

HAPPINESS AND INDIGENOUS WISDOM In the History of the Americas

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Introduction

The attainment of happiness has always been a fundamental human aspiration since time immemorial. This is why all traditions of wisdom have made reference in one way or another to how it can be obtained, frequently conceiving happiness as the *sumum* or pinnacle of human achievement. Happiness as a goal has even been enshrined as a fundamental value for nations or governments.. The United States' Declaration of Independence, for example, specifies "the pursuit of happiness" as one of the new nation's fundamental aspirations, and fathers of this manifesto, such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin in their body of political ideas, made happiness a central good. Simon Bolivar, leader of the independence of several South American republics, did the same when he affirmed: "*The most perfect system of government is that which produces the greatest possible amount of happiness...*" (Bolivar,1819). In those eighteenth century times, happiness was usually linked to feelings of safety and personal and social stability. In spite of all the foregoing, such an ideal might seem too general or utopian to some skeptic-pragmatists of today, and some might even say, sarcastically, that if in those days the Gross National Product –the measurement that today's economists have enshrined as the supreme value of any national well-being-- had existed, the founding fathers would have preferred it.

But the goal of happiness keeps returning to the agendas of leaders and nations, as a vital unsatisfied aspiration; nations as diverse as Bhutan, whose government recently declared, on the basis of ancestral Buddhist teachings, that "the National Happiness Product is more important than the Gross National Product", and England, where the government has decided to highlight the pursuit of well-being and social happiness in its public policies. At the international level, the desire for happiness is maintained as central: at the United Nations' Millennium Summit, held in 2000 in New York, Secretary General Kofi Annan presented a Gallup International poll, the biggest public opinion poll ever taken covering about 60 nations, to the Heads of State. The poll concluded, "People value good health and a happy family as being more important than anything else. " (Report of the Secretary General, 2000)

On the subject of the pursuit of happiness, one of the more illuminating and renowned wisdom traditions, has been that of the indigenous peoples. And among these, the wisdom of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, which greatly influenced the thinking of prominent revolutionary leaders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and the Americas, in their struggle against monarchic-feudal authoritarianism and in favor of more human, freer societies. Among them, leaders such as Franklin, Jefferson and Bolivar.

Jefferson's admiration for indigenous wisdom in terms of happiness became such that it made him exclaim: "*I am convinced that those societies as the Indians which live without government enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under European governments*". Jefferson had seen, likewise, that: "*Native Americans are not submitted to any laws, any coercive power and shadow of government. The only controls are their manners, and the moral sense of right and wrong. . An offence against these is punished by*

contempt, by exclusion from society...Imperfect as this species of coercion may seem, crimes are very rare among them" (Johansen, 1982).

Bolívar, on his part, left us the following comments: *"The Indian is of such a peaceable character that he only wishes for repose and solitude; he does not expect to lead his tribe, much less dominate others... this species of men is the one that least claims preponderance; although their numbers exceed the sum of the other inhabitants... he is a sort of barrier to contain the other parties, he does not pretend authority, because he has no ambition for it, nor believes he has capability for exercising it, being contented with his peace, his land, and his family. The Indian is everyone's friend."* (Bolivar, 1815). In his first chronicles even Christopher Columbus had commented the following, in relation to his encounter with the indigenous culture of the "new continent": *"They are the best people in the world, and the sanest. They love their neighbors as themselves. They are faithful and do not covet what others have... their speech is always sweet and gentle, accompanied by a smile."* (Windwalker, 2002)

But before we go on with such great exaltation of the indigenous, which sadly proved to be short-lived in the Americas after the subsequent genocide of the aborigines, let us stop here and try to determine precisely what happiness means. And, starting from this determination, let us make more objective judgments of how to what extent the ancestral indigenous wisdom achieved it.

Information coming to Europe of the happy goodness of indigenous self-government on the basis of the Natural Order truly influenced a series of revolutionary thinkers throughout several centuries; from Thomas More to John Locke, Rousseau and Marx. Their ideas, in turn, would return to the American continent to influence it in an interesting reverse flow. Despite their different ideological meanings (More's illustrated anarchy, Locke's and Rousseau's emphasis on natural rights, Marx's communist society, etc) and even of the diverse forms in which said theories were put into practice, all those thinkers shared the reality of having nurtured from the indigenous as an idealistic path to happiness and social harmony, -as did the Jeffersons and the Bolívars in the American continent itself, from direct observation of the indigenous people.

