The Science of Happiness and Wellbeing
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Lecture - 03
Happiness and Wellbeing: Do Cultures and Environments Call the Shorts

Good morning, friends, today we are going to take up from where we left in the last session where we started by trying to define what is happiness and we came up with more problems than solutions. But then, you see that as I had shared earlier the entire area is a fairly challenging area and in trying to identify the issues that are involved, we can have a very nice and beautiful experience as well.

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So, these are what we will be covering. We will be covering the key concepts, we will talk about cultural language and happiness that is the focus then we will talk about environment and happiness in a little more detail. And with that we will kind of wrap up today's discussion and before we wrap it up I will share with you the direction in which we will be moving in the next two sessions.

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So, the focus today is going to be on as I shared a little earlier.

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A revision of what we have done. We have identified through an exploration of different perspectives different inquiries into what happiness means to people and we came up with a series of features. We realize that there can be either short or long they can be intense or less intense can be strongly linked to the body as the point of origin or at a mental level can be evaluated as momentary or long term.

And there can be different levels of happiness and different kinds of happiness. And we realize that all of this makes sense and today in the first few minutes, we are going to develop an awareness of the fact that; this is probably related to how we conceptualize our world. We

have already discussed about the various definitions of happiness in different cultures in different countries. But we will take that thread a little further.

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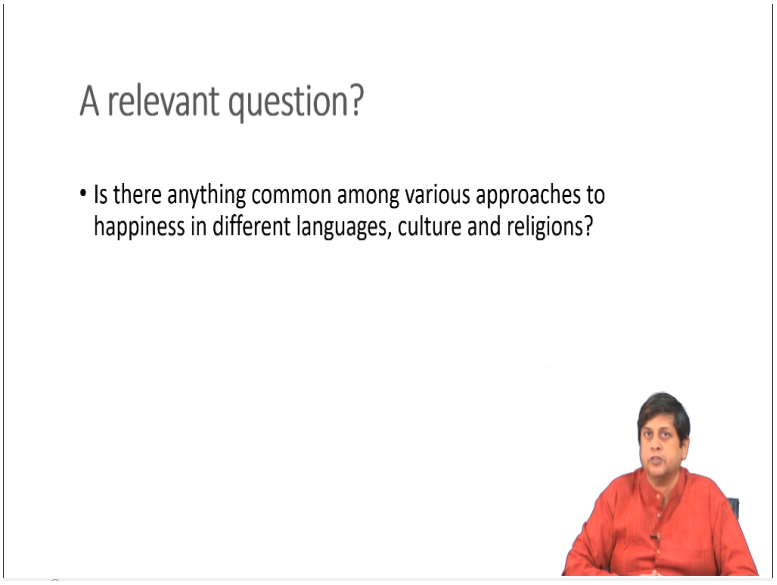

And talk about the relation between language, culture, religion and happiness okay. And so, it is probably a relevant question to ask is there anything common among the various approaches to happiness in different languages culture and religions. We got a partial answer to this question in the last session if you remember.

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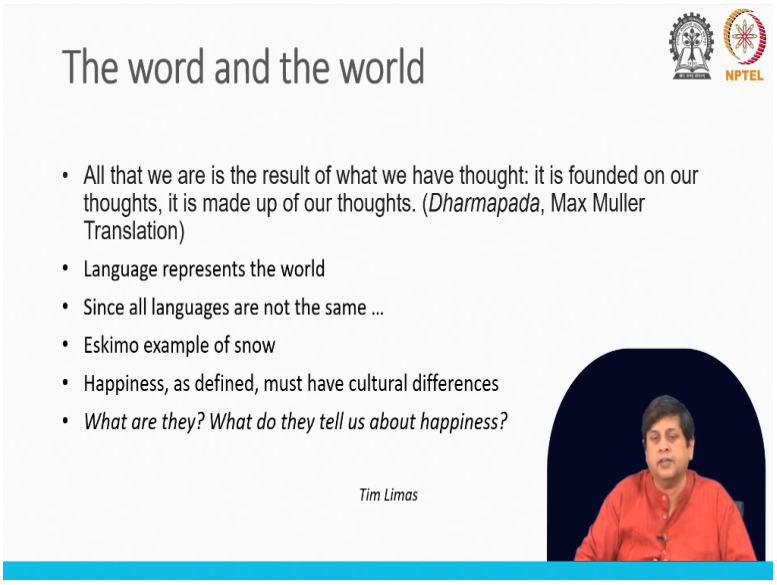

