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**Good social relationship: a key to happiness**



**Interview 15 June, 2007** – Mr. Takayoshi Kusago, associate professor in human sciences with Osaka University, Japan, was in the capital recently to present

the findings of a joint research on the level of happiness and life satisfaction in Japan and Bhutan. Kuensel's Samten Wangchuk talked to Mr. Takayoshi Kusago on the study and his perception of happiness and the concept of GNH.

**Why the study and what were its findings?**

Bhutan is just making its way into modernisation while Japan started the process 150 years ago but this research was conducted not to judge which country is better.

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The interesting fact that came out clearly in the research of the two countries is that the people of both the countries care about similar things like family, health, basic financial support or security.

But the major difference is that the Bhutanese have a control over their way of life, through their daily lives which follows what they believe, partly Buddhism and partly from their community ties, that is actually coming out strongly from the study.

This study has no intention at all to make any comparative evaluation over Bhutan and Japan in terms of people's level of happiness or level of life satisfaction.

The tables used in the presentation to show the difference in the level of life satisfaction and to search for the basic or core elements of happiness of human beings should not be considered as representation of national average of key elements of happiness perceived by the Bhutanese nor by the Japanese. They are those perceived by small samples of people in Bhutan and Japan, which are not scientifically proven as national representation.

Bhutan's data shows that perceptions over key elements of happiness of 350 Bhutanese selected in this GNH pilot survey, and the Japanese data shows the perceptions over the same key elements of some residents of the Arakawa-ward.



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<b>Bhutan – Japan: Life Satisfaction</b>		
Life satisfaction: higher group		
	<b>Bhutan</b>	<b>Japan</b>
Age	Young	Old
Gender	Female	Female
Marital Status	Never Married	Married
Education	11-12 grades	University
Household size	large family members	NA
Job		With job

<b>Japan: Life Satisfaction</b>		
Who satisfied with one's life?		
	<b>High Satisfaction group</b>	<b>Low satisfaction group</b>
Age	Above 60's	20's and early 50's
Gender	Female	Male
Marital Status	Married	Not-married
Income level	High	Low
Job status	with job	without job
House ownership	Owned+ Subsidized	Others

### **Does economic growth increase the level of life satisfaction?**

In Japan, after the World War II, between 1945 till 1984, the perception dataset I used for this study clearly shows that, the percentage of the total population of the respondents felt satisfied or very satisfied and this peaked in 1984. So for about 40 years, economic growth enhanced people's life satisfaction in Japan. But after 1984, it declined. In my view, that could be because the Japanese people felt they reached a certain level of economic necessity.

People started having some gap about their judgment on their needs. I think they didn't want to have more goods, rather they wanted to have something new or have a more unique product rather than the same one. This changing

preference might have taken place around mid-1980s.

**What according to you is happiness?**

Happiness is very difficult to define. The concept of happiness is very difficult to tell, because happiness before we explain, we need to spend 30 minutes to explain the assumptions.

Happiness has to be properly understood in the context, it has to be understood in a more long term way than everyday.

Instead, I prefer asking, did you have a good year rather than are you happy at the moment. And tracing that data of happiness has to be repeated and cannot be just one time exercise otherwise we cannot see changes in the level of happiness through the same person or in the same society.

**How does the concept of GNH differ in Japan and Bhutan?**

In Bhutan your King and the government has laid out the concept of GNH whereas we don't have such a thing in Japan, we do not have any developed concept of happiness like GNH, and happy society.

GNH has highlighted and emphasised the issues, which most countries and governments in other countries missed out, particularly culture and environment. I would like to continue to tell Japanese people through my work to pay more attention to have a more balanced view of life, which is my understanding about people's and

human being's existence and welfare in the holistic concept.

**What do you think of Bhutan's concept of GNH as a development philosophy?**

It is one way to explain what sustainable development and sustainable society of human beings on this planet is. I teach social and economic development at Osaka University and I allocate more time for alternative development thoughts and development policy including sustainable approaches and policy ideas.

**Is democracy going to be a contributing factor in our development and happiness?**

I am not in a position to comment on possible impacts of democratisation on Bhutan's development and the level of happiness in people's lives. But to share the Japanese experience, although I never lived under a monarchy, I don't think democracy in Japan is matured because many people still do not vote. We sometime see only about 30 to 40 percent of the people turning out to vote and they decide the future of the country, city, and community.

If the decision made by the 40 percent of the people represented the rest of the 60 percent's will, well, this low turnout rate was not a serious problem, but if the 40 percent's will did not represent well and were quite different in terms of their needs from the rest, the low rate was not good at all. For example, assume that they are relatively well off than the 60 percent, there

is a variance in the policy-making priority. This becomes a major problem.

If that kind of things happen in Bhutan, which I wouldn't want to see happen, that might cause some negative impacts on policy selection in the country. The point is, if you want to see good outcome of democracy everyone needs to understand about the importance of their own votes, rights and participation. People should be given the right with informed choice by themselves and not be coerced by someone else.

**Most Asian countries look up to Japan as a model for economic development and want to own fast fancy cars and high tech gadgets. Is it compatible with GNH?**

I think the IT products need to be wisely selected for use. We need a car to commute from very rural area to a city, but if you live in a city, for instance in Japan, you have a choice to use a train, the system is very efficiently developed but yet, many people like to use sleek fancy cars, even if they live in a 20-kilometre radius.

We need the technology for the advancement of our society, but the consumers have to be wise, with good understanding about the importance of the limited resources that we have on this planet. Not everyone can think along those lines, but the governments can take initiatives to guide them to be aware of those things like environmental issues.

About the compatibility, again it depends on the individual choice, which means an individual who has understood what the most important criteria when one decides to buy one product. If he or she has a philosophy already like one based on GNH, they will limit the level of consumption.

**What is the most important element for an individual or a society to feel happy?**

Relationship itself is considered very important. Good and stable relationship with friends, family and environment is the most important element of happiness and life satisfaction. In order to maintain good relationship, in the country, the government should preserve its culture, good relationship in a family, think carefully about long hours of work.

In Japan, long hours of work really minimises time with family and is becoming a major problem among many Japanese families.

**What could Bhutan learn from Japanese experience?**

Allocation of economic return from economic development needs to be carefully made.

I have seen some developing countries where poor people suffer the most because of misallocation of economic fruits, which are mostly given to the wealthy and middle class people, and the needy are deprived.

In Bhutan to maintain a good and peaceful society the allocation of fruits from economic development is one key issue. Japan is not so

bad over this.

On the other hand, Japan could learn a great deal from Bhutan, like who we are, why we exist and as I pointed out earlier, the most important element in one's life – good relationship.

Japan can learn why Bhutanese people feel so secure living in Bhutan. One secret is that Bhutanese people naturally care about relationships among people and nature. We should learn that from Bhutan. The people of Japan and many developed countries thank Bhutan for challenging the conventional development philosophy.

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