What happiness consists of

Happiness can be understood as a state of satisfaction or contentment and well-being, based on our natural identity.

Insofar as our natural identity is concerned, it is generally accepted that we human beings are matter and spirit, body and soul, depending on what we want to call our two characteristic identity components: the dense and the subtle.

Well-being's dimension in the concept of happiness refers to the more physical, dense and external aspects of our being. While satisfaction/contentment's dimension would refer to the more spiritual, more subtle and inner aspects of our identity.

We could also link the well-being dimension with health, as defined in the wide-ranging sense given by the World Health Organization (WHO). For WHO, health is: *"A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"*. This broad concept highlights the

importance of affirmative and preventive health aspects (beyond the repair-cure thrust in which modern medicine has remained); it emphasizes health as a lifestyle in which, besides attention to health as such, attention to nutrition, housing, clothing, education, environmental quality, and the affection and protection afforded by community-based life are included.

However, it is evident that health cuts across, and has a continuity relationship with, the other subtler dimension. Both, the term used by WHO "infirmity" (disease) -coming from the Latin "*infirmus*" which means lacking firmness or equilibrium, as well the mental scope of health as cited in the WHO definition, remind us of health's more subtle aspects. It has also been said that matter, in the final analysis, is but concentrated energy.

In reference to the satisfaction/contentment dimension, a prerequisite for happiness is wisdom, since it will give us the correct leads for differentiating that which makes us happy from that which does not. Being able to relate with our self and other beings from a perspective of love, compassion, respect for all life, as well as feeling useful, are other fundamental requirements for a happy life. In relation to the above, the eminent Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana has noted: "Our biological essence is based on love and cooperation", adding, in a note that reverts us to the linkages with the well-being/health dimension: "we tend to become ill for a lack of love, but never for a lack of violence or aggressiveness."

In spite of those links between the two dimensions, those of well-being/health and satisfaction/contentment, it is evident that this last, linked to the more spiritual aspects, is the most crucial. As the Christian theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin highlighted: "*We are not human beings on a spiritual quest, we are spiritual beings in a human experience*".

Recapitulating, and in order to achieve it, the following basic needs emerge from the above-stated definition of happiness:

-With relation to the well-being/health dimension: health as such, nutrition, housing, clothing, physical exercise, environmental quality, education, and community-based affection and protection.

-With relation to the satisfaction/contentment dimension: wisdom, love, compassion, respect for all life, and feeling useful.

-Bearing in mind that, if we are to be faithful to the higher hierarchical standing of the spiritual, the latter set of requirements should really come first.

Indigenous wisdom and happiness. Comparison with modern societies.

How can we qualify ancestral indigenous wisdom in relation to these benchmarks for happiness? And on the other hand, what can we say of modern civilization's performance in this regard? Let us proceed now to some considerations on these questions.

Insofar as the first, the indigenous should not be idealized or romanticized, nor should we deny that it has also been subjected to its own degenerative process, in a cycle that seems to have been inescapable for all humanity. The

forefathers and thinkers of the eighteenth century incurred, in point of truth, in a certain idealization of indigenous wisdom, the idealization of he who tends to see in another that which he is deeply lacking, or simply the idealization of the simplifier or the one of limited knowledge. Not all indigenous cultures encountered by the Europeans when they arrived in the Americas were at their highest stage of wisdom; some, such as the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas were in decline from their “golden years”. Nevertheless, it is true that with reference to what originally and ancestrally indigenous, the expressions of admiration of Europeans and Americans of said descent, were not far from the truth.

When we speak of the originally or ancestrally indigenous, it should be clear that, for us, the indigenous, more than skin color or race, is a state of consciousness that embodies an intimate and respectful communion with Mother Nature and its laws.

Although it could seem that the term “happiness” did not always appear explicitly in indigenous languages, their lifestyles and attending values did express the concept.