In today's session we are going to focus on the linguistic aspect of it, so it is, if you are looking at the text of Dharmapada it tells us that all that we are is the result of what we have thought. In other words, the boundaries of my language are the boundaries of my world. This

has been echoed in western tradition by many other philosophers Schopenhauer Wittgenstein and others as well.

But what we are talking about fundamentally is that language represents the world and the language ingrains the culture that it represents. So, through language when we; are trying to generate meaning because without language, we cannot do anything. We are also in the process bringing in the different cultural angles the cultural dimensions. For example, if I ask you that how many words would you have for snow in the English language.

Or even in our own languages we might find that one or two words are sufficient. Why? Because snow; is not something which is a part of our daily lives unless we are living in the mountains where it regularly snows. So, for people who stay in the lower part of the country the middle states, snow might have just one or two words in English we might have 3 4 5 synonyms and related words.

But imagine that in the Eskimo language, for example there would be probably up to more than a hundred different variations of the word snow. Why? Because their entire world is snow and ice and hence there are so many different sets of snow and ice that that have relevant connotations or implications in their lives. They build houses with snows they melt snow they do so many things with snow.

And each category of snow would probably have a different meaning and different connotation and a different term for it. So, Limas tries to say that if you start looking at the specific words which exist for different traditions and cultures probably will get a lot of insight into the different aspects of happiness. I will not go into the details of the methodology the reference is given at the end.

But you see that I will give you a schematic understanding of what he suggests and what he arrives at bio content analysis of more than a thousand words in different languages.

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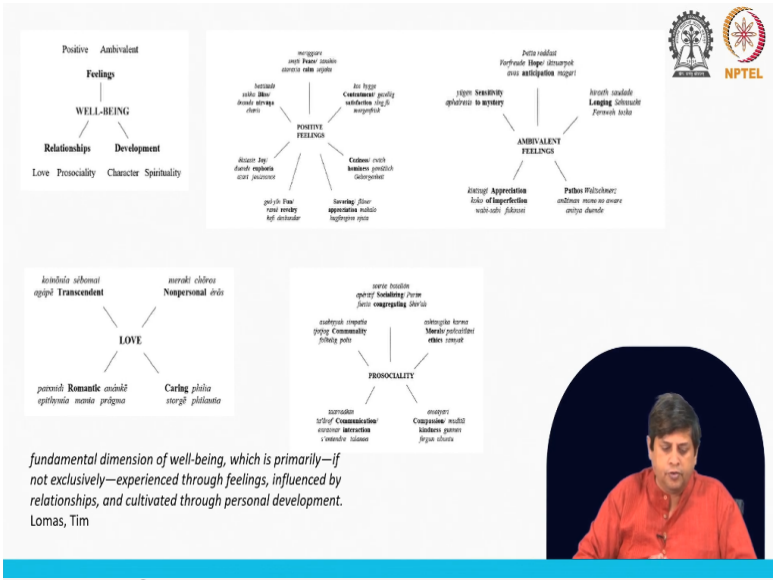

So, you see that right at the beginning three things are arrived at. So, the fundamental dimensions of well-being which is primarily if not experienced through feelings influenced by relationships and cultivated through personal development. So, you find that when we are talking about happiness and well-being, we find that they are founded on our emotions. And they build up on the basis of our various relationships.

And through these emotions network through these relationships we aspire for development, evolution, flow, a journey. I will not go into the details of it but when it starts talking about feelings there are two distinctive kinds of feelings which are associated with happiness one obviously are positive feelings that we discussed earlier but, there are ambivalent feelings also. Ambivalent feelings are feelings which are not necessarily happy nor necessarily sad.

