

CLASSIC WISDOM ABOUT WAYS TO HAPPINESS

How does it apply today?

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ABSTRACT

Since we humans have some choice in how we live our lives, there has always been ideas about what constitutes a good life. Written reflections on that subject focus typically on moral issues, but there have always been ideas about what constitutes a satisfying life. Interest in this classic wisdom is increasing today, as part of the rising concern about happiness. This begs the question of what we can learn from this ancient wisdom. Does it hold universal truth? Or are these views specific for the historical conditions from which they emerged? In this paper I consider some classic beliefs about happiness and inspect how well these apply in contemporary society.

The following five beliefs are considered: 1) Happiness is found in fame and power: follow the path of the warrior. 2) Happiness is found in wealth and involvement: follow the path of the merchant. 3) Happiness is found in intellectual development: follow the path of the philosopher. 4) Happiness is found in simplicity: follow the path of the peasant. 5) Happiness is not of this world: follow the path of the monk.

Each of these ways to happiness will manifest in specific behaviors and attitudes and I inspected to what extent these go together with happiness today. To do this, I selected relevant research findings from the World Database of Happiness. The classic beliefs 1 and 2 seem to apply fairly well today, but 3 and 4 not. The advice to seek happiness in other-worldly detachment (5) may have been more sensible in the brutish conditions of feudal society, in which it emerged.

1 INTRODUCTION

Interest in happiness is rising these days and this conference is a manifestation of this trend. In the scientific world this interest has given rise to both new empirical research and renewed attention for classic thought.

1.1 Renewed call for greater happiness

During the middle ages in Europe it was widely believed that happiness was not possible during one's earthly life and that morality was to be based on the word of God. These views were contested in the Enlightenment; happiness came to be seen as attainable and morality as man-made. A lively discussion on the relation between happiness and morality emerged (Mauzi 1960, Buijs 2007) and in this climate an instrumental view on morality appeared, in which maintaining ethical codes was seen as a means to secure a happy life.

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Much of this enlightened thought is reflected in Jeremy Bentham's (1789) 'Introduction to morals and legislation'. Bentham argues that the moral quality of action should be judged by its consequences on human happiness, and in that line he claims that we should aim at the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number'. Bentham defined happiness in terms of psychological experience, as 'the sum of pleasures and pains'. His philosophy is known as 'utilitarianism', because of its emphasis on the utility of behavioral consequences. 'Happyism' would have been a better name, since this utility is seen to contribute to happiness.

Though welcomed in enlightened circles in the 18th century, this view was rejected by the dominant ideologies of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The strongest opposition came from the churches, which saw little value in early happiness and continued to profess a principalistic morality based on the ten commandments. The liberals of the time had reservations about the greatest happiness principle; in their power struggle with the aristocracy they emphasized freedom. Likewise the socialists who entered the scene in the late 19th century prioritized social equality. Nationalism dominated in first half of the 20th century during the period of the two world wars, and the nationalists were more interested in national glory than in individual happiness.

As a result, interest in happiness declined and one of the indications of this decline is a sharp drop in the use of the word in book titles after 1800 (Buijs 2007). When I took a course in social philosophy in the 1960s, I encountered Bentham's greatest happiness principle as a historical topic. Yet a revival was in the air, people began to seek happiness, ever more books on 'How to be happy' appeared in the bookshops and happiness became a topic on the political agenda.

This renewed interest in greater happiness was driven by several factors. One of these is that many pressing ills had been overcome, such as wars and epidemics. The second half of the 20th century was characterized by peace, democracy and an unprecedented rise in our standards of living. This gave way to more positive goals, such as improving public health and happiness. Another factor was the development of a multiple-choice-society in which individuals could choose how to live their life and therefore were interested in what way of life would be most satisfying. The rise of happiness on the political agenda was also facilitated by the weakening of the earlier ideological opposition mentioned above. The churches were in decline, the liberals and the socialists had attained most of their ideals and nationalism had lost much of its appeal.

1.2 Emergence of empirical research

The rising public interest in happiness was paralleled by the increasing attention paid to this topic among scientists. Happiness became a major topic of interest in several new strands of research: in 'social indicators research' which emerged in the 1970s, in medical 'quality of life research' which developed in the 1980s and the strands 'positive psychology' and 'happiness economics', which appeared around the year 2000. The number of scientific publications on happiness has grown steeply since the 1960s, as can be seen from [figure 1](#). In all this research the leading question is: What makes people happy? and the major motivation has been to advance happiness.