In the language of the *Waraos*, the ancestral aborigines of the Orinoco Delta in Venezuela, the word did exist as such, in the expression: “*oriwaka*”. *Oriwaka*, for the Waraos has the following meanings: “wait together”, “have a party”, “joy of sharing with others”, “paradise where the dead are happy”, meanings that highlight the importance of sharing, of joy, and of the transcendent as the key to happiness. In the *Piaroa* language (a Venezuelan Amazonian ethnic group) “happiness” is called “*eseusa*” and means, principally “the joy of sharing with others”, in value quite similar to the Warao concept. To the ancient *achaguas arawak*, who also inhabited Venezuela, their word “*chunikai*” meant both “happiness” and health” (which takes us back to the equation we earlier highlighted). To the *Baris*, in western Venezuela, when their Creator *Sabaseba* gave life to them it was on the following mandate: “*You will be called Bari and will always be happy and smiling*” and that’s why in their oral tradition is preserved that “*the Baris are thus not allowed to get angry, because so we were made by Sabaseba, as our elders have said. Because so all Bari have been from the beginning and so we shall continue to be*”.

Insofar as the Mayas are concerned, it is interesting to note the importance given to happiness in the behavior prescribed by their moral code known as The Pixab: “*A thing is good as long as it harms no one. A thing is right as long as it contributes to happiness and life*” (Oxlajuj Ajpup, 2001) (emphasis ours).

In the Maya language *Q’eqchi*, happiness is called *sahil ch’oolejil* and means literally “having a glad heart”. Confirming the great centrality that the value of happiness had in daily *Q’eqchi* Maya life, the main social greeting is *masa’ laa ch’ool*, which means: “How is your heart?”

The contrast with the European lifestyle served to raise conscience among indigenous peoples of the merits of their ancestral lifestyle, relative to happiness. In this regard, the following reflection, made around 1676, by Chief Micmac in North America is eloquent: “*Which of these is the wisest and happiest- he who labors without ceasing and only obtains, with great trouble, enough to live on, or he who rests in comfort and finds all he needs in the pleasure of hunting and fishing?...There is no Indian who does not consider himself infinitely more happy*”

and powerful than the French” (Nerburn and Mengelkoch, 1991. Or the following comparison by Chief Maquinna, of the *Nootka* nation, also in North America, after having learned the banking practices brought by white civilization: *“We Indians have no such bank; but when we have plenty of money and blankets, we give them away to other chiefs and people, and by and by they return them, with interest, and our hearts feel good. Our way of giving is our bank”* (Idem).

Compare the above with the greed and individualism that, despite the best wishes of such founding fathers as Franklin, Jefferson and Bolívar, persisted in the bosom of the colonizing European culture. Such inclinations would lead, in the end, to the dismal practices of subduing and slavery to which the colonists would subject indigenous peoples, and the subsequent traffic of African blacks, as well as the growing mercantilist and corporate materialism which would later take hold. In this last regard, as far as the United States is concerned, analysts such as the historian Richard Beard have highlighted the narrow economic interests that truncated much of the high idealism of that nation’s Declaration of Independence written in 1776, when it was translated eleven years later in 1787, into the nation’s Constitution, which explains, among other things, why black slavery was not abolished in the latter (so that blacks were excluded from the Rights proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence as universal to the human condition). In the end this omission cost the new nation dearly, since it had to be settled some eighty years later by a dreadful Civil War. On the other hand, starting from that war, corporations and money would take center-stage in that nation, causing President Lincoln to voice the following concerns, prophetic in their portrayal of the subsequent developments of the United States: *“I see in the near future a crisis approaching that un-nerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. As a result of the War, corporations have been enthroned....An era of corruption in high places will follow and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people”* (Waserman, 1984).

Those narrow economic ambitions, of course, also played their part “South of the Rio Grande” and also truncated the dreams of solidarity and social happiness cherished by the founding fathers of the new republics in that part of the continent. The new landowner and commercial elites sought unscrupulous political and economic divisions for their own ends.

We can find the root of all those inexorable forces of economic greed in the Industrial Revolution. This, which, propagated from England to the rest of the world contemporaneously with the great political and independence-seeking revolutions of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, ended up predominating over much of what the latter pretended to do, including their ideals of social happiness. The great historian Arnold Toynbee has left the following judgment on the subject: *“There were paradoxical and unhappy human consequences of an increase in the production of material wealth. The cause of this social miscarriage was the motive of the entrepreneurs by whom the Industrial Revolution was launched. Their stimulus was greed, and greed was now released from the traditional restraints of law, custom, and conscience.”* (Toynbee, 1978)

Since then, greed has become so ubiquitous that it is today a central subject of debate, particularly in the light of events such as the great wave of corporate

scandals which have shaken the world of late in generalized form, with cases as emblematic as Enron in the United States and Parmalat in Europe.

