

# Happiness as the Greatest Human Wealth

FRANK BRACHO

“From joy I came, for joy I live, in sacred joy I melt”  
-Paramahansa Yogananda

## Definition of Happiness

Happiness has been defined as “a state of well-being and contentment”. The “well-being” component would carry a more external dimension whereas the “contentment” component a more internal one. The defining characteristic of happiness being the latter though: a feeling of inner joy of satisfaction.

Another way to put it would be that “well-being” would address grosser and less profound aspects of our nature as living beings whereas “contentment” would address subtler and more profound aspects.

Yet both dimensions refer to basic aspects of our nature as human sentient beings since we are flesh and spirit, body and soul; in one single unit where the state of one dimension is dependent upon the other. In fact, if the body is “the temple of the Spirit”, the Spirit is “the high energy of the temple”.

Happiness has been ultimately the most cherished goal of any conscious human being in any endeavor to better his or her condition. In the founding of the republics of the Americas leaders such as Simon Bolívar and Thomas Jefferson spoke about the importance of happiness in the purpose of the new nations. Bolivar said “The best political system is the one that assures the greatest sum of social happiness” and Jefferson placed the pursuit of happiness next to life and liberty as one of the three fundamental pillars enshrined in the American Constitution. Of course, much earlier predecessors, philosophers and sages have referred to the notion of happiness as the defining yardstick of human realization. Terms such as “ananda”, “samadhi”, “nirvana”, “maripa”, “oriwaka”, in diverse spiritual and native traditions have been used to refer to the ultimate bliss brought about by Enlightenment as “the greatest state of happiness”.

## Concerning Primarily The Well-Being Dimension

### ***Well-being, Health and the GDP***

But how can we further pin down the practical meaning of happiness ? Back to the “well-being” component, this may be related to the concept of health. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines “health” as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. The latter tem, “infirmity”, comes from the

Latin word “infirmus” which means “lacking firmity or being off balance”. As may be noted, the WHO definition actually highlights the importance of the affirmative or preventive aspects of health—something neglected in present day medical practice which focuses on disease and treatment.

Health, in fact, is neglected as well in the prevailing yardstick of human “well-being” and “progress” of modern times: The Gross Domestic Product or GDP. The GDP measures the monetary value of the goods and services produced every year in a national economy. Such a kind of measurement doesn’t say much about the quality of life, the sustainability of what is produced or the fairness with which its fruits are shared, let alone the vast non-monetary services and products such as day-to-day internal home labor without which the formal economy would not hold itself together. In such a narrow context, many of the activities of the GDP