of happiness available to a householder who manages wealth righteously:

1. **Atthi-Sukha (The Happiness of Possession):** The legitimate economic security derived from wealth that has been acquired through honest, energetic effort (*uṭṭhāna-vīriya*) and moral means.
2. **Bhoga-Sukha (The Happiness of Enjoyment):** The simple joy of utilizing that wealth to maintain oneself, support family and dependents, and perform philanthropic acts of generosity.
3. **Anaṇa-Sukha (The Happiness of Debtlessness):** The profound psychological relief of owing nothing to anyone, whether large or small, freeing the mind from economic vulnerability and shame.
4. **Anavajja-Sukha (The Happiness of Blamelessness):** The highest form of lay happiness, arising from the clear conscience of being blameless in physical actions, speech, and thought.[12]

Significantly, the Buddha adds that the first three material happinesses do not equal even a sixteenth part of the spiritual joy born from the fourth; the happiness of a blameless, ethical life. Economic well-being is thus treated as a valuable foundation, but its ultimate purpose is to support a life of moral clarity and mental peace.

Finally, the Buddhist model of happiness moves outward from individual psychological training into a relational, social ethics. Personal well-being is shown to be deeply intertwined with the well-being of the collective. To develop this social harmony, the tradition prescribes the systematic cultivation of the four sublime attitudes or divine abodes (brahma-vihāras). These are the four *Brahma Viharas*:

- ***Mettā*** (Loving-kindness): The sincere wish for the well-being and happiness of all beings.
- ***Karuṇā*** (Compassion): The desire to alleviate the suffering of others.
- ***Muditā*** (Sympathetic Joy): Rejoicing in the success and happiness of others, which serves as the direct antidote to jealousy and envy.
- ***Upekkhā*** (Equanimity): A balanced mind that remains peaceful amidst the "ups and downs" of life.[13]

Practicing these "immeasurables" saturates the entire being with the "color of the Dhamma," making the practitioner's mind calm, fearless, and joyful.

Nirvāṇa: The Supreme Happiness

The culmination of the Buddhist path is Nirvāṇa (Pāli: *Nibbāna*), which the *Dhammapada* declares as the "highest happiness".
nibbaṇam paramaṃ sukhaṃ.[14]
Nirvāṇa is described as the "blowing out" of the three fires of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*).[15]It is an unconditioned reality (*asaṅkhata-dhamma*), meaning it does not rely on a causal chain of physical or psychological components to sustain it.
Traditional Buddhist tradition distinguishes between Nirvāṇa with remainder and Nirvana without remainder (or

Parinirvana). One is achieved during life, where a person is free from defilements but still possesses a physical body, *Parinirvana* occurs upon death. In the Mahāyāna tradition, a further concept of non-abiding (*apratiṣṭhita*) Nirvāṇa was developed. This view holds that a fully enlightened Buddha does not withdraw into a static state of cessation but, out of compassion (*karuṇā*), continues to manifest in the world to help all sentient beings reach liberation.

Conclusion

The exploration of happiness within the Cārvāka and Bauddha traditions provides an important philosophical intervention into contemporary discussions on human development and well-being. In the modern world, developmental paradigms are gradually moving beyond purely economic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) toward multidimensional approaches that incorporate psychological well-being, social harmony, environmental sustainability, and human flourishing. In this context, the dialogue between the materialistic orientation of the Cārvāka school and the ethical framework of Buddhist philosophy acquires renewed philosophical and practical relevance.

The contemporary significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to a more integrated and holistic conception of development. The Cārvāka tradition, grounded in pratyakṣa (direct perception) and empirical realism, emphasizes the indispensability of material well-being, bodily comfort, and worldly fulfillment in human life. Its insistence on the reality of lived experience serves as a reminder that any meaningful model of human progress must address the concrete conditions of existence, including health, security, and social prosperity. In this respect, the Cārvāka perspective resonates with modern human-centered approaches to development that prioritize the enhancement of quality of life within the finite span of human existence.

At the same time, the Bauddha tradition offers a profound critique of excessive attachment to material pleasure and transient desires. Through its teachings on duḥkha (suffering), anitya (impermanence), and anātman (non-self), Buddhist tradition highlights the limitations of purely pleasure-oriented modes of living. The Buddhist emphasis on śīla (ethical discipline), samādhi (mental cultivation), prajñā (wisdom), karuṇā (compassion), and mindfulness provides a sustainable framework for inner stability and psychological resilience in an age increasingly marked by consumerism, anxiety, ecological imbalance, and social alienation. Rather than rejecting worldly happiness altogether, Buddhist philosophy seeks to transform human consciousness so that lasting well-being may arise through self-awareness, detachment, and spiritual insight culminating in nirvāṇa.

Therefore, this study suggests that the future of human development discourse may benefit from a constructive synthesis of these two philosophical orientations. A truly comprehensive model of human flourishing cannot rely exclusively either on material advancement or on spiritual idealism in isolation. Instead, it must recognize the complementary importance of external well-being and inner transformation. The Cārvāka tradition underscores the necessity of material fulfillment within embodied existence, whereas the Bauddha tradition directs attention toward ethical living, mental purification, and liberation from suffering. Together, these traditions offer the possibility of a multidimensional paradigm of sukha and ānanda in which worldly welfare and spiritual well-being coexist in dynamic balance. Such an integrated vision may serve as a valuable philosophical foundation for shaping a more humane, sustainable, and spiritually conscious global civilization in the future.

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