For example, if I can give an example romantic emotions very often not a mixture of positive and negative in some sense. And yet at the end of the day they give a pleasurable feeling. When it comes to relationship, we find that there can be two distinctive ways that you build relationship. Relationship based on love and relationship based on pro-sociality generosity desire to do good to others.

And other such feelings and emotions which are not necessarily love which go beyond the personal and belong to a social realm or even an altruistic level.

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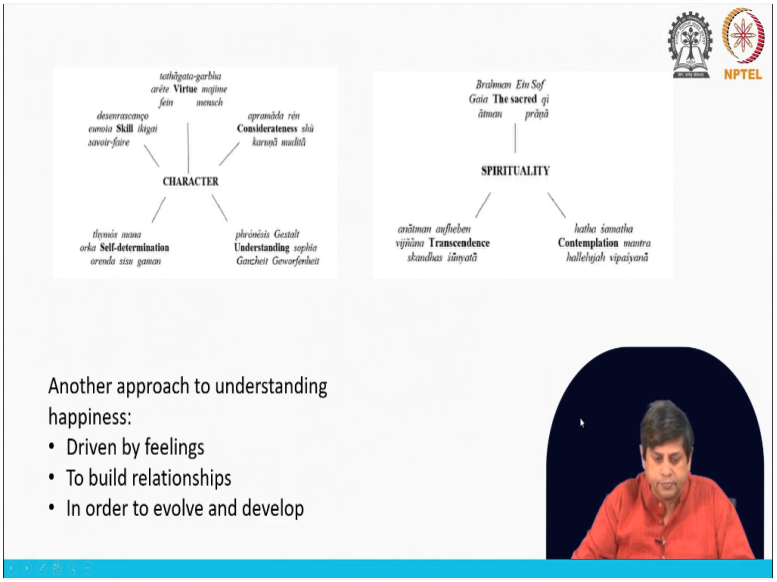

And when we come to the different aspects of let us say the when we are looking at the different aspects of development, we can have either development at this level of character and the different dimensions are provided here. I will talk about it in the next session in greater detail or on the basis of spirituality. So, in other words the reason I am talking about it is that across different traditions.

There are traditional variations which we will talk about in the next session but across traditions. Because here we are trying to look at the general understanding of happiness, they are driven by feelings in order to build relationships which kind of anchor happiness in order to evolve and develop and all these things together play very very critical very very crucial role in whatever it is that we call happiness.

So, you see that we are now approaching happiness from a different perspective and this could be considered as something which is which has emerged from different traditions and cultures. So, that is how we are introducing the element of the significance of traditions and cultures in the context of happiness. But in the next session; when I start taking on a journey of the different seekers of happiness in different traditions.

We will be able to find out how they differ from culture to culture. How something which I talked about in very quick definitions but in a more detailed way and you might inquire why is it that we need to go into that in a session like this. Because you see that this tells us that perhaps at a very fundamental level each human being has a desire to search for happiness. In some exceptional cases these have translated into beautiful journeys.

And these journeys have led to wisdoms and these wisdoms are shared across traditions across cultures by let us say the journey of Zarathustra the journey of Christ the journey of prophet Muhammad or the journey of Gautam Buddha or Shankaracharya. So, these journeys are beautiful journeys they are all have having different distinctive nuances of differences and yet at some level there is also a commonality. So, we will touch upon that as we go ahead.