Well-being / health dimension

Coming back to the indigenous contribution, the following statement by the North American indigenous leader *Tenskwata*, of the *Shawnee*, in 1805, has broad implications because it refers to the root and basic aspects of the happy indigenous lifestyle, and its comparison to European culture:

“Our Creator put us on this wide, rich land, and told us we were free to go where the game was, where the soil was good for planting. That was our state of true happiness... Thus were we created. Thus we lived for a long time, proud and happy. We had never eaten pig meat, nor tasted the poison called whiskey, nor worn wool from sheep, nor struck fire or dug earth with steel, nor cooked in iron, nor hunted and fought with loud guns, nor ever had diseases which soured our blood or rotted our organs. We were pure, so we were strong and happy.” (Windwalker, 2002). Tenskwatawa's acute reflections are particularly relevant to illustrating indigenous concepts concerning the physical well-being and health dimension with respect to the happiness concept, as well as its comparison with the invading civilization that attempted to impose itself over the indigenous peoples.

Smithsonian Institute studies, by historians such as Francisco Herrera Luque and Manuel Cartay, the chronicles of the naturalist scientist Humboldt, and even those of many of the conquistadors, bear witness to the biological and health superiority of the indigenous over the European. Let us quote barely one of these latter, as an example, the words of the conquistador Pedro Álvarez Cabral, who, in the face of the aboriginal world of what is today Brazil, expressed with admiration in 1500: *“They do not plow nor raise [animals] There are no oxen or cows, not goats, nor sheep not chickens. Nor any animal used to living with men, nor do they eat except of that iñame (mandioc), of which there is much here, and of those seeds and fruits of the land, and the trees which grow by themselves, and with this they walk as hardy and plump as we are ourselves not as much.”* (Cartay, 1993).

Even in the subject of curative practices for treating illnesses, the natives were generally superior. Smithsonian Institute researchers have pointed out the following, for the case of Mesoamerica: *“The conquistadors sunken in a general lack of confidence in their own medical skills, frequently sought out the Aztec practitioners for health complaints, in preference to their fellow countrymen.”* (Verano & Ubulaker, 1993).

Well-being as health, in the broader sense of the WHO's definition, was in truth a lifestyle for the traditional native, where in respect and integration with the Five Elements of the Natural Order, that is to say, "earth", "water", "fire", "air" and "ether", the indigenous native obtained all he needed for his subsistence, including, besides health as such, the concomitant requirements of good nourishment, housing, clothing, education, physical exercise, environmental quality, and community-based affection and protection.

Chief *Seattle's* famous manifesto for the most part is a hymn to the virtues of the Five Elements of the Natural Order as vital requisites for human welfare and life.

When health was lost, the indigenous native would turn to purification in order to recover it. As pointed out in the Maya Pixab: "*When disease, problems, pain and desperation invade our days, it is necessary to perform a purification so that harmony will return, so that peace and happiness will return.*" (Oxlajuj Ajput, 2001). Purification had diverse methods and depth, according to need: fasting, de-intoxication with multiple remedies, penitence, service to others, spiritual retreats, etc.

On the other hand, all the strength of the indigenous culture, and all its wisdom in terms of well-being, could not withstand the overpowering European conquering onslaught, which in the end inflicted on the aboriginal peoples one of the greatest genocides that the history of humanity has ever known. At the end of the conquest and colonial rule, about 90% of the American Indian population had succumbed. More than the action of the musket (harquebus), this was due to imported diseases that decimated them. And these, less than direct contact with the Europeans, as is usually said, came fundamentally from the collapse of their physical and spiritual aboriginal lifestyle, in the face of the European colonialist assault and enslavement. This meant the collapse of their immunological systems, leaving them prey to all types of disease. This is the same fate which, indeed, awaits present-day humanity, which in the deepening of an anti-nature life and the destruction or contamination of the natural environment has gone so far that it now faces a similar collapse -as evidenced by the present proliferation of diseases of the most diverse types.

