Abstract

Psychological research techniques have given access to the intricate functioning of affect at neurological, cognitive, social, and behavioral functioning and beyond. Yet much remains unknown. This paper proposes to explore the structure and mechanisms underlying affect through a link between psychology and spirituality in an earnest effort to understand how it contributes to wellbeing. Taking a holistic view of health, emotions are integrated with a particular emphasis on Indian tradition of thought, the theory of Karma. The intention is to stimulate a novel way to look at feelings and improve our understanding of emotional responses.

Affect and Well-Being: A Spiritual Perspective

Wellbeing reflects an evaluation of the self in this world. It includes a preponderance of positive thoughts and feelings about one’s life. Sometimes happiness is also used synonymously with subjective wellbeing (SWB). It corresponds to life that is pleasant and meaningful. It is a heightened state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one’s values and goals. Happy people generally possess high self-esteem, a sense of personal control, optimism as well as exhibit extraversion. This state of well-being is rooted in dharma (Sukhasya mulam dharmah- Kautilya). Well-being includes a cognitive component (life satisfaction) and an emotional component (enhanced positive affect and absence of negative affect) and is a global assessment of all aspects of a person's life (Diener, 1984). Both Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA) are independent constructs influenced by different variables. SWB is influenced by affective evaluation (e.g., pleasant feelings, enjoyment) and cognitive evaluation (e.g., satisfaction, meaning etc.) of one’s life. Even happy people feel sad sometimes. Hence SWB provides unique information about the subjective quality of one’s life.

Yoga-Sutra and Affect

Various affects that are experienced in life are mentioned in Yoga – Sutra. It talks about PA as well as NA. Positive affective states include different kinds of positive states, such as Ananda (joy), Hladha (delight), Samtosha(contentment), Sukha(pleasure), Mudita(gladness), Karuna(compassion), Aparigraha(greedlessness), Upeksha(equanimity). Negative affective states as Daurnanasya(depression), Dukha(Pain or suffering), Krodha(anger), Lobha(greed), Paritapa(distress) and Vaira (enmity or hostility). PA and NA reflect the immediate reactions to the pleasant and unpleasant conditions of our life. The intensity and frequency of experienced affect and its cognitions form the basis of subjective well being (SWB). Yoga-sutra focuses on the higher processes of Yoga. These include meditation and the various levels of ecstatic unification (samadhi). Patanjali suggests an eight-fold path of Yoga. Emotional stability can be achieved by practicing sensory inhibition, breathing(Pranayama) concentration, and meditation. Hence, the emphasis is not on the psychopathology of the ordinary people. Rather it suggests that the negative affect experienced by a person acts as a source of distraction or obstacles in the spiritual path. Ego (Ahamkar) is the root cause of this conflict.

Yoga helps in attaining happiness by managing the five areas of conflict or Klesha’s, such as ignorance, pride, attachment, aversion and fear of death. Attachment (Raga) rests on pleasure and aversion rests on pain and suffering. Raga is a desire, an emotional bondage to any source of pleasure. It manifests in extreme forms when one is unable to enjoy anything rather becomes dependent on it. Freedom from hoarding (Aparigraha) unnecessary items, thoughts is recommended by focusing on the inner self (Antaratma). Though neither pleasure nor is pain deemed worthy of development. The emphasis is to promote a mental state in which pleasant and unpleasant affect transcends in favor of a condition in which mental activity is controlled (niruddha).

Yogic state can be achieved by exercising self control. This is possible by practicing meditation or vritti-nirodha, which helps in controlling fluctuations in feelings and thoughts. Meditation helps to deal with negative emotions and discover better ways of living a pleasant life, helps to control and moderate negative affect. Mindfulness meditation(Nyklicek,2008) helps to enhance mental awareness. This enables one to recognize various emotions and other mental events. However it inhibits any intense emotional reaction. Therefore meditation is preventative mental work, where one learns to control emotions, where unpleasant emotions are in evitable.

Once this is achieved then attempts can be made to control the higher ideation (pratyaya-nirodha)in the state of ecstasy through the cultivation of formless or supraconscious ecstasy (asamprajnata-samadhi).

