

MONEY AND HAPPINESS*

Vijay K. Jain**

Modern-day behavioural scientists, on the basis of their studies involving sample groups, have concluded that money, at least up to a certain level, can make one happy. Divergent views have been put forward about the level of income after which money seems not to contribute much to an increase in happiness. Suggestions have been made about the way one should spend disposable income to buy happiness. These include spending money on others in the form of shared experiences, buying all sorts of insurances, going on stress-free vacations, having expensive and lavish dinners, and gaining more leisure time by hiring people to help around. All these suggestions presuppose that the main purpose in life is to make it 'rosier' through pleasant experiences, and retaining fond memories to live with. There is absolutely no vision beyond the present life. Profound ideas like acquiring faith and knowledge, observing vows such as non-injury and limiting possessions, fasting, giving up of external and internal attachments, self-restraint, enduring afflictions, austerities, concentration and meditation are foreign to these studies. Those who proclaim that money can buy happiness know neither the true nature of happiness nor the true value of money.

Not knowing the true nature of happiness, we wrongly assume that wealth can be a source of happiness. We need to correct this by

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**An independent researcher and author of several books on religion and philosophy, Vijay K. Jain, based in Dehradun, India, did his graduation in Electronics Engineering from Institute of Technology, Banaras Hindu University, and Post-Graduation in Management from Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

first knowing the truth and then making efforts to provide our souls with a breath of fresh air. We have to think beyond the superficial challenge of competitiveness, as the yardstick for measuring happiness is not the performance and achievement of others but our own inherent potential in this majestic challenge of life. It is any day better to be happy inside and a pauper outside, than to be a wreck inside and a potentate outside.

Our career-oriented education system and societal norms lead us to believe that the amount of wealth a person owns is the safest, most trustworthy parameter to assess his level of success and, therefore, happiness. Driven by this delusion, we start exerting ourselves in the pursuit of wealth at an early age. Our lust keeps on increasing and we do not mind using any means, fair and foul, to get more. As we make more money, our expectations and desires rise in tandem. Not knowing where to stop in our mission to make more money, we work even harder, not to be daunted by the insane working hours or the symptoms of ailments making inroads in our bodies. We are so enamoured with our notion of success that we fail to realize that a terrible compromise with happiness is surreptitiously being worked out within us. Trying to be happier, we keep on doing those very things which go against the idea of realizing our soul's natural perfection and joy. We are, at best, on a hedonic treadmill – we have to keep on working just to stay in the same place.

We may feel 'great' counting the money that we have amassed, notwithstanding the harm that we may have caused to our soul and body. Safe-keeping of the assets acquired must now attract our attention. We rack our brains devising means to not only protect these from burglars but also from decay, depreciation, and decomposition. But the inevitable cannot be averted. With the passage of time, as our senses debilitate, a feeling of utter helplessness starts overtaking us. The folly of our efforts becomes clear, albeit too late.

Stark reality that we must leave behind, voluntarily, all material possessions strikes in our face. There is no escape from this plain truth; if we do not volunteer to do it ourselves, death will perform the act for us, rather ruthlessly. The idea of separation from our prized possessions leaves us in great pain and misery. Enjoyment of a few pleasures in the past is no solace to a grieving soul. Realization of this basic truth early in life can save us from much hardship and agony later on.