The exploitation of the indigenous continued in post-independence times, under the domination of the "criollo" (mestizo or mixed-race) culture in the new republics; in some aspects with even greater ferocity and contempt. This was true up to contemporary times, when after 500 years of servitude and resistance, a cultural and political indigenous resurrection movement seems finally to have begun in the Americas. This movement has benefited from international and domestic legal conquests that have recognized the "rights of indigenous peoples" to their own ancestral cultures and habitats to a great extent. This laudable achievement, nevertheless, must be tempered with the warning that in the ancestral indigenous wisdom the concept of "rights" -if it ever existed as such- was subordinated to the more important concept of duty-fulfillment. If one reads Chief Seattle's emblematic manifesto, this is a Charter of duties: duties to care for Nature, to respect other living beings, etc; Seattle speaks little of rights. In this regard, the famous expression attributed to him: "*the land does not belong to men, men belong to the land*", typical of universal indigenous wisdom, summarizes everything. The new kind of indigenous sovereignty, emphasizing only rights -a distortion brought by modern culture- has lent itself to abuses in some aboriginal territories, through the implementation of natural resource depredation projects, or in opposition to the integrity of aboriginal culture, promoted by indigenous persons alienated from their traditional culture and unscrupulous foreign partners, some times even above more protective national laws.

Satisfaction / contentment dimension

Let us turn now our principal attention to the satisfaction/contentment dimension of the concept of happiness. It has to do, as we have said before, with the more subtle, but also more crucial dimension of happiness.

Even with physical health, and in possession of many material assets and social relations, we can end up being unhappy. Part of the explanation of the above could be in having too much of all these things, with which we can end up as "possessed possessors" (having too much, like having nothing are two extremes that conspire against happiness). When greed enters into play in this process, the matter becomes more serious. As we have said before, greed is anathema to happiness in a major degree, since those human beings who have fallen prey to it are never satisfied. As Gandhi said so well: *"The world has enough to satisfy everyone's needs, but not enough to satisfy a single one's greed."* Greed makes us want to accumulate assets or money in an insatiable manner, frequently at the expense of the needs of others and of the Natural Order, against the precepts of love, compassion and not harming life. "Goods" accumulated in this manner end up turning into "bads".

Jefferson had excluded property from the category of "natural right" in the Declaration of independence of the United States; this proclamation was reserved only for life, liberty and happiness. Jefferson considered that property should have social limits, and therefore was more a 'civil right' –subject to regulation. Private property and its evil usage through greed or avarice was seen by indigenous cultures in the same manner, as shown by the following statement by *Ohiyesa (Santee Sioux) Charles Eastman*: *"The tribe claimed the ground, the rivers and the game; only personal property was owned by the individual, and even that, it was considered a shame to greatly increase. For they held that greed grew into crime, and much property made men forget the poor....Without a thought of same or mendicancy, the young, helpless and aged all were cared for by the nation that, in the days of their strength, they were taught and eager to serve. And how did it work out? Thus: Avarice, said to be the root of all evil, and the dominant characteristic of the European races, was unknown among Indians, indeed it was made impossible by the system they had developed"* (Windwalker, 2002)

Another part of the explanation of why possession of things or relationships may not necessarily make us happy could lie in the quality of what one has or enjoys. We may possess a great deal but the quality of our possessions may fail to satisfy us.

But the most important reason for explaining why having or enjoying things does not guarantee happiness is the *ephemeral* nature of many of these, which causes all attachment to them to be inexorably destined to suffering when they disappear –as inevitably they must- from our lives. In regard to the latter, the greatest attachment of all can be the attachment to our own physical life, since in truth, the only certain thing in it is that it will end in its own death, but without certainty of exactly when or how.

From the above emerges, then, the importance of attaching ourselves only to the transcendent, the permanent, and this is only achieved in God's territory and

in the territory of the soul, or to say it in more indigenous terms, of the Great Spirit or Creator, and the spirit of each one of us.

From the Creator and his works, the Natural Cosmos, comes all the indigenous wisdom for happiness. And let us remember that wisdom is a prerequisite –together with love, compassion, respect for all life and feeling useful-for fulfilling of the well-being/contentment dimension.