Indigenous Theory of Emotions

The indigenous theory of emotions helps in gaining deeper insights into the functioning of affective processes. In this context, the framework of panch koshas, Sri Aurobindo’s reformulation in terms of physical, vital, mental, psychic, and supra mental (spiritual) may provide an answer. Paranjipe has delineated the notion of enjojer (bhojita) and has elaborated the notion and types of bhakti (devotion to God) in detail. Depicting the role of bhakti in the transformation
of emotions, whereby one engages in a world state of equanimity, while continuously experiencing a great love for all aspects of creation, rooted in one’s devotion to the Divine. Self-observation of emotional states can lead to self-understanding, and insight into emotional problems and facilitate wellness. The emergence of the quality of restless mobility or rajoguna, dependence on external objects as sources of sukha, and the fear of the separation from the sukha are the main cause of sorrow for the self. This is so a sense of limitation is experienced with respect to the self. Hence the internal locus of control is more important for happiness than eternal satisfaction of need.

Experiencing Positive Affect (PA)

Positive emotions, have been experimentally shown to help humans behave communally and to learn more quickly (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Surprisingly, spirituality is virtually indistinguishable from these positive emotions and is, thus, rooted in our evolutionary biology. The power of emotions like love, compassion and forgiveness. Positive emotions are spiritually nourishing. Negative emotions are self-focused. In contrast, positive emotions free the self from the self. We feel the emotions of both vengeance and of forgiveness deeply, but the long-term results of these two emotions are very different. Negative emotions are often necessary for survival. The positive emotions are more expansive and help us to broaden and build (Fredrickson, 2001) and help us to survive and thrive. Careful experiments have documented that while negative emotions narrow attention (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), positive emotions, especially joy, make our cognitions more flexible, creative, integrative and efficient (Isen et al., 1991; Panksepp, 1998).

PA reflects the level of pleasurable engagement with the environment, such as happiness, joy, excitement, enthusiasm, contentment (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). It can be brief, long lasting or stable trait like feelings. PA may be more critical to maintenance of well-being during situations that are very painful or stressful. A relative deficit in PA increases the vulnerability to negative emotions during stress. PA is more than the absence of NA. It can enable a person who is experiencing some personal distress to feel better and also enhance feelings of hope and optimism. It can provide a psychological respite which helps to deal with any stressful situation. This may not only make one resilient but also instigate an expectation of finding more positive or favorable life situations in the future. The presence of the omnipresent power which is the ultimate source of all happiness.

Emotions can be analyzed within the framework of (bhava) basic emotions or rasa. The experience of bhava takes place by a combination of emotions(sthayibhava), transitory emotions (vyabhicaribhava), eliciting condition(vibhava), consequences(anubhava) and the organic manifestations of emotions(sattvikabhava). The experience of rasa as a supraphysical consciousness requires the position of a witness who has the quality of (saradayata) being together. The emotional experience involves activities that are subjective, situational, and collaborative.

Indian contribution to well-being

The satisfaction of physical or bodily needs does not enhance well-being. The Indian view goes beyond it recognizing the value of sensibility and spirituality. Spiritual health, traditional values, social support may facilitate the use of active coping and contribute to life satisfaction and well-being. Recitation of the Bhagavad Gita was found to be contributing to personality function, quality of life and bodily functioning. The ultimate goal of life is to realize the true nature of the self or satchitanand. In India, religion plays an important role in our lives. Hinduism promotes the notion that well-being is mediated by believing and following the principles of duty (dharma), and action (karma). These are the guiding forces which play a significant role in spiritual advancement by minimizing the root cause of all miseries of life that is ignorance. Religion and well-being have been found to be negatively correlated with aggression and positively correlated with mental health (Khosla, 2010).

As Paranjpe (2011) suggests that Indians manifest anaskh without being aware of it. Increasing anaskh, or detachment, was associated with reduced state anxiety, better recovery rate, optimism, and anandatman, self in the state of bliss. Importance is given to Karta or doer and relinquishes the sense of completing a task. Various spiritualistic leaders and famous texts affirm the belief in omnipresent God. The main effort lies in avoiding materialistic pleasures which would ultimately enhance well-being and spiritual health. It appears that work itself gives a sense of accomplishment rather than means of earning money or status. It reflects a kind of Nishkam – Karma. As proposed by the Bhagavad Gita, that the doer is more important than the fruits of the deeds. This helps in reaffirming the faith in oneself where failures tend to lower self esteem and self confidence. Happy people have strong belief in the supreme power. They tend to think of future and people as being good and trustworthy. Often such feelings enable one to gain control affects and cognitions in one’s life which enhances not only mental but physical health as well. Spiritual advancements in due course of bhakti are also apparent in causing emotional transformation. This leads to deeper changes in character by awakening the soul by living through the Divine.

Spiritual growth

It is viewed as a positive change in life and an effective resource for coping with negative aspects of life such as trauma, illness, and loss etc. It leads to positive changes in the self. The attitude towards life improves and greater life satisfaction is experienced. One feels pride to be alive, feeling more responsible with changed priorities in life. There are changes in the value of life. There is greater appreciation of life and the time left. Every little thing in life seems important. There are positive goal related changes such as the need to help others, search for meaning in life and care giving.

The search for meaning in life instigates one to determine and pursue the purpose in life. Various strategies are designed and implemented to make life significant. This is
an important indicator of well-being in life. Spiritual growth not only reduces the intensity of perceive distress, but also facilitates adaptive coping, promoting recovery and growth. There is no universal meaning of life. Each individual seeks his meaning in life via pursuit of important goals in order to develop a coherent life narrative. Well-being also increases when positive affect, need for value, self efficacy, self worth, self transcendence, and personal growth increase. Meaning in life correlates with life satisfaction, positive affect, self esteem, optimism, happiness, enjoyment, low negative affect and involvement in religious activities. Search for meaning has been a characteristic response to upsetting events, or when one feels meaningless. Spirituality enables one to develop wiser sense of self, goals, minimize the negative implications of stress, in pursuit of finding benefit in life. Higher levels of consciousness help to gain insight into the self and its many manifestations. It not only modifies the cognitive appraisals about the evaluation of the quality of life but also influences affective judgments about life satisfaction. The meaning or purpose of life has been found positively related to spiritual experiences and beliefs (Kass, et al., 1991) and peak experiences (Wuthnow, 1978).

Contentment and inner feelings of self-assurance and freedom enhance life satisfaction. There is a close link between feelings and cognitions. Hence the judgment about one’s life causes positive affect which leads to contentment. Though often happiness and contentment have been taken with a hedonistic and materialistic framework. Apart from the satisfaction of physical or bodily needs sensibility and spirituality play a major role in well-being? Spiritual health, traditional values, social support may facilitate the use of active coping strategies and contribute to life satisfaction and well-being. Recitation of the Bhagavad Gita has been found to be a contributing factor to personality and bodily functioning and ultimately the quality of life.

Psychic and Spiritual Experiences

_Buddhi_ or intellect processes knowledge, mental perception and spiritual aspects of thinking. This corresponds with physiognomic sphere of consciousness, individuality and feelings. In higher level of consciousness, _buddhi_ allows the realization of life and the extent of individual participation in it. _Mahat_ (chitta) means aspects of consciousness according to which a person realizes individuality. In sphere of consciousness the _mahat_ means comparison of individual knowledge with the supreme knowledge, while _manas_ mean understanding the actual phenomenon. In sphere of individuality the _mahat_ means personal consciousness according to which the man compares himself to other person and _manas_ relates to those ideas or feelings which a man attributes to his existence. In sphere of feelings the _mahat_ means identification with the phenomena and objects of world around while manas involves sensual perception. _Brahman_ means the absolute spiritual beginning. Soul (_Atman_) means the subjective spiritual beginning which forms essence of the man which is more important than material substances in the world (_Prakriti_). There are different derivatives of _Prakriti_, such as _Sattva_, _rajas_ and _tamas_ which are (_gunas_) qualities of material substances of the world. Enthusiasm of feelings (_Sattva_) cause pleasure (euphoria). _Sattva_ means spirituality of ideas, opportunities of figurative thinking, emotional association and sympathy to people. Excitation of feelings (_Rajas_) causes uneasiness due to conflict caused by discrepancy or inconsistency of thinking of a person and the expectations of the society. Catalepsy of feelings (_Tamas_) causes indifference. _Tamas_ is caused when thinking is burdened by numerous facts of isolated information. _Buddhi_, _mahat_ and _manas_ are levels of consciousness; while _brahman_, _atman_ and _prakriti_ are levels of individuality; and _sattva_, _rajas_ and _tamas_ which are levels of feelings.

References


Does happiness lead to success? _Psychological Bulletin_, 131, 803-855.


