

Research Article

Happiness Experiences and Transformation in Yoga and Spirituality Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Indian Psychology (the applied aspects of Indian Philosophy) has withstood the test of time. In one sense, it is more 'scientific' than actual science because the theories of science have been proved and then disproved, in light of new inventions and discoveries, but those of Indian psychology as postulated in yoga psychology texts have not been negated and continue to thrive. Another reason for these Truths to be still relevant is the fact that many of them can be validated by the experiential knowledge and individual personalized experiences of the people who adopt them. Ānanda or happiness/bliss is one such concept. In this paper an attempt is made to discuss the personal narrations of the experience of happiness. The results of this study indicated that this ānanda or rather traces of this everlasting 'imperishable' happiness, is experienced while on the path and it results in transformation of the individual. This study on ānanda experiences can lend support and throw new light on happiness and positive psychology.

Keywords: *Happiness, Bliss, Spiritual experiences, experiential knowledge, Positive psychology*

Ānanda or bliss is an intense positive emotion. 'Ānanda is a Sanskrit word connoting one of the rare but extremely satisfying experiences that man can achieve in this life' (Shivaram, 1954). Charles Tart (1972) explains that it is an 'ecstatic sort of state in which one loses all sense of self and experiences an oceanic, joyful feeling'. A sense of equanimity is achieved while in this state and the person can be oblivious of the surroundings. Happiness or Bliss according to the Upanishads (eg., *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, *Taittiriya Upanishad*, *Kundika Upanishad*) is the characteristic of Brahman, the Supreme Godhead. The Vedanta Sutras (Vidyarnava, 1919) explain that 'God is all bliss' and the person who realizes God becomes immersed in an ocean of bliss (*Mandalabrahmana Upanishad*; Aiyar, 1914). In fact the individual Self is also considered to be truly an embodiment of 'Sat-Chit-Ānanda' (Truth-Consciousness-Bliss). But due to ignorance one is not aware of the nature of one's

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true Self. The *Bhagavad-Gita* (Chapter 6 – 28 verse) ascertains that a person who remains unattached to external sensations, who tends to find happiness in the self, and whose self is united with Brahman reaches imperishable happiness. Philosophers and spiritualists understand that real happiness is within and recommend different ways of practice that shall help manifest this lasting happiness or ‘bliss’. The process of unleashing this bliss from within is however the task of the spiritual practitioner.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

In this article the myriad *ānanda* or happiness experiences of spiritual practitioners following different traditions are presented and analyzed. Meditative and non-meditative spiritual experiences of 31 practitioners following different spiritual traditions have been explored and identified. Spiritual experiences from 16 subjects are collected by semi-structured interview method and the remaining data is collected from published literature (for more details see Suneetha, 2014).

Instruments

Data from these subjects was collected by way of interviews conducted based on an interview schedule that was developed – the Spiritual Experiences Record (SER). SER was framed after a study of spiritual experiences collected by way of literary survey and personal experience. The final version was developed after discussions with two experts in the field. The SER included both open ended, closed ended questions and several lead questions based on which in depth information regarding the spiritual experiences of the subjects was collected. SER has two sections. Section 1 covers personal details of the subject and particulars about the spiritual tradition followed in addition to summary of the current spiritual practices. In Section 2 the questions/items focus on personal spiritual experiences of the subject.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in three or more sessions as per the convenience and mood of the subjects. Usually in the first two sessions most of the items of Section 1 are covered. In the next couple of sessions the SEs of the subjects, their impact and the transformative changes in them were discussed. Sufficient time gap was given before interviewing for the SEs after the initial sessions facilitating recollection of past SEs. They were also instructed to make a list of them before attending the interview sessions. The data collected from both the sources, that is, literary and from the subjects was subjected to thematic analysis.

