

Wellbeing and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm

Radio Thailand Dhamma Talk

By

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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa.

Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Rightly Self-awakened One.

Good morning and welcome to the Radio Thailand's Dhamma Talk. I am Venerable Phra Shakyavongvisuddhi of Mahamakut Buddhist University at Wat Bovoranives Viharn, your host for this morning's Dhamma Talk. This is a weekly Dhamma sermon brought to you by Radio Thailand to keep you reminds of your spirituality based on the teachings of the Buddha and attuned them to our needs in the chaotic modern life.

Today's dhamma talk will be on dealing with emotion and stress reduction. I have here with me a psychology major student who is co-hosting the programme. She is Khun Nopphassorn Saeneewong Na Ayudhaya. Welcome Khun Nopphassorn to the programme.

On the 2nd of the April, I was invited by the Royal Government of Bhutan, the host of the United Nations high-level meeting on 'wellbeing and happiness: defining a new economic paradigm' to take part in the meeting at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. I was invited in the capacity of one of the scholars out of over 600 eminent scholars from around the globe. Our main task was to be a part of think tank to build a new economic paradigm focus on wellbeing and happiness under the auspices of the United Nations Organization. The UN has taken this issue of wellbeing and happiness as its 66th General Assembly. I was a single Theravada Buddhist monk in this event. However, on the part of the Buddhist tradition, there were another two Buddhist represents from an American Tibetan Buddhism and a Roshi from American Zen Buddhism. Similarly, in the name of spiritual scholars there were represents from Hindu, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Bahai.

After we have witnessed with hard statistical evidence as the Gross Domestic Product or GDP has grown, people have not grown up yet. There are many suggestions that there is a low level of income beyond which your income may grow but your happiness won't. It is obvious that the current world is dominated by money, military and materialism. This leads to depletion of natural resources, social destruction and excessive desire. Therefore, we were given a task to create a New Economic Paradigm which focuses on wellbeing and happiness instead. Despite its desperation, the task was challenging and equally exciting. I was chosen to be a panellist to offer a brief comment to the UN High-Level Meeting of over 600 renowned scholars from all over the world.

In today's Dhamma talk, I would like to present a glimpse of this historic event which took place in the first week of April at the United Nations headquarters. Indeed, this was an unprecedented event where scholars from all field of subjects both from pure sciences and human sciences, diplomats, spiritual scholars, politicians, economists, NGOs, High-level government bodies and high-level UN administrators meet and discuss

on the same platform on the subject of wellbeing and happiness. It was indeed surprising to see everyone came to talk about the subject of happiness which was never taken seriously as a major issue of the UN agenda or any government's policy.

Few years ago, when there were some scholars began to work on the subject of happiness they did a basic search on the web to see if there was any other organizations with happiness in its name and surprisingly answer came back on his computer: 'Your search for happiness has produce no results.' Therefore, it is unprecedented indeed to see every walks of life come together in the same platform to discuss on this rare but needy subject of 'happiness.' Moreover, on this occasion the first World Happiness Report was launched at the UN.

According to the report, the happiest countries in the world are all in Northern Europe. Their average life evaluation score is 7.6 on a 0-to-10 scale. The least happy countries are all poor countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with average life evaluation scores of 3.4. Although it seems like wealth is a main factor of happiness the report also shows that it is not just wealth that makes people happy: Political freedom, strong social networks and an absence of corruption are together more important than income in explaining wellbeing differences between the top and bottom countries. At the individual level, good mental and physical health, someone to count on, job security and stable families are equally crucial.

Following are among the findings of the first ever World Happiness Report, commissioned for the April 2nd United Nations Conference on Happiness mandated by the UN General Assembly. The report reflects a new worldwide demand for more attention to happiness and absence of misery as criteria for government policy. It reviews the state of happiness in the world today and shows how the new science of happiness explains personal and national variations in happiness.