1.3 Revert to classic wisdom

This renewed interest in happiness has also manifested in a fascination with classical thought on ways to happiness. Ancient wisdom from the east was found in Indian Vedas and Buddhist philosophy and Asian classic text were translated in modern English. A recent book on the teachings on happiness by Tibet's Dalai Lama, sold more than a million copies (Dalai Lama XIV & Cutler 1998). Likewise, the views of early western philosophers have been

scrutinized for advice about happiness, such as in Wilhelm Schmid's 'philosophy of art of living'. A recent account of the history of philosophical thought on happiness has been published by Darrin MacMahon (2005).

Yet, with so much modern research literature available on happiness, why do we revert to classic teaching? One reason is that the scattered facts about happiness found in modern research have yet to be crystallized into clear rules for a happy life. Classical thought provides rules without facts. A related factor seems to be in the belief that seasoned wisdom may have already captured the big principles behind observable facts. Another driver is modern romanticism and our related openness to 'alternative' views from other times and cultures, the allure of mysticism.

2 CLASSIC VIEWS ON WAYS TO HAPPINESS

The most 'classic' views on happiness that we know, are views that have been written down. Writing appeared late in human history and for that reason we do not know anything about our preliterate ancestors' views on happiness over the thousands of centuries that they lived as hunter gatherers. What reflections we have on ways to happiness date from advanced agricultural society in which scholarship developed in the context of religious institutions and noble courts (e.g. Nolan & Lenski 2011).

The classical teachings on happiness are about how to live a good life. The term 'good' in how to live a good life is mostly seen in living a morally correct life and behaving in a proper manner, typically being religiously devoted and socially responsible. Yet subjective enjoyment of life is also acknowledged and often seen as a byproduct of good behavior.

There is much diversity in the classical advice for on how to live a good life and this diversity roots in the variety of possible views on what is a good life and in the public served with the message. Below I present 5 major strands of advice, which rather than expanding in details and justifying, I will place in the social context from which they emerged.

2.1 Way of the warrior

A common strand of advice is to live a brave and adventurous life and reap fame and power. This advice fits the ideals of the warrior class in feudal societies and several scholars living in the noble courts have praised this way of life. The crusader is exemplary of this view, fighting daringly for the right cause and rewarded with fame, power and wealth in early life and with heaven in afterlife.

2.2 Way of the merchant

A civilian variant is to seek success in trade and gain wealth. This advice fits the way of life of the merchant class that developed late in advanced agricultural societies and is typically professed by intellectual exponents of the attendant culture, such as protestant ministers and teachers. Icons of this view are explorers, inventors and founders of big business. The 'protestant ethic' is a frugal alternate of this view on the good life.

Both above views see happiness in active involvement in society. Following Weber (1905) this can be characterized as an 'inner worldly' (innerweltlich) orientation. Parallel to these views there has always been admonition that reflects an outer worldly (auserweltlich) orientation. Below are three variants of happiness advice of this kind.

2.3 Way of the philosopher

In this line of advice happiness can best be achieved in a contemplative life. Life becomes

more bearable if we understand it better, both the world around us and our inner self. Hence happiness is sought in knowledge, typically distant knowledge free from disturbing emotion. Happiness is equated with wisdom.

This view fits the life of professional philosophers and the advice is actually to live as a philosopher. An icon of this view is the Greek philosopher Epicur, who retreated from the turbulent society of his time into the peaceful environment of his walled garden, where he immersed himself in gentle intellectual conversation with followers while enjoying good food (Bergsma et al 2008).

2.4 Way of the peasant

An intellectually less demanding alternative way to happiness is live a simple life, preferably in the country. Renouncement of opulence will save us a lot of frustration and contact with nature will cure alienation.

This romantic advice is typically not delivered to poor peasants, but to well-to-do city dweller, who assume that the grass is greener in the country. Though mostly a matter of alternative dreaming, this advice has instigated several ‘back-to-the-land’ movements such as the ‘communes’ and the Arts and Crafts movement in the 19th century.