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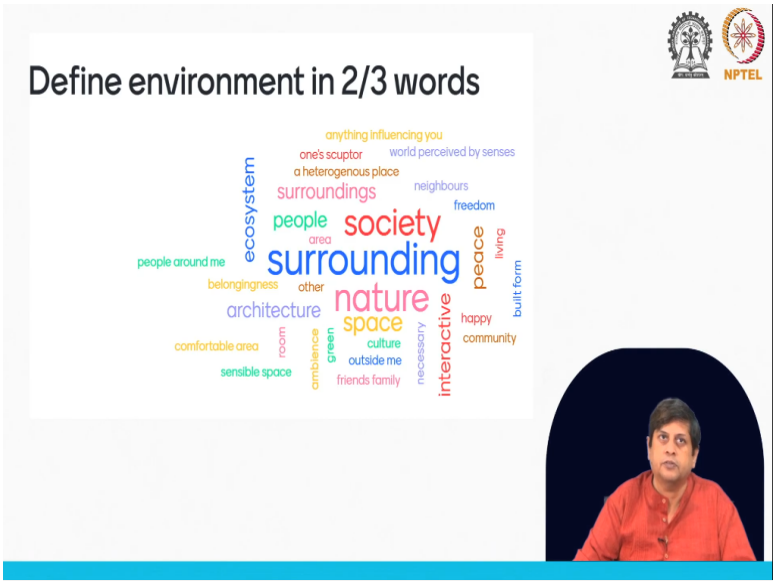

But if you are looking at the other aspect of things which is environment because, culture we realize to a very great extent does influence our understanding of happiness. But irrespective of the cultural differences we assure that in all cultures whatever way we define happiness, happiness is determined happiness is associated with emotions is anchored in relationships and takes us on a journey or evolution if it is something which endures.

That is all we have been able to achieve but then individual differences are there. Today in the second part of this session what we are talking about is the concept of environment. Now when in a class I asked the students how do I understand environment. We found that there are various different nuances of the concept of environment. Environment can be the physical ecosystem it can be the social and cultural ecosystem.

And if you are talking about the inner environment, it can be also a psychic ecosystem. Today in this particular session we are going to focus on the physical as well as the sociocultural environment. Friends, happiness researchers tell us that to a very great extent our ability to

experience happiness is genetically determined right at birth and the point is that we are predisposed to being happy or unhappy right from the beginning.

So, if you are taking 100 people maybe for 50 people there is a possibility that they would be happy or unhappy based on their genetic coding right at birth. In a similar way you might say that another 25 percent is determined by the environmental factors. So, if you are talking about the environmental factors over here that leaves us only 25 percent where my personal choice my personal determination gives me the ability to be happy or unhappy.

So, we can interpret it in this way that probably out of a hundred people 25 percent through their own effort can become happy or if I am talking about my personal self, I might say that I have a 25 percent chance of becoming happy through my own efforts. So, I have that potential within me which is which is very significant. Even a 1 percent potential for being happy probably is very significant and if 25 percent, is a big deal for us.

But what is the other 25 percent all about if even without our effort our environment can make us happy what exactly is it all about.

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You see that, we have beautiful tales in the Indian tradition and if you are looking at the Mahabharata; I will not go into it because that will give you an opportunity to study on your own look at the story of Parikshit and Janmajay, Takshaka and Astika and the destruction of the Khandava forest. I will focus in the third point the other two I leave it as food for thought what is the story which finally leads to the destruction of the jungle.

The forest but even as we go into that let me share with you that if you do look deep into it. You find that there is politics at play over there as well and the concept of environment and it's ability to make people unhappy or happy is something which is as problematic at that point of time as it is today whatever the associations the Indian associations of the forest meditative practices.

The Rishis and the Munis, the Mendicants, Gautam Buddha, Gina's all moved into the forest in order to identify get isolation that is not the same as loneliness. In order to reflect contemplate in the search for meaning of life and search for peace happiness whichever way you define it. But then you also have the forest which is negatively associated with exiles like in the Mahabharata as well as in the Ramayana, in both the cases the princess are exiled in the forest.

Forest stands for beauty forest stands for peace, calm, greenery and the movement away from the temptations from worldly material existence, that is why you have the concept the Aranyakas and you have in the Indic perspective the four movements from brahmacharya to Grihastha to Vanaprastha moving into the forest. So, this ambivalent environment is something I would just like to go a little deeper into in the context of understanding of happiness.