The report shows that, where happiness is measured by how happy people are with their lives:

- Happier countries tend to be richer countries. But more important for happiness than income are social factors like the strength of social support, the absence of corruption and the degree of personal freedom.
- Over time as living standards have risen, happiness has increased in some countries, but not in others (like for example, the United States). On average, the world has become a little happier in the last 30 years (by 0.14 times the standard deviation of happiness around the world).
- Unemployment causes as much unhappiness as bereavement or separation. At work, job security and good relationships do more for job satisfaction than high pay and convenient hours.
- Behaving well makes people happier.
- Mental health is the biggest single factor affecting happiness in any country. Yet only a quarter of mentally ill people get treatment for their condition in advanced countries and fewer in poorer countries.
- Stable family life and enduring marriages are important for the happiness of parents and children.

- In advanced countries, women are happier than men, while the position in poorer countries is mixed.
- Happiness is lowest in middle age.

As case studies, the report describes in detail how happiness is measured in Bhutan and the United Kingdom, and it lays out how the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development plans to promote standard methods of data collection in different countries. The report itself proposes two evaluative questions that should be asked by social surveys of representative populations in all countries:

- Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are? and
- All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?

If possible, it would also be desirable to ask separate questions about how people experience their day- to-day existence.

The report concludes that gross domestic product "is not the ultimate indicator of happiness."

"GDP is important but not all that is important. This is especially true in developed countries, where most or all of the population has living standards far above basic material needs. Except in the very poorest countries happiness varies more with the quality of human relationships than with income. And in the richest countries it is essential not to subordinate the happiness of the people to the 'interests of the economy,' since the marginal utility of income is low when income is so high. The economy exists to serve the people, not vice versa. Incremental gains in income in a rich country may be much less beneficial to the population than steps to ensure the vibrancy of local communities or better mental health." Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley challenged officials at the conference to consider a nation's happiness when creating new policies.

Maybe it's time to pay attention to Gross Domestic Happiness presented by Bhutan or the Sufficiency Economy granted by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand.

This raises a question: Should happiness figure in a nation's bottom line? And should the concept of Gross National Product be replaced by Gross National Happiness?

Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley told a high-level U.N. meeting on the 2nd April that it not only should but that it must if mankind is to avoid its current unsustainable and self-destructive course.

Bhutan, the tiny Himalayan nation which tops Asia in the United Nations' First World Happiness Report, convened the meeting seeking to develop a new economic model based on principles of happiness and wellbeing.

"The GDP-lead development model that compels boundless growth on a planet with limited resources no longer makes economic sense. It is the cause of our irresponsible, immoral and self-destructive actions," Prime Minister Thinley said. "The purpose of development must be to create enabling conditions through public policy for the pursuit of the ultimate goal of happiness by all citizens."

The conference titled "Happiness and Well-being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm," brought together hundreds of representatives of government — including Costa Rican

President Laura Chinchilla Miranda— academics and other civic leaders to discuss the issue. All endorsed the importance of happiness, though not necessarily Bhutan's proposed index.

Jeffery Sachs, a prominent development economist at Columbia University in New York who edited the World Happiness Report along with John Helliwell and Richard Layard, said that happiness could be achieved independent of economic well-being as measured by GNP.

"GNP (gross national product) by itself does not promote happiness," Sachs told the conference. "The U.S. has had a three time increase of GNP per capita since 1960, but the happiness needle hasn't budged. Other countries have pursued other policies and achieved much greater gains of happiness, even at much lower levels of per capita income."

Although the report indicates that wealthy nations are happier than poor nations the report also noted that social factors such as the strength of social support, the absence of corruption and the degree of personal freedom were more important than wealth.

Japan's Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs H.E. Mr. Joe Nakano told the conference this was certainly true in his own country.

"A number of recent studies have shown that, in many developed countries, including Japan, happiness is not proportional to economic wealth," Nakano said. "This finding, often called the 'Paradox of Happiness,' has given rise to international discussion on how to enhance individual wellbeing through government policies."