2.5 Way of the monk

The most radical alternative way to happiness is to seclude oneself from society and seek refuge in the isolation of a desert or behinds the walls of a cloister. Again a key idea is that it is better not to want things one cannot get. The attendant ideas are that one can discipline oneself to live with a bare minimum and that there is deep gratification to be found in religious practices such as prayer. Endurance of discomfort in one’s current life is seen as a ticket to better conditions in an afterlife.

As in the case of the philosophers, this advice was typically professed by its practitioners, that is the clerical class, which constituted a considerable part of the population in medieval society and was quite influential intellectually.

3 HOW TO ASSESS APPLICABILITY TODAY?

Observed happiness on advised ways to happiness

The renewed interest in this ancient wisdom about happiness begs the question of how applicable it is in the conditions of contemporary society. Does it apply at all or might it even take us from the frying pan into the fire? Are some of the recommended ways to happiness better fitted to the present than others? Below I will answer these questions using the available research findings on conditions for happiness in modern society.

3.1 Concept of happiness

To answer these questions we first need a clear concept of happiness. This concept should be distinct from the advised ways of life to avoid conflation. It should also be measurable so that differences in happiness on advised ways of life can be assessed empirically.

I have defined happiness elsewhere as the ‘subjective enjoyment of one’s life as a whole’ (Veenhoven 1984, 2000). In this definition happiness is synonymous with life satisfaction and this meaning also fits Bentham’s definition of happiness as ‘the sum of pleasures and pains’. Happiness in this sense is conceptually different from objectivistic notions of a morally desirable life and is as such well suited for this test. The concept is also well measurable. Happiness, defined as ‘subjective enjoyment’, denotes something that people have on their mind, which like all states of awareness can be measured using

questioning.

Questions on happiness can be framed in several ways and sometimes address subtly different things than life-satisfaction. All the acceptable questions ever used in empirical research are listed in the collection ‘Measures of Happiness’ of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2013c). The research findings mentioned in the next section are all based on questions admitted to that collection after a check for fit with the concept of happiness as defined above.

3.2 Empirical approach

I followed the methodology used in a special issue of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* on ‘Advice of the Wise’ (Bergsma 2008), in which the reality value of various recommendations for a happier life are explored. One of the articles in that issue was about the advice implied in three ancient Chinese philosophies. Together with Zhang Guoqing I first listed the advocated ways of life and next checked whether modern people who live accordingly are happier than contemporaries who do not (Veenhoven & Quoqing 2008). For this purpose we drew on research findings gathered in the World Database of Happiness and in particular in the collection of ‘Correlational Findings’ (Veenhoven 2013d).

3.3 Data about conditions for happiness in contemporary society

In this study I also draw on the World Database of Happiness. To date this ‘findings archive’ contains some 20.000 research findings, each of which is described on separate ‘pages’ in a standard format using standard terminology (Veenhoven 2011). These finding pages can be sorted on subject and this enabled me to select findings that pertain to advised ways of life.

I will not present these findings individually, but will characterize the typical correlation as either positive (+), non-existent (0) or negative (–). I will also not dwell on the many variations to this general pattern. The reader can find all the details using the links to the finding reports given in the right columns of tables 1 to 5.

3.4 Limitations

The bulk of the findings gathered in the World Database of Happiness come from studies performed in western nations since the 1970s. So the check will limit to applicability in this kind of society.

Though the number of research findings is large, only a part bears information about the conditions addressed in classic advice on happiness. Most of these findings are based on samples of the general population and studies in subgroups are scarce to date. So I can consider applicability for the average citizen, but have, as yet, little perspective on the applicability of this advice in specific subgroups of the population, such as elderly widows or unemployed academics.

A great deal of the findings is based on bi-variate analyses and these are vulnerable to spurious correlation. If such distortion is controlled in multi-variate analyses, I give greater weight to these in my estimate of the typical correlation.

Correlation between advised behavior and happiness is no proof of a causal effect. Statistical associations can also be driven by effects of happiness on the way of life chosen, for instance because happiness fosters social involvement, while unhappiness rather discourages outgoing behavior (e.g. Lyubomirski et al. 2005). On some of the topics we have indications of the direction of causality and, if so, I will mention these in the text. If no such indications are available I assume that at least part of the correlation is due to an effect of life style on happiness.

4 RESULTS OF APPLICABILITY CHECKS

Below I will list the available research findings about correlates of happiness in contemporary society that link up with classic advice for living a happy life; for each topic I mention the subject code in the collection of Correlational Findings and provide a link to the finding report in which full details can be found.