Thus the following admission in the sacred Thanksgiving Prayer of the North American Oneidas: *“Our mother earth takes care of all lives. Let’s put our minds together. So be it in our minds..... To the one who made all things that we are thankful here on earth. Let’s put our minds together. So be it in our minds”*

Separation from the Natural Order was for the indigenous peoples a separation from wisdom. As exemplified by the following statement by the *Oglala Sioux* Chief Luther Standing Bear: *The old Lakota was wise. He knew that man’s heart, away from nature, becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans too. So he kept his children close to nature’s softening influence.”* (Nerburn and Mengelkoch, 1991)

Due to all of the above, it is necessary to reflect on the degree to which the most ancient indigenous gatherer-cultures, (that had not entered the agricultural or industrial stages) were as primitive as present-day conventional wisdom would have us believe. The latter tells us that the evolutionary progression of man has ascended from gathering as the “most backward stage” to the industrial as “the most advanced”. However, the gatherer cultures, on account of their depending on the intimate knowledge and mastery of the Natural Order, in order to be able to survive sustainably on the basis of its wild fruits, were, indeed, closer to a greater wisdom –from the indigenous point of view that emphasizes a full understanding of the Natural Order.

On the other hand, conventional wisdom would also have us believe that aboriginal cultures such as the *Caribs*, who populated Brazil, Venezuela and the Caribbean Sea, were more backward than the Aztecs and the Incas simply because they lacked the monumentality of the latter – as reflected in their great cities, temples, pyramids, etc. But, could we not say, rather, that the Caribs were freer, happier, and wiser precisely because they avoided the above, being happy instead with living within a low-intensity use of their natural environment, through a de-centralized gatherer-hunter-agricultural culture, in good measure itinerant, without the ties of monumentality and social stratification characteristic of the great American indigenous empires? Historical evidence seems to indicate that, in fact, the Caribs, known for their great devotion to freedom, remained in it deliberately, and, in truth, for the European Conquistadors, were more difficult to subjugate.

Wisdom, Natural order Laws and happiness

For the indigenous peoples, therefore, the wisdom essential for happiness lies in being attuned to Nature and its laws. Among these the “The Law of the Oneness of Life” stands out, of “All is one and all is alive” – the great Shaman maxim. If we humans are only “a thread in the weave of life” – as the great Chief Seattle said, then in consequence, as he said too: *“anything we do to the weave, we will be doing to ourselves.”*

We can thereby deduce the corollary that we must avoid doing harm to all life (the *ama guaña* commandment of the Incas, analogous to the *ahimsa* of Buddhists and Hindus) and, on the contrary, must profess love for all Creation. Creation itself, in truth, is an act of love; even our own lives as human beings come, generally, of the loving fusion between two beings. All Creation arises from love, is nourished by love, lives for love, and ends by dissolving itself into love. No wonder the First Commandment in the Christian tradition, coinciding with all the other main religions, refers to Love – in a “golden rule” present in all religions and encompassing all the other commandments.

Another cardinal law of the Natural order is “The Law of Impermanence” that says that “The only constant is that nothing is constant”. In indigenous cultures death, in this sense is a great teacher, because it reminds us that today we have to live to the fullest. In the indigenous tradition, every “spiritual warrior” prepares for each battle as if it were the last, and by doing so achieves excellence. Impermanence teaches us to treasure the transcendent and the immortal as the most important elements for happiness, As the *Yamparika Comanche* Ten Bears said: “*I look for the benefits which would last forever, and so my face shines with joy*”. (Nerburn and Mengelkoch, 1991). From the teachings of the legendary Yaqui sage Don Juan, the saying: “*always having death as companion and teacher*” stands out as key to wisdom.

A third fundamental law is the “The Law of Cause and Effect”, which says to us that, “Every action produces a consequence or reaction”. Thus, in every traditional indigenous culture, the native is careful of all his steps; he is in a permanent state of alert to foresee the consequences of what he does, he relates to the natural environment from a perspective of great respect. so as not to cause undesirable consequences that would inevitably affect him. For the same reason, in indigenous wisdom, the notion of trying to repair any damages immediately is common, as is the notion of trying always for positive actions so as to obtain favorable effects. With regard to all of the above, the following teaching of Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé nation in North America is illustrative: “*We were taught to believe that the Great Spirit sees and hears everything, and that he never forgets, that thereafter he will give every man a spirit-home according to his deserts. If he has been a god man, he will have a good home; if he has been a bad man, he will have a bad home*” (Nerburn and Mengelkoch, 1991).

