



For thousands of years, humans have been puzzled by the purpose of life and happiness. Over 2700 years ago, Greek philosopher Aristotle said that the purpose of human existence is to achieve happiness. It is a central issue in major world religions. According to these religious views happiness and suffering are both part of human existence, two sides of the same coin, and man struggles in between on his earthly path towards happiness, heaven, salvation, or paradise.

There is no precise equivalent to the word happiness in Hebrew. Prophet Micah recommends, we must "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Deborah Lipstadt, Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish History and Holocaust Studies, says life itself is seen as a gift that must be celebrated. "The scripture says rejoice in your festivals, be REALLY happy. You should take pleasure in all the things, the spiritual things, the familial relationships, material things, enjoy the life."

For Catholics, happiness differs from mere enjoyment. Perfect happiness can only be achieved after death, however ethical behaviour during life can bring happiness and lead to salvation.

The possibility of relative happiness in this life is recognized, but the importance of moral self-control is emphasized.

Islam and Buddhism, as well, see the path of happiness as an ethical path, where happiness and well-being mixes with enlightenment and enrichment of the soul. According to Bukhari, one of the most quoted scholars in Islam, "True enrichment does not come through possessing a lot of wealth, but true enrichment is the enrichment of the soul." For Buddhists, happiness is an inner feeling, a mental state. Happiness can be achieved in earthly life by following ethical behaviour that includes knowledge, respect for others and nature, as well as compassion.

Protestantism is known for its recognition of hard work ethics as a path to salvation. For Martin Luther and Jon Calvin, salvation, or perfect happiness after life, depends only on faith, but capital accumulation was also seen as a sign of God's grace, which of course encouraged discipline and hard work as a way to fulfilment.

So what is it that we human beings want? To answer this question, Hinduism points to the four purusharthas, or aims, of human life: artha, kama, dharma, and moksha. Artha and kama being material and physical well being and social recognition. Dharma is righteousness, the experience of the divine, and Moksha, ultimate happiness.

And as Confucius once said: "If you want to be happy for a day, get drunk. If you want to be happy for three days, get married. If you want to be happy forever, cultivate a garden."