RESULTS

After analysis of the data a total of ninety eight issues were identified. These issues are of wide range dealing with several aspects encompassing various dimensions. They included changes in the subject, the visual and auditory experiences, experiences of light and energy, the expansion in their consciousness and other related experiences such as omnipresence, Samadhi experiences and few tradition specific experiences too. A discussion on all of them

is beyond the scope of this article and hence, data about happiness experiences will be elaborated.

DISCUSSION

Spiritual Transmission and bliss

Mr. Raju (all names changed) is a follower of Sri Ramachandra Mission which propagates the Sahaj Marg or the Natural Path. During the second transmission or *pranāhuti* session Mr Raju had a bliss experience. In his own words:

“Then I experienced lot of happiness which was overwhelming. I cannot express the immense joy I experienced. Even when I was walking in the sun....it was like moonlight to me. I experienced bliss.....From inside it (bliss) was coming. Boundary less!from the heart region, from the inner core of the heart. Immeasurable happiness! O ho! That happiness is immense. That such a kind of happiness is there in the body is bewildering! For the ordinary person they cannot understand....When I am in that ānanda I had no relation with this world. I felt that the joy is bouncing. I did not remember any issues of the family or friends or anything else.”

Guru/God, Bliss and Transformation

As *Narada Bhakti Sutras* (1.6) state, ‘by knowing this supreme love, man becomes intoxicated, peaceful, and completely immersed in the bliss of the atman’, some people seem to experience immense bliss during direct contact with their Guru. Interestingly they belong to different traditions following different methodologies. The impact it can have on the positivity of the person is worth noting. For instance, Smt. Jyoti a follower of the *bhakti* path had an experience of *ānanda* that has metamorphosed her perception, sensation and *sādhana*! She explained:

“By the time we got back to Visakha (Visakhapatnam) it is 12:30 pm. Then I got immersed in ecstasy. I felt like some soft, cool, happy and peaceful feeling in my whole being. When I was at ashram I felt energized with some new energy. I felt indescribable ānandam and a kind of satisfaction and peace”.

The reason for her ecstatic experience according to her is the *darśan* of her Guru. She was confident he has blessed her with this experience. Since she had not only immense happiness akin to ecstasy but also felt energized, satisfied and peaceful, it gives us an indication of the resultant effects on her of such a blessing. According to her, ‘this experience is superior to any other blissful happy experiences I experienced before...Compared to ordinary happiness this is thousand times higher and beautifuler’. Her Guru might have initiated her on the path of devotion and the inner changes she underwent testify that she is progressing. Moreover the *bhakti bhāva* seems to be consistent and increasing in duration day by day. In this *bhakti* state she explained her inner emotions as, “....a sense of fullness, a sense of satisfaction, a feeling of satiety, that fills the mind, body and the surroundings with a great sense of contentment I never experienced before”.

Swami Yogananda (1946; p. 140) described how once he left his Guru and all the ashram works entrusted to him to seek another Guru. After few days, he returned back to his Guru realizing his folly. On approaching his Guru he was filled with fear how his Guru will react. But to his utmost surprise his Guru received him with lots of love as if nothing has happened and blessed him with bliss experience.

'We looked into each other's eyes, where tears were shining. A blissful wave engulfed me; I was conscious that the Lord, in the form of my guru, was expanding the small ardours of my heart into the incompressible reaches of cosmic love'.

The medium that facilitates progress in one's *sādhana* seems to be '*ānanda*'. In Swami Rama's (2005; p. 59) words when in a state of bliss *he floats effortlessly and go towards the void*. He described this experience thus:

'Sometimes I touch the state of ecstasy and during that time I float effortlessly and go towards the void with the deepest feeling of happiness and joy. I have seen all the wonders of the world, but this experience was so strangely wonderful that it is beyond my description'.

Experience of bliss could be one of the highly motivating factors that influence the sadhakas to further their efforts in the spiritual direction. Paul Brunton (2003; p. 303) shares his experience of how meditating in the physical presence of his Guru Ramana Maharshi resulted in experiencing bliss.