In Venezuela, with relation to indigenous cultures such as the Waraos and the Pemones, seeing how the law of cause and effect is venerated in their meticulous ancestral cultural behavior codes, full of taboos and “contras” (to repair damages or counterweigh their effects) and recommendations so as to better get along with the environment and other living beings, is admirable.

Other laws, such as the “The Law of the Cyclical-spiraled Movement of life and its processes” (easily discerned by indigenous people in their close communion with the seasonal cycles of gathering, planting, water, etc.) “The Law of Analogy” (The microcosms reflects the macrocosms and viceversa), and “The Law of Complementary Poles”, were also part of the vital cultural heritage of indigenous wisdom.

Happiness: A matter of Being more than of Having

From all of the above one can deduct that to reach happiness, definitively, the aspects of “being”, linked to the transcendent and more lasting are more important than those of “having”, linked to the less transcendent and more transitory.

And that in the case of ancestral indigenous wisdom, “Being”, in the most satisfying manner, in the form most conducive to happiness, was linked to the greatest possible integration with Creation, with the natural order and its laws. The Hopi Indians, so revered for their ancestral wisdom, had summarized their creed of peace and happiness in the exclamation: *Techqua Ikachi*, that meant, “*Blending with the land and celebrating life*”. This notion of life as a celebration reminds us of the following teachings in the Quechua tradition of the *Intij Inti*, The Creator, who said at the genesis of the indigenous people: “*Go to the world to enjoy, because by enjoying you will learn, and by learning you will grow and by growing you will fulfill the sacred purpose of evolution.*” No wonder the general zeal of the traditional indigenous peoples for revering and respecting the Natural Order, so well summarized by Chief Joseph who, additionally, compared it with the attitude of the conquering European: “*We were contented to let things remain as the Great Spirit Chief made them. They were not, and would change the rivers and mountains if they did not suit them*” (idem)

Epilogue. Happiness: A vital life mission

All the above brings us back to a fundamental aspect of the definition of happiness, its conformity with natural identity, with what we are in accordance with the Creator’s designs, with our natural mission of existential life.

In that light, the following acute statement by Henry Steel Commager, with reference to the lost wisdom, acquires universal significance. “*Men were happy only in a natural state*”. Or, to say it in the reverse sense, if we achieve our natural identity we will automatically be happy, since as the Quechua Luis Espinoza has said: “*Happiness is our natural condition and the main symptom of being in our right place.*”

To be happy, however, each of us has to add our individual life mission to the common existential mission in life we have as humans and living conscious beings. In relation to the this, the following explanation of the Nawal concept of the Mayas summarizes it very well: “*...Happiness and complete fulfillment in life are achieved by carrying through the work or function given to us at the moment of conception and birth... No one comes to the world because he wants to come, say the Elders, who wisely assure us that we all have a mission to fulfill in life; a role to play to benefit humanity. Every human being has a Nawal that defines a particular personality and makes him different from other persons... the life-mission will depend, then, on his qualities, aptitudes, virtues and defects as ruled by his Nawal, which is not more than a divinity that guides and helps the individual. It is his gift, his donation, his responsibility, and if he should resign the mission, he would fall sick, or worst of all, would die.*” (Oxlajuj Ajput, 2001).

We are happy, then, if we fulfill the mission to which we are destined as human beings, both in the cosmic sense as well as individually. We are happy, if

we are simply what we are meant to be. And this constitutes a path more than a destiny, in the here and now. Making an analogy with the simpler animal world: “the bird does not sing because it’s happy, it’s happy because it sings.”

And by being happy, we transcend, we free ourselves from that which is of secondary value, the perishable.

Analogous to the bird which does not fear the moment when the branch he is on will begin to creak, because it has wings to fly away.

Like the wings to which we may appeal when physical death arrives, because, as Chief Seattle said, in the final analysis: “there is no such thing as death, but a change of worlds.”

Like the wings placed over indigenous human beings in the sacred city of Tiwanaku in Bolivia or on the rocks of Atures in the Venezuelan Orinoco, which remind us of our own transcendence.

The transcendence where happiness dwells.

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