4.1 Way of the warrior

This way to a happy life involves the pursuit of power and adventure . As such it will require leadership behavior and should result in social prestige. This way of life calls for the cultivation of personal characteristics such as boldness and independence and openness to thrills and pleasure. Involvement in warfare is part of the way.

The available research findings on these topics are summarized in [table 1](#). The correlation with happiness is typically positive, which suggests that this way of life is satisfying for most people. In the case of involvement in war, there is a negative relationship, war-veterans being less happy than comparable compatriots. So the way of the warrior should not lead one into a actual war.

4.2 Way of the merchant

This advice for a happy life recommends active involvement in work and citizenship, which will show up in a high activity level. Involvement in work appears in employment and working hours, and is likely to materialize in income and wealth. A protestant work ethic fits this way of life as well as some forms of materialism. Involvement in civil society will appear in participation in voluntary associations and in politics. All this requires a zestful personality.

The observed correlations of these markers of the way of the merchant with happiness are presented in [table 2](#). Most of the correlations are positive. Yet there is no clear correlation with working hours and the correlation with moral materialism is negative. This suggests that one can go too along on this path.

4.3 Way of the philosopher

In this recommendation greater happiness can be achieved by having a better understanding of the world and oneself. When practiced, this advice must lead to studying well and result in high intelligence and success in school. Moral valuation of knowledge is part of that way. If studying is a proper way to happiness we can also expect that students are typically happier than their non-studying age mates.

The available findings on each of the indicators of this way of life are presented in [table 3](#). The support is mixed in this case. Though people who have spent time many years in school tend to be somewhat happier than people who do spent less, the resulting wisdom appears to be uncorrelated with happiness. Surprisingly, smart people are not happier than dummies, as I have shown in more detail in elsewhere (Veenhoven & Choi 2012). Likewise there is little correlation between educational level and happiness, in particular not when income is controlled for. A moral valuation of education is also not contingent with greater happiness.

How about the happiness of students who are at least temporarily on the way of the philosopher? The findings are again mixed, some studies show slightly greater happiness among students, but more studies show no difference with working youth. Given that advantaged people are overrepresented among students and that students enjoy more freedom this does not suggest that this way of life yields greater happiness, at least not for the average person.

4.4 Way of the peasant

Let us now consider the rewards of a simple life. This way of life is not paved with any luxury, one has to make do with a small income, modest housing and without expensive commodities such as cars and computers. To live happily in such conditions, one must value simplicity and live up to these values. This way of life is typically practiced in the country rather than in cities.

Findings on the relation between these hallmarks of simplicity and happiness are presented in [table 4](#). Most of the correlations are negative, in particular where it comes to the actual standard of living. Moral appreciation of simplicity appears to go with greater happiness, but moral ascetics who live up to these values are no happier than the ones who do not.

The question of whether we live happier on the country than in the city is more complicated than would seem at first sight, since the picture is distorted by selective settlement, such as rich commuters who live in the country but work in a city. The available data do not support the view of rural happiness.

4.5 Way of the monk

Lastly the advice to seek happiness in holy isolation. This kind of life involves considerable social isolation, typically one follows that way without kin. Likewise there is little involvement in society and partly for that reason living conditions are typically poor. On this harsh way, travelers focus on inner experience and seek happiness in religious activities.

I present some research findings on the relation between these features and happiness in [table 5](#). The correlations are typically negative. Apparently we are not built to live in isolation. A focus on inner life does not go with greater happiness either. Several studies have documented a positive correlation between religious involvement and happiness but not all.

4.6 In sum

The findings discussed above are summarized in [table 6](#). Together this review of research findings suggests that classic recommendations to seek happiness in this world still apply today, while the advice to seek happiness in distancing oneself from society works out negatively in contemporary conditions. This results fits my earlier analysis of the present day relevance of the advice embodied in three classical Chinese philosophies, in which Confucianism performed best because of its inner-worldly orientation.

5 MORE APPROPRIATE IN THE PAST?

The belief that detachment from society is a proper way to avoid unhappiness may have been more appropriate in the time where this view was first recorded, that is, in an early agrarian society.

