



## **PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK OF HUMAN WELL-BEING: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ARISTOTLE AND BUDDHIST THOUGHT**

***Tanushri Mandal***

*Ph.D. Research Scholar,*

*Department of Philosophy, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, West Bengal*

### **Abstract**

Aristotle and Gautama Buddha both place strong emphasis on the attainment of ultimate well-being or happiness in human life, yet their perspectives reveal significant differences. In Aristotle's philosophy, this ideal is expressed through the concept of eudaimonia, which signifies a flourishing life achieved through the cultivation of moral virtues. In contrast, Buddhism defines true happiness as the attainment of nirvana or enlightenment, a state of liberation from suffering and the cycle of rebirth.

In his work *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that eudaimonia is the highest goal of human existence. It is realized through the excellence of the soul in accordance with virtue. This form of happiness is not dependent on mere sensory pleasure or external goods; rather, it is grounded in ethical development, rational activity, and responsible participation in social life.

On the other hand, Buddhist philosophy maintains that happiness is not rooted in physical pleasure or material acquisition but in inner peace, contentment, and the cessation of suffering. Through practices such as meditation, ethical conduct, and wisdom, an individual can attain enlightenment, thereby overcoming suffering and achieving true well-being.

Therefore, while both Aristotle and Buddhism aim at the ultimate good of human life, Aristotle emphasizes rational virtue and moral excellence within worldly life, whereas Buddhism focuses on transcendence, inner awakening, and liberation from suffering. The primary objective of this research is to present a comparative analysis of Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia and the Buddhist notion of nirvana in relation to the attainment of human well-being.

**Keywords:** Eudaimonia, Well-being, Happiness, Enlightenment

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:	RESEARCH ARTICLE
<b>Tanushri Mandal</b> Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, West Bengal Email: <a href="mailto:mandaltanushri60@gmail.com">mandaltanushri60@gmail.com</a>	

## **Introduction**

The renowned French writer Romain Rolland once observed that when selfish happiness becomes the sole aim of life, life soon loses its meaning. This insight highlights that human happiness cannot be isolated from the well-being of others. A self-centered happiness, nurtured in isolation, resembles a castle built on sand—fragile and transient.

Similarly, the Buddhist philosopher Shantideva writes:

“All the joy the world contains has come through wishing happiness for others;  
all the misery the world contains has come through wanting pleasure for oneself.”

This does not suggest neglecting one’s own happiness, but rather emphasizes that all beings equally desire happiness. Thus, human well-being is intrinsically interconnected.

The term *eudaimonia* generally refers to flourishing or living well. Happiness is a complex and subjective experience associated with joy, fulfillment, and a positive outlook on life. It is not merely a fleeting emotion but a deeper state of satisfaction derived from meaningful achievements. The concept of happiness has long been central to philosophical and psychological inquiry, and its meaning varies across individuals and traditions. Since ancient times, philosophers have explored the nature of happiness. This paper aims to examine the philosophical understanding of happiness through the perspectives of Aristotle and Buddhism.

## **Aristotle’s Concept of Eudaimonia**

According to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* means “to live well and attain happiness.” It does not refer to any particular feeling or emotion; rather, it signifies a complete and flourishing life as a whole. In ancient philosophical thought, *eudaimonia* occupied a central place in ethical discussions because it defines the ultimate aim and boundary of human life.

Aristotle holds that the primary component of *eudaimonia* is morality or virtue. This virtue is closely connected with the rational capacity of human beings and is essential for shaping life. Humans are not born morally good or bad; rather, they develop their character through habit and interaction with their natural tendencies. For example, humans possess sensory capacities, which are morally neutral in themselves. However, individuals may use these sensations either in morally good or bad ways. Moral virtues guide us toward the right path.

From ancient times, Western philosophers have debated the nature of happiness, and Aristotle’s philosophy reflects this tradition. He distinguishes between the meaning of the word “happiness” and what happiness truly is. According to him, happiness is the highest good, which determines and evaluates all human actions and efforts. As he famously states, “everything we do is for the sake of happiness.” To express this valuable human condition, he uses the term *eudaimonia*.

### *Philosophical Framework of Human Well-being: A Comparative Analysis ...*

Aristotle identifies two fundamental features of happiness:

First, happiness must be an end in itself, not a means to something else. While we may perform actions for the sake of happiness, happiness itself cannot be used as a tool for achieving other goals. For instance, if someone cultivates cheerfulness merely to earn money, then happiness is being treated as a means, not an end. Aristotle insists that happiness is always desired for its own sake.

Second, happiness must be self-sufficient. It should be connected with qualities that make life valuable and complete. Without such qualities, a life cannot truly be considered happy.

This raises an important question: In what does happiness consist? and What kind of life is truly valuable? Life includes events such as old age, disease, and suffering, which may create a sense of aversion toward life. These do not, by themselves, make life valuable. Similarly, we may fight wars to establish peace, but such actions do not necessarily produce happiness. If life is to be meaningful, it must involve something inherently valuable and fulfilling.