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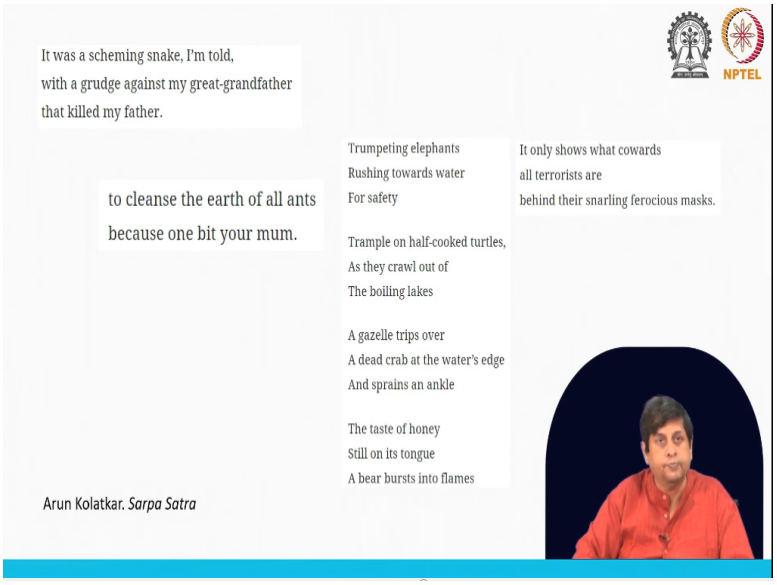

So, I present before you a beautiful text by Arun Kolatkar, Sarpa Satra which deals with the story of the destruction of Khandava forest. What happens over there? If you are looking at

the text of the Mahabharata, we are told that Indraprastha has to come up. And we are given a lot of reasons just like today for any kind of change that takes place we have a lot of discourses lot of angles.

So, the destruction of the forest is necessitated by certain compulsions we are told and there is a conflict between Lord Krishna and Lord Indra. Lord Indra wants to protect the forest and its animals who have prayed to him and Lord Krishna with Arjuna they want to burn the jungle because indirectly once the jungle is cleared the palace and the city of palaces will be built Indraprastha will be built.

So, that that conflict is there now I will not go into the poem, you can read it by yourself but what we are told is about the crisis of environment which significantly influences us. As human beings and of course the creatures who survive in those contexts. The fact that ecological context is so significant for happiness has been something which is highly debated today we talk about carbon footprint and all that especially the developed countries.

And that makes us realize that the story is not new the story is fairly odd more than 4000 years old and the problems related to the relationship between human habitat and human beings their relationship and the happiness that is related to that is something which was as problematic in the past as it is today.

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So, I will not go into this but briefly, we can have we can talk about spatial environment we can talk about temporal environment. I might be over a period of time be exposed to different

kinds of environment or the environment might change if you are talking about let us say right now, I am in IIT KGP I might move to an NIT or to any other institute or to another or the IIT system itself might change which will mean that the temporal environment changes.

I can move from one city to another spatial environment changes. Then, what constitutes environment it could be as I told you at a physical level at a level of workplace, even in a workplace the environmental change and we will talk about the other things later.

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If you are looking at the findings in the world happiness report 2020 then we find that there is a small typo here environmental change matters to us and the findings suggest that today the entire world is suddenly awake to the change in environment. If you are looking at the yellow bar you find satisfied with environmental protection people are unhappy with that. And in 2020 the survey both indicated the urgency for looking at environment and the findings related to that.

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So, you see that this current association with environment and its relationship with human beings is something that is explored in this particular context in biophilia. And you see that depending on the kind of environment in which we are there can be stress reduction, positive emotions, cognitive restoration and self-regulation which can take place if you are in a physically conducive environment.

And it can indirectly be affected by exercise and interaction and physically our physical health can be affected by lack of pollutants. And you see that this fact that the physical environment matters is something which is well tested especially if you are looking at the 18th, 19th and 20th century literature you find that we are told of stories which deal with sanitorium you are going to a place you are going to the hills you are going to the clean air in order to restore yourselves.

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So, these are just examples of that I have given of stories. But if you are looking at the global findings again from the world happiness report 2020, you find that to what extent does the environment affect our mental well-being our mental understand feeling of goodness wellness you find that air pollution matters, climatic conditions matter, land cover matters and it is found that a sunny bright atmosphere especially in Europe makes people feel happy.

