

Kyoto University International Education Program
“Happiness” class 2012-2013 Summary

Hideo Shingu, Professor Emeritus Kyoto University
Kyoto Energy and Environment Research Association shideo@enekan.jp

Introduction

Selig ist der Mensch,
der mit sich selbst in Frieden lebt.
Es gibt auf Erden
kein grösseres Glück.

Happy is a man,
who lives himself in peace.
There is no greater fortune
than that on earth.

Matthias Claudius

What kind of life brings peace of mind? The examination of this question and getting thereby to the essence of happiness was the principal concern of all our classes since this course began last October. In seeking to answer this question various ancient and modern stories and examples were explored.

Peace of mind

Is peace of mind realized in peace of mind? This question is a fundamental one illustrating the great difficulties that are encountered in seeking an answer to the question “what is happiness?”

In the 2nd class we learned that stress is indispensable for both physical and mental health reflecting peace of body and mind. Usually the word “peace” means a state without turmoil or disturbance, in other words a stress-free state of mind. Thus a state of “peace of mind” marshals against the attainment of real “peace of mind”.

Pain and Boredom

There is a rather famous phrase by German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer: “The biggest enemies of happiness are pain and boredom. [*Die größten Feinde des Glücks sind für ihn Schmerz und Langeweile (Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit)*].

It is understandable that when you experience a totally pain-free state, you might experience boredom and vice versa. Thus, pain is inconsistent with peace of mind but if one always seeks to avoid pain one may end up experiencing boredom and thus be unable to find peace of mind.

Satisfaction

The fulfillment of some purpose is said to bring about a state of peace of mind. This state of peace of mind is the same as a sense of satisfaction. But this state is also problematic.

Commonly *questionnaires* distributed to groups of people to determine which people are happy or not, contains the question “Are you satisfied?” The *questionnaires* usually do not ask directly if one is happy because this direct question has been found to be too difficult for most people to answer. The implicit understanding of the enquirer is that happiness is synonymous with satisfaction. Being satisfied may bring peace of mind yet it also bears the danger of generating boredom.

Thus, what people need to live happily is not satisfaction but those situations that bring mental stress from time to time or even continually. This stress is caused by external stimuli encountered in the process of seeking satisfaction.

Surprise

Kunikida Doppo, a Japanese story teller of the early 20th century wrote that the strongest wish of a rather young gentleman in one of his short stories “Beef-Meat and Potato” was not the fulfillment of commonly pursued pleasures associated with “Love, Money, and Fame.” This young character does not deny his hope of attaining those pleasures, yet the wish that even surpasses this is his burning thirst “to be startled [びっくり(喫驚)したい] or surprised” by the unexpected.

If things happen as expected, one may experience temporary satisfaction. For example it is a great joy for an engineer when the machine, or any device, or any project or theory works as he/she planned. Yet the degree of joy is rather small if it is compared with a case when one finds out that their plan was a total failure and then discovers as a result, a totally new mechanism or theory previously unknown. In this case, one certainly will be “startled.”

We have examined many stories in class that recount the behaviors of people in somewhat odd situations. Many people said and did rather unexpected things. If we remain conscious of the possibility of being startled by the behaviors of those people in the past, we will have a better chance of empathizing with the types of “happiness” that these ancient people enjoyed. Even if one does not experience such startling events oneself, if one understands the value of such unexpected things, one will not fall into the error of dismissing small happenings because those events were unusual. You may share the surprise of seeing that what is “black is black” no matter how many people say it is “white”. (Mozi: 墨子、少見黒曰黒、多見黒曰白。Great Straight Looks Crooked: Laozi 老子：大直若曲).

Frugality

Finally, the relation between “frugality” and “happiness” may be discovered in being surprised. The more abundant and luxurious utilities that surround one, the degree of feeling the joy gets less for a small addition to these.

Such a situation also applies to one’s mental condition. If one is accustomed to, even spoiled by, too many good things or luxuries in one’s life, it is unlikely that one could appreciate any small addition to these things. If one remains humble and pays attention to the apparently small happenings, in other words, if one is living a mentally frugal way of life, one has a better chance of being surprised by simple changes.

Human psychology seems to work in the same way in the perception of stimuli provided by material utilities or by spiritual events.

Some examples of nonsensical but quite common expressions concerning “what is Happiness”.

*Happiness is individualistic, so that there are as many types of happiness as there are of people, since it is in vain to discuss over happiness.

*You are happy when you do not think about whether or not you are happy.

*I am happy. So there is no meaning discussing what happiness is.

*Happiness is a complex feeling so that it can never be summarized in a simple phrase.

Don’t be persuaded by your own ideas too easily!

Keep doubt in your mind.

Satisfaction is backward, Surprisal is forward. 感動は前進、満足は後退。

The Arrow and the Song

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

*I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.*

*I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For who has sight so keen and strong,
That it can follow the flight of song?*

*Long, long afterward, in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroken;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.*

(As so many arrows you shoot in your life, so much happiness you can appreciate?)

き聞くたびに めすら 珍しければ ほるときず 時鳥 いつもはつねの 心地こそすれ

Every time I hear Hototogis sings, it sounds so nice and I feel like I’m listening to it for the first time.

ようえんそうじょう 永縁僧正 (1056-1125) (金葉集 113) Monk Yowen (1056-1125)

Hototogis: A small bird that starts singing late spring. This bird was quite popular among ancient Japanese people.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qL18_oco0DY&NR=1
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH6UafbDsP8&feature=related>