Aristotle rejects the idea that mere bodily pleasures—such as food, drink, and sexual desire—constitute the ultimate goal of life, as these are too biological in nature. Human desires are diverse and vary from person to person. Some desire health, others honor, knowledge, or tranquility. However, these are not ultimate ends; they are pursued for the sake of something higher. This highest and most complete end is what Aristotle calls eudaimonia.

Aristotle's concept of happiness differs significantly from that of utilitarianism. According to utilitarianism, an action is good if it produces more pleasure than pain. In contrast, Aristotle argues that an action is not good because it produces happiness; rather, it produces happiness because it is good.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines happiness as activity in accordance with virtue—actions that are worth doing and done well. This definition arises from an analysis of human function. Every being has a specific function, and human beings are no exception. Since humans are rational animals, their function lies in the exercise of reason.

Aristotle distinguishes between two aspects of human nature: the biological and the rational. The rational aspect leads to intellectual and ethical excellence, often referred to as dianoetic virtue. The proper life involves controlling biological impulses through rationality in the pursuit of higher purposes. There is an undeniable conflict between animal impulses and rational faculties, and overcoming this conflict is essential for moral excellence.

Aristotle famously describes humans as “rational animals.” Although humans possess animal instincts, their distinctive feature is reason. By using reason to control these instincts, individuals can develop moral virtue and good character. This process is not easy; it requires

continuous effort and self-discipline. The joy of moral victory—the triumph over base impulses—is itself a source of happiness. Thus, a virtuous person, through self-realization, leads a joyful life.

In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle also emphasizes the role of pleasure. However, true pleasure is not merely sensory. A virtuous person finds pleasure in performing noble actions. While sensory pleasures have a place in life, they must be regulated by the virtue of moderation. Excessive indulgence, as well as complete deprivation, both violate this virtue.

At the beginning of Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle presents his famous claim: “Every art, inquiry, action, and rational choice aims at some good.” This idea forms the foundation of his ethical philosophy. All intermediate goals ultimately lead to a final end, which must be desired for its own sake. Otherwise, there would be an infinite regress of purposes, which is irrational. Therefore, Aristotle concludes that while many things are chosen for the sake of something else, happiness alone is always chosen for itself. It is the ultimate goal and the central focus of all human endeavors.

### **The Buddhist Perspective on Happiness**

The concept of eudaimonia in Aristotle and the idea of happiness in Buddhism both consider happiness or well-being as the ultimate goal of human life. In this discussion, I attempt to examine whether Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia and the Buddhist concept of happiness are identical, completely different, or whether there exists a subtle distinction between them. From the Buddhist perspective, one’s own happiness is achieved through the happiness of others. We can never separate our well-being from that of others. Self-centered happiness is like a palace built on sand—it can collapse at any moment. Our happiness is deeply interconnected with the happiness of others. Most of life’s complexities arise when we fail to consider the welfare of others. In this context, the Buddhist philosopher Shantideva states: “All the joy the world contains has come through wishing happiness for others; all the misery the world contains has come through wanting pleasure for oneself.”

Happiness and suffering are inseparable aspects of human life, but in Buddhism, they are understood primarily as internal mental states. The concept of dukkha does not merely signify physical or mental pain; rather, it reflects a profound dissatisfaction inherent in life. Gautama Buddha, deeply moved by human suffering—such as aging, illness, and death—sought to identify its causes and discover a path to liberation. Through spiritual practice, he attained insight into the Four Noble Truths, which form the foundation of Buddhist philosophy. By understanding these truths and following the Eightfold Path, one can attain peace. Buddhism emphasizes the doctrine of karma, according to which individuals experience the consequences of their actions. Liberation (nirvana) is achieved through action free from desire. The cessation of desire leads to freedom from suffering.

### *Philosophical Framework of Human Well-being: A Comparative Analysis ...*

Buddha also observed that beings constantly seek happiness, yet in doing so, they remain caught in the cycle of birth, aging, and suffering.

#### Wisdom (Prajñā) and Happiness

Buddha explains that true happiness can be attained through the cultivation of wisdom (prajñā). The Pali term “sukha” encompasses various levels of happiness—from simple pleasure to ultimate bliss. Wisdom begins with seeking guidance from enlightened and meditative individuals who have trained their minds to experience the highest happiness.

Four important aspects of wisdom in relation to happiness are: Happiness arises from within oneself. It can be learned from experienced and enlightened individuals. Long-term happiness is superior to short-term pleasure. True happiness is realized through the practice of wisdom.

Buddha distinguishes between two types of happiness:

1. Sankhata (conditioned happiness): This arises from intentional actions—mental or physical. All sensory experiences fall into this category. Since they are impermanent, they cannot produce lasting happiness. At best, they provide relatively stable but temporary well-being.

2. Asankhata (unconditioned happiness): This is independent of intentional actions and beyond change. The most well-known form of this is nirvana. It cannot be produced but must be realized. Wisdom plays a crucial role in attaining this unconditioned happiness.