The report also listed a number of practical suggestions for governments to promote happiness among their citizens including helping people meet their basic needs, reinforcing social systems, implementing active labor policies, improving mental health services, promoting compassion, altruism and honesty, and helping the public resist hyper-commercialism.

All this happen as a result of last July, at the urging of Bhutan, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution endorsing a holistic approach to development that could lead to individual happiness and wellbeing around the globe.

Prime Minister Thinley said "practical policy recommendations" from the conference will be gathered in a report to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and presented to participants at the "Rio plus 20" Earth Summit scheduled for June in Brazil. The conference is being held two decades after the first U.N. Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro.

Following is the part of the Prime Minister Thinley's welcoming address to the High-Level UN Meeting on the 2nd April:

{voice of PM Thinley}

Then H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon Secretary-General of the United Nations gave inaugural address:

{voice of Ban Ki-moon}

The keynote address was given by H.E. Ms. Laura Chinchilla, Honorable President of the Republic of Costa Rica. Costa Rica is universally recognized for its outstanding achievements in environmental conservation and its exemplary sustainable

development record and showed as the most happiest country by the world happiness report.

In her keynote address she says:

“The quest for wellbeing also demands a suitable balance between aspirations and achievements; between ‘I’ and ‘we’; between public and private; the institutional and the spontaneous; drives and limits; traditions and innovation; freedom and responsibility.

Societies, like human beings and nature, are complex systems that require adequate balances to survive and improve.

Based on these notions, I invite you to reflect, at least, on two issues:

The first is what might be the best paths to stimulate a holistic approach to development, one that may get us closer to the general wellbeing, in harmony with our fellow beings and our natural surroundings.

The second issue is how to move forward in building methodological approaches that better enable us to systematize good practices, explore results, and develop suitable measurements of wellbeing.

Happiness is a sentiment that nests within each person, and each person has a different concept of it, stemming from her or his individuality, affiliations and culture. There are many paths to reach it. But human history, as well as current realities, teach us that the paths to wellbeing are deeply connected to the respect for dignity, and to the creation of opportunities to freely pursue our full and harmonious realization as part of the natural and social milieu.”

On the same occasion, Thailand’s Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs H.E. Mr. Jullapong Nonsrichai read out his statement affirming the need to bring change in modern economy:

{voice of Mr. Jullapong}

In the second day of the High-Level Meeting, the scholars were sub-divided into smaller breakout groups to work on implementing the outcome of this Meeting. I took part in the civil society group and under which we broke away to another special sub-group of spiritual traditions. After a heavy discussion of spiritual traditions we submitted our statement to the civil society as follows:

“As leaders representing various spiritual traditions, we believe that in the new economic paradigm, the role of spiritual traditions is to preserve and transmit to future generations the wisdom and love inherent in their own religious heritages, while simultaneously serving as a force for change to nurture unity, in the knowledge that the world is one community, interconnected, and interdependent.

The new economic paradigm is based upon compassion, altruism, balance, and peace, dedicated to the well-being, happiness, dignity, and sacredness of all forms of life.

Because external economic realities mirror internal psychological and spiritual realities, participants in the new paradigm pledge themselves to ethical conduct, reflecting and holding themselves to the highest level of integrity and virtue, increasing their sharing and dedication to others, and resilience in the face of challenges.

Because economics is based upon relationships, in the new paradigm, relationships are characterized by active service, justice, and cherishing the dignity of other's lives.

We commit ourselves to thus nurturing the new economic paradigm personally and collectively in our own faith communities. May the new paradigm swiftly blossom throughout the world for the benefit of all those alive today and future generations yet unborn."

You are listening to the Radio Thailand Dhamma talk with Venerable Phra Anil Dhammasakiyo of Wat Bovornnivet Viharn. The 'Radio Thailand Dhamma Talk' can be contacted for any questions and comments by writing in e-mail at dhammatalk@gmail.com.