'To-night I flash swiftly to this point, with barely a skirmish against the continuous sequence of thoughts which usually play the prelude to its arrival. Some new and powerful force comes into dynamic action within my inner world and bears me inwards with resistless speed. The first great battle is over, almost without a stroke, and a pleasurable, happy, easeful feeling succeeds its high tension'.

This experience of bliss in some practitioners might start as a mild feeling initially and then later spread to all parts of the body as if each and every cell in the body is at its heights of joy. At this point I am reminded of my own whole body experience once when I went to Sri Ramakrishna Mission to meditate. That day I went and sat in the prayer hall facing the idol of Sri Ramakrishna. I prayed to him that I want to experience something really unique that will make me feel His blessings are on me. Thinking thus I started meditating. Soon I was besieged with a feeling of intense bliss. The bliss – ecstasy was so intense that I felt each and every cell of my body is experiencing it! This experience intensified my faith.

Smt. Jyoti also seems to have experienced the whole body (and soul) bliss when she described, "again my body shuddered right from the cells of my toes to the cells of my finger and each and every part of my body – shoulders, legs, each single hair on my head also experienced this sense of vibration! This is a wonderful experience. I never experienced so much of physical and mental ecstasy!" Apart from resulting in physical and mental ecstasy

the presence of the Guru can be curative too as in the case of a yoga practitioner. Mrs Kamala is a childless widow who is God fearing and likes Lord Rama from childhood but entered spirituality only after losing her job. At that time she thought of committing suicide but decided not to since she read it's a great sin. Then she sought the guidance of a Guru and attended his discourses.

".....my heart at that time, due to all the bad experiences I had gone through, became like a bruise and used to pain a lot. But while listening to guruji's lectures my heart used to feel very cool and very nice....I used to feel as if something from him is coming and healing my heart. It used to be very cool and I used to experience ānandam....feel contented".

As Sri Ramakrishna (Gupta, 2001; p. 362) says, 'If you once taste the bliss of Brahman, your mind does not run after sensual pleasures, wealth and honour' just like how the insect of the rainy season (moth) sees the light once, it does not go to the darkness again, after experiencing true *ānanda* there is contentment. Reddy who happened to learn *kuṇḍalini* mantras with *chakra* meditation from a local guru narrated that,

"I literally saw Her coming towards me...She is wearing a red sari and a red blouse. She is exactly like how she is in the idol that was there in that ashram....and there was light emanating from her. I could very clearly see that. I laid my face on her lap and ...'What you want?' means, I felt I needed nothing else this is enough!...the whole room was filled with radiance...one can clearly feel her...Ānandam means, it has no expression at all!I do not know what you call it. But it is the most wonderful feeling. That feeling will not come even if one earns crores of rupees! One should experience that at least once. I also felt energy passing in the whole body and also felt that I am melting."

Transformation - Supramundane emotions!

The emotions one experiences during the process of *sādhana* seem to be of various hues and shades. Some emotions might be new and never experienced by the *sādhaka* before in her/his mundane life. Some of the practitioners described their experience of bliss to be 'pure bliss' with no mixed emotions, but few of them reported such mixed feelings. For example, Swami Rama (2005; p. 3) wrote about his feelings of his Guru wherein he described how mere thinking about his Guru resulted in ecstasy:

'His words have the abiding peace of a deep faith that accompanies a strange and joyful pain. There is indefinable heartache in the realization of this love, and a throbbing pain that finally ceases in blissful peace. This is an experience that cannot be narrated or communicated to others.He is the architect of my life. As my thoughts dwell with admiration on his noble teachings, my heart leads me to the peak of ecstasy'.