However, conditioned happiness is not entirely without value. Buddha describes wholesome actions (puṇya karma), such as generosity, morality, and goodwill, as sources of lasting, harmless happiness.

In the Anguttara Nikaya, Buddha explains a progressive chain: moral conduct leads to freedom from remorse; freedom from remorse leads to joy; joy leads to tranquility; tranquility leads to happiness; happiness leads to concentration; concentration leads to true knowledge and insight; and ultimately, to liberation.

Buddhist ethics is grounded in doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Brahmavihāras, and the Five Precepts. According to Buddhism, every event arises from causes and conditions. Negative traits like greed, hatred, and pride must be replaced by love, compassion, patience, and mental calmness. True happiness does not depend on external circumstances but arises from an inner state of mind.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Dukkha (suffering): Life inevitably involves suffering—birth, aging, illness, and death.
2. Cause of suffering: Desire, attachment, and ignorance are its root causes.

3. Cessation of suffering: Freedom is possible through the elimination of desire.
4. Path to cessation: Following the Eightfold Path leads to liberation.

The Brahmavihāras (sublime states) further elaborate ethical cultivation:

1. Loving-kindness (Maitrī): Wishing well for all beings.
2. Compassion (Karuṇā): Feeling and alleviating the suffering of others.
3. Sympathetic joy (Muditā): Rejoicing in others' happiness.
4. Equanimity (Upekṣā): Maintaining balance toward pleasure and pain.

According to Buddhism, all individuals possess the potential for infinite inner strength, regardless of caste, religion, gender, or status. Through self-effort and purification of the mind, one can attain ultimate happiness.

#### Similarities and Differences between Aristotle and Buddhism

Although Aristotle and Buddhism may appear similar in their emphasis on happiness, their approaches differ significantly.

Ultimate Goal of Human Life: Buddhism: The ultimate goal is nirvana, the cessation of suffering and attainment of a peaceful, stable state.

Aristotle: The ultimate goal is eudaimonia, a flourishing and fulfilled life.

Means of Achieving Happiness:

Buddhism: By understanding suffering and following the Eightfold Path, one attains liberation.

Aristotle: By practicing the Golden Mean and cultivating virtues, one achieves balance and excellence in life.

Ethical Foundation:

Buddhism: Ethics is rooted in the Eightfold Path, emphasizing right knowledge, intention, action, livelihood, and mindfulness.

Aristotle: Ethics is based on character and habit, focusing on developing virtues and choosing the right balance between extremes.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, although Aristotle and Gautama Buddha differ significantly in their philosophical approaches, both converge on the idea that the ultimate aim of human life is well-being or happiness. Aristotle emphasizes rationality, virtue, and active engagement in worldly life, while Buddhism stresses detachment, inner awakening, and liberation from suffering. A synthesis of these perspectives may offer a more comprehensive understanding of human well-being—integrating ethical action with inner transformation.

**Reference**

1. Chowdhury, Sukomal, editor. Religion and Philosophy of Gautama Buddha. Kolkata: Paribeshak Press, 1997.
2. Chowdhury, Sukomal, translator. Samyutta Nikaya. Vol. 3, Kolkata: Mahabodhi Book Agency, 2014.
3. Bhikkhu Srimad Sanghaloka, et al. Ananda. 2009.
4. Bhikkhu Prajnananda. Anguttara Nikaya. Vol. 5, Rangamati: Jurachari Basi Upasakbrinda, 2011.
5. Dharmadhar Mahasthavir, translator. Milinda Panha. Kolkata: Mahabodhi Book Agency, 2013.
6. Basu, Charuchandra. Dhammapada. Kolkata: Mahabodhi Book Agency, 2020.
7. Vidyarnya. Buddhist Philosophy and Religion. Kolkata: Paschim Banga Rajya Pustak Parishad, 2019.
8. Shilabhadra, translator. Digha Nikaya (Complete Edition). Kolkata: Mahabodhi Book Agency, 2011.
9. Ahlawat, Ajay. Sustainable Development Goals. Chennai: Notion Press, 2019.
10. Dalai Lama. The Meaning of Life: Buddhist Perspective on Cause and Effect. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000.
11. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Discernment: The Buddhist Strategies for Happiness II. Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013.
12. Damien Keown. Buddhist Ethics: Reconciling Virtue and Happiness. Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 2022.
13. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Translated by H. Rackham, London: Harvard University Press, 1926.
14. Romain Rolland. Jean-Christophe. Vol. 8, Les Amies. Paris: Albin Michel, 1952.
15. Shantideva. Bodhicaryāvatāra: The Way of the Bodhisattva.
16. Kittiprapas, Sauwalak. "Buddhist Approach and Happiness for Sustainable Development." Journal of the International Buddhist Studies College, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011.
17. Sakthivel, K. "The Effects of Buddhism's Philosophy on Mental Health and Well-being." International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews, vol. 4, no. 3, 2023.