There is good evidence that the quality of life was low in the agrarian phase of societal development, and considerably lower than in the earlier phase of hunter-gatherer existence. Inspection of human remains has shown that that people lived equally short lives in agrarian society, but suffered more malnutrition and diseases. A greater proportion of the population died of violence than ever before in human history. Moreover the conditions of agrarian existence seem to have led our ancestors into an oppressive social system, which Mariansky and Turner (1992) characterize a 'social cage'. This view of quality of life over human history is summarized in [figure 2](#).

If true, the advice to seek happiness in outer-worldly detachment will have been apt, in particular for the powerless of these days. The ways of the peasant and the monk were ways

to avoid too much unhappiness rather than a ticket to a satisfying life.

6 CONCLUSION

Some of the classic beliefs about happiness still apply today, in particular the idea that social engagement tends to result in a satisfying life. Some classic recommendations should not be followed in contemporary society; especially not the advice to forsake its comforts and retreat into an inner world.

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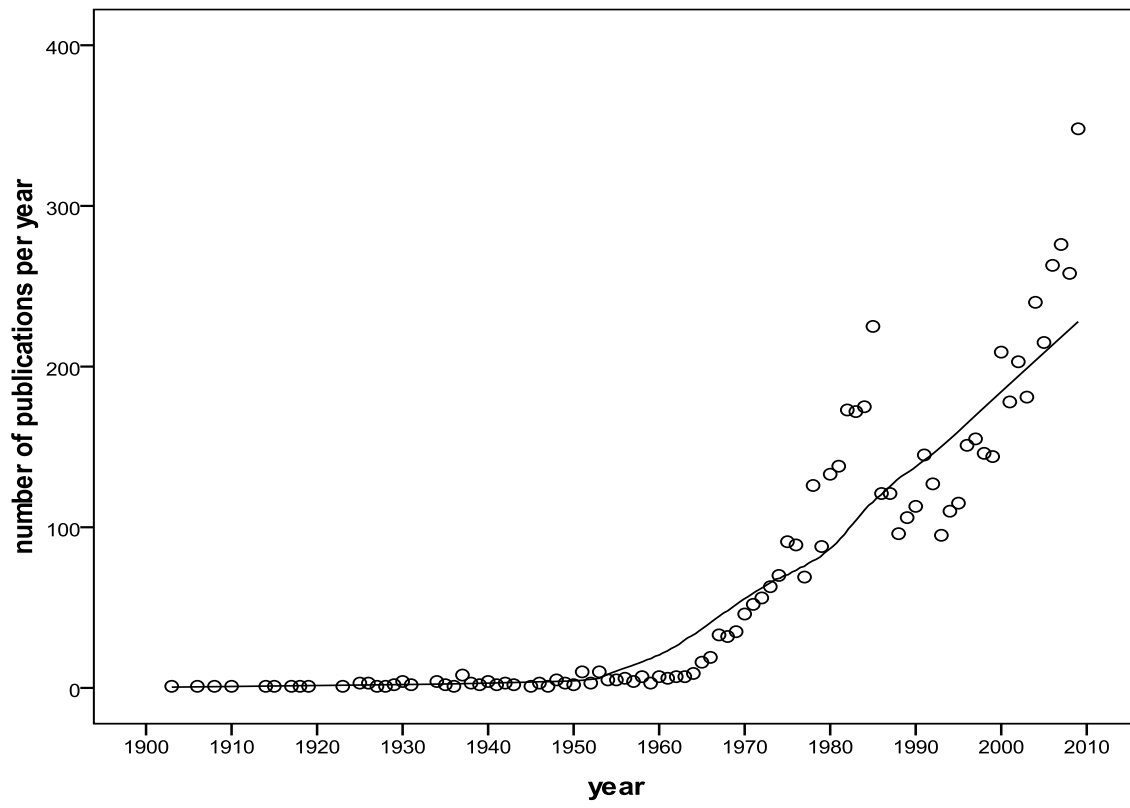
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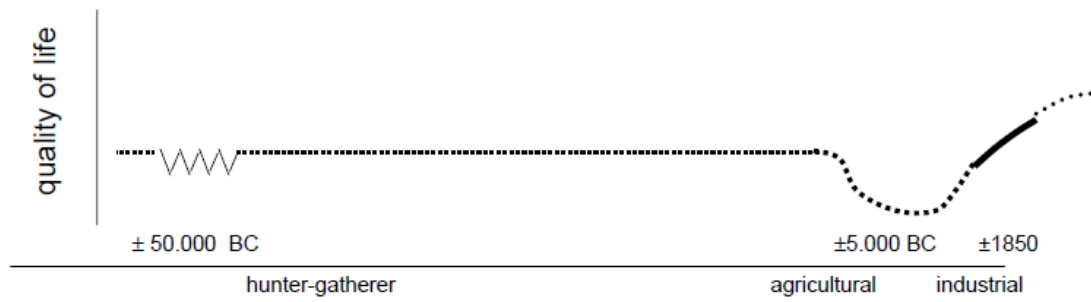
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Figure 1
Scientific publications on happiness since 1900