Whereas, soggy cold temperature makes us unhappy, extreme heat makes us feel unhappy and pollutants to a certain extent as you can see from the graph make us happy or unhappy.

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Now, there was another interesting study which was discussed in the context of the world happiness report Mappiness study. Imagine I think the study was done in UK imagine that you have an app and the app keep sends you a notification randomly at different points of

time during the day and says how happy or unhappy you are feeling at the moment. And imagine that the location the GPS location is something which is documented at that point of time a very simple app.

But what happens is if one lakh people are responding to this app?
What happens? If we have data to the tune of 10 lakh data points you get a map you get a pattern. So, the findings of the study was that the happiness level of the people were correlated with specific locations in specific ways. Especially, outdoor green and blue spaces made them happy and natural habitats made them happy balanced over extreme places.

That is if you had you went into the deep extremely dangerous jungle then the happiness level went down unbroken sunshine made people happy coasts, mountains, canals, trees all these things made them happy and when we are talking about built environment that is cities, towns. Cities and towns which were beautiful had beautiful structures made people happy. So, even at a very basic level the physical environment does influence our levels of happiness.

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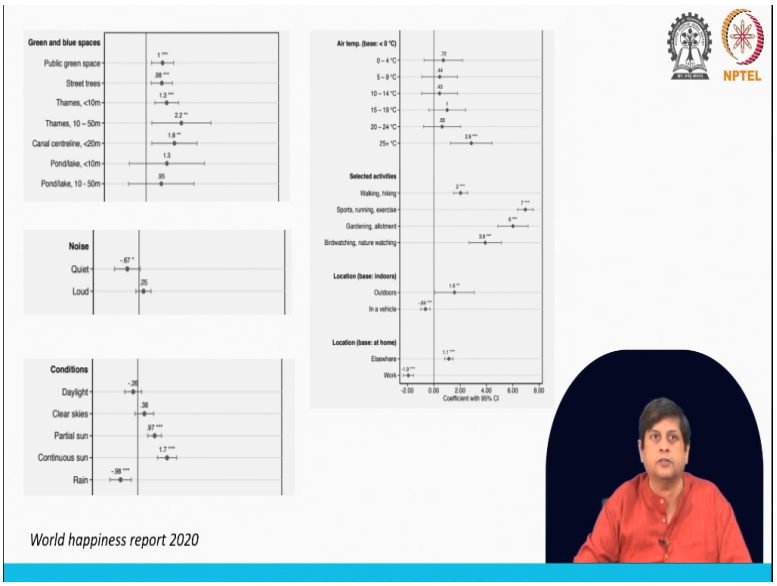

Now if you are looking at, so I will not go into the details but you can see the graphs which indicate to what extent where the graphs shift to a right you can you find indications of how significantly certain parameters affect our levels of happiness.

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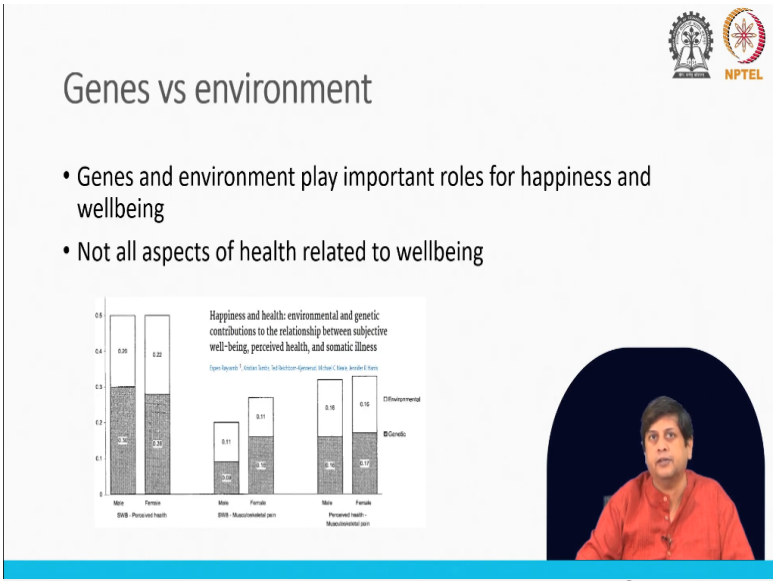

The points I made a little earlier, I told you a little earlier about genes as well as environment and the studies are given at the end in the references, you can look into them. But as I told you genes and environment do play a very significant role in the context of our happiness.