In the above narration one might wonder why 'pain'? Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa explains in the *Kathamrita* (Gupta, n.d) about his pain experience thus: *"In that state I felt as*

though a ploughshare were sticking through my spine. I cried out, 'I am dying, I am dying!' But afterwards I was filled with great joy." It is comparable to the phrase 'joyful pain' of Swami Rama who wrote about his mixed feelings of pain and ecstasy. Thinking of the Guru/God can indeed result in both pleasure and pain! Pleasure/bliss because thinking of them will make one feel their actual presence. With their presence are ignited within several positive emotions. Attached to these positive emotions is an intense thirst aspiring for more and more of it. One gets to see clearly that there is more of it but one is as yet not able to reach those deeper levels. This struggle goes on. So each time along with the bliss is the pain of separation from the beloved Lord! This 'joyful pain' probably will be there till one day complete union with the Divine becomes possible. The *viraha bhāva* of the Gopis of Brundavan is testimony of these feelings.

Sometimes the experience of bliss is felt at the sense level too. One might feel like actually drinking the nectarine juices of Super consciousness! When Ramadas sang, 'Your name is very tasty' it probably was experientially felt so by him. Swami Yogananda (1946; p. 80) terms such a bliss experience like drinking the 'transcendental wine'. He wrote:

'The unique pantomime brought me an inexpressible ecstasy. I drank deep from some blissful fount. Suddenly my chest received another soft blow from Master Mahasaya. The pandemonium of the world burst on my unwilling ears. I staggered, as though harshly awakened from a gossamer dream. The transcendental wine removed beyond my reach'.

Transformation - Thoughtless State

'Mokṣa is, liberation from all pain, sorrow and suffering and attainment of supreme Divine Bliss and eternal satisfaction in that state of liberated consciousness' (Chidananda, 1991; p. 14). It is possible only by first achieving the thoughtless state. Mr. Swamy first experienced bliss in the presence of his Guru. He is a follower of the Sahaja Marg. After the initial experience he continued to re-experience it during meditation especially when he was able to reach the thoughtless state. According to him, "a state of bliss means...you will get all that pleasures, *ānand...paramānand*. After that I am getting vibrations also and it is not simply doing meditation physically. Really we can go to that state of *nirākar*- thoughtlessness. Thoughtlessness has to be achieved in this meditation". Mr Giridhar, a yoga practitioner also experienced the thoughtless state. He narrates that:

That minute when I was woken up (by his wife after 1 hour elapsed in savasan without awareness) I felt immense ānandam. I am telling you, after marriage I wondered how so much joy is there in intercourse, it is the highest ānandam, but at that moment I thought it is nothing. This ānandam is thousands time higher! ... I actually felt 'I am not doing but my 'body' is doing the actions. I was in that state that whole day and next day it got lessened a little..and from the third day everything became normal.

Another practitioner of the same tradition, Niranjana, experienced 'ecstasy' during an interesting meditative experience wherein while doing meditation, he was able to see himself.

Twice or thrice while sitting and meditating he used to feel that again he was sitting opposite himself and observing himself doing meditation and he used to experience feelings of equilibrium and also ecstasy. Rajeshwari an elderly lady who is a follower of Kriya Yoga shared that when engrossed completely in meditation she sees a dot of light coming from far and then it grows in size so much big that it covers her complete head. Then she loses body awareness and there is complete stillness and feels *ānanda* and a feeling of lightness. Similarly Chandini had bliss experience in a meditative vision that involved 'astral travel' with the soul of her dead son. She is an advanced Reiki practitioner. Her only son died in a tragic bike accident. Since then, she said she met him in several meditative visions. During one such visions she narrated:

"He showed me a place which looked like a large hall full of divine energy in blue and light violet colours. The walls were made of precious materials. It was simply blissful. Then he showed another place.....I did not feel like leaving that place. Words fail me to describe the feeling of bliss – ānanda - I experienced there".

CONCLUSION

Bhagavad Gita (V.21) explains that with the self unattached to external contacts one finds happiness in the Self and with the self engaged in the meditation of Brahman one attains endless happiness. The narrations discussed here have shown that such an experience of *ānanda* is not just confined to the pages of philosophical texts but is very much within the experiential purview of the followers of the different philosophies which eventually results in transformation in their emotions, cognitions and personalities.

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