Source: Bibliography of Happiness (Veenhoven 2013b)

Figure 2
Quality of life over human history



Source: Veenhoven 2010

Table 1**Way of the soldier:** Correlation of leading advised way of life with happiness

<i>Way of life</i>	<i>Correlation with happiness</i>	<i>Source: section in collection Correlational Findings</i>	
		<i>Name</i>	<i>Code</i>
Social prestige	+	Current socioeconomic status	S9.2
Leadership	+	Current leadership	L2.2
Autonomous	++	Current personality: inner control	P4.58
Ambitious	+	Current personality: ambitious	P4.2
Pleasure seeking	+	Current values: hedonic	V2.1.1
Adventure seeking	0/+	Current personality: Sensation seeking	P4.95
Warfare	-	Earlier involvement in war	W1.1.1

Table 2**Way of the merchant:** Correlation of leading advised way of life with happiness

<i>Way of life</i>	<i>Correlation with happiness</i>	<i>Source: section in collection Correlational Findings</i>	
		<i>Name</i>	<i>Code</i>
Income	+	Current income	I1.2
Possessions	+	Current possessions	P10.2
Employment	+	Current employment	E2.2
Working hours	0	Current working hours	W4.2.15
Civil involvement	+	Current participation in associations	S7.2
	+	Current political participation	P8.2.2
Active	+	Current activity level	A1.2
Zestful	+	Current personality: zestful	P4.120
Protestant ethic	+	Current work values	V2.2.3
Materialism	-	Current terminal values: materialism	V2.1.1.3

Table 3**Way of the philosopher:** Correlation of leading advised way of life with happiness

<i>Way of life</i>	<i>Correlation with happiness</i>	<i>Source: section in collection Correlational Findings</i>	
		<i>Name</i>	<i>Code</i>
Study	+	Current activities: study	A2.3.4
Intelligence	0	Test intelligence (IQ)	E3.2.1
Education	0/+	Educational level	E1.2
Value knowledge	0	Current values: education	V2.2.6
Student	0	Currently involved in schooling	S1.2.1.1

Table 4**Way of the peasant:** Correlation of leading advised way of life with happiness

<i>Way of life</i>	<i>Correlation with happiness</i>	<i>Source: section in collection Correlational Findings</i>	
		<i>Name</i>	<i>Code</i>
Low income	–	Current income	I1.2
Modest housing	–	Current quality of house	H14.2.3.1
No car, PC, ect.	–	Current possessions	P10.2
Immaterialism	+	Current terminal values: materialism	V2.1.1.3
Ascetism	0	Living up to ascetic values	V5.2
Rural living	–/0	Current rural living (vs. urban)	L10.2.1.2

Table 5**Way of the monk:** Correlation of leading advised way of life with happiness

<i>Way of life</i>	<i>Correlation with happiness</i>	<i>Source: section in collection Correlational Findings</i>	
		<i>Name</i>	<i>Code</i>
Social isolation	–	Current intimate contacts	I6.2
Non-participation	–	Current personal contacts	S6.2
		Current organizational participation	S7.2
Non possession	–	Current possessions	P10.2
Focus on inner life	–	Current values: meditation on inner life	V2.1
	–	Current values: stoic self control	
Religiousness	0/+	Current religiousness	R1.2
	0/+	Current religious practices: prayer	R1.4.3
	+	Concern about religion	R1.6.1

Table 6**Summary: Applicability of classic advise for a happy life today**

<i>Advised ways to happiness in the past</i>		<i>Chance of happiness today</i>
Way of the warrior	Seek fame, power and thrill	+
Way of the merchant	Seek success in business and work	+
Way of the philosopher	Seek understanding, keep distance	0
Way of the peasant	Lead a simple life	–
Way of the monk	Seclude from society, focus on inner life	–