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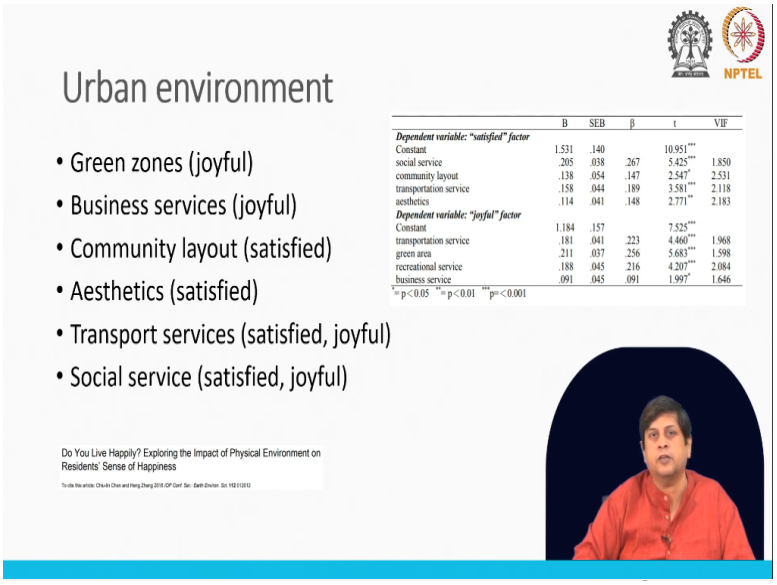

And you see that findings specifically in the context of urban environment suggests that green zones, business services, community layouts, transportation, aesthetics, social services all these things.

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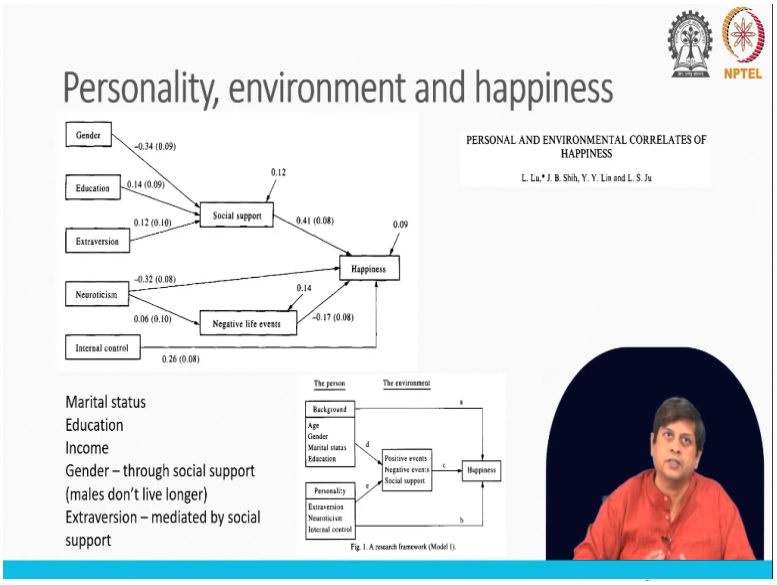

Play a significant role in the context of cities in deciding whether we are happy or not. Similarly, you see that social support which is also a subset of the social environment positive or negative life events is a different thing that is individual, but social support depending on the kind of gender that you have all these things also affect the level of happiness like marital status, education, income, gender.

Where there is social support or lack of social support extroversion which is personality all these things are mediated all these things play a significant role mediate and determine the level of happiness and some of these happen to be environmental components. So, you see that there might be places where the opportunity for education and income is better. There might be locations where there is gender support or lack of gender support.

And these would play a significant role in the context of your level of happiness. So, there are personal components but there are also environmental components which significantly contribute to happiness and here we are focusing on the environmental components.

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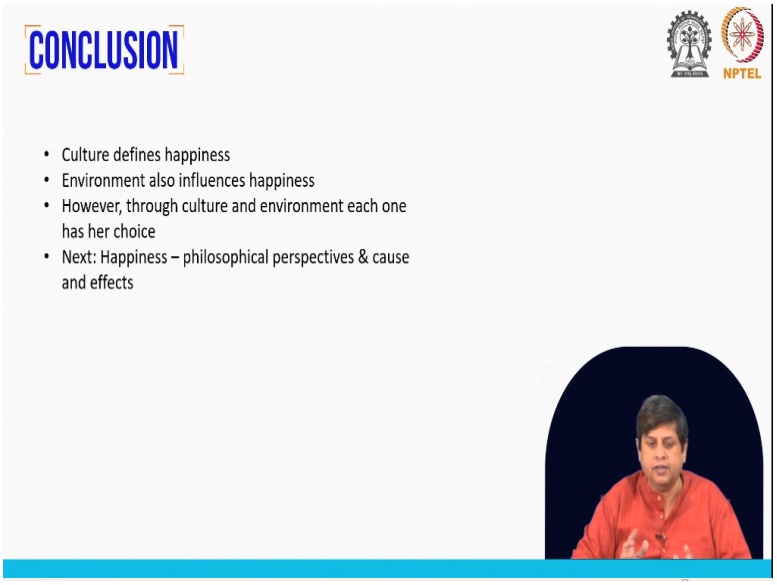

So, at the end of the day if we want to kind of sum up what we have discussed so far. We realize that happiness is something which is still difficult to define but we have found certain patterns. In the last session we found set of patterns certain set of guidelines as to understand different kinds of happiness. Today in the first phase we understood that is irrespective of the fact there are different cultures.

Across cultures certain ways of looking at happiness can be summarized and generalized. In the next session we will be looking at these cultural differences and the philosophical tradition linked to that and the journeys and the quests for happiness. When it comes to the environmental component of happiness, we realize that the fact that environment is something which plays a significant role in human life is something which has been embedded in our cultural discourses even more than four thousand years back.

So, that is about physical environment when we are talking about social environment. And when we are talking about cultural environment as briefly pointed out through some of these studies they play significant role. The world happiness report suggests that both the physical urban, rural spaces and the built environment play a significant role in our lives. Some of the other studies which I cited also indicate that there are personal factors which play a key role in our levels of happiness.

But there are also other factors especially social support and support for different kinds of activities opportunities for education income which play also a significant role. Because these determine our financial or material security and indirectly also affect our levels of happiness

and then of course workplace. So, on the basis of this what are we going to do next, we have already kind of looked at and understood the various context within which happiness.

It can be located and happiness can be influenced, the next two sessions will be focusing on the different happiness journeys. The happiness perspectives which definitely are influenced by different cultural practices or cultural orientations, but they also are the base of the beginning of cultural journeys. Many of these traditions are built around people if you are talking about Christianity, Christianity is built around a person.

If you are talking about some of the Buddhism it is built around and the various cultures related to that are built around Buddha. So, we will talk about that complex relationship a little bit but more important about the quest the nature of the quest the similarities and differences and the various nuances of happiness that they make us aware of. The fact that you are in this class implies that either you are a seeker of happiness or you have some material benefits associated with taking this course.

But if you are curious about happiness and want to be happy that means that it is very relevant to also look at the journeys of other people who have very seriously searched for happiness and that is how people explore in the next few classes.

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So, these are some of the references which I refer to in the discussion you can go through them if you are more interested. Some of it would be made available along with the links in the resources that our team of TAs will share with you. And please keep updated with the

specific service that are associated with these fixed sessions. So, that we can have a very meaningful interaction and you will get feedback related by. Thank you very much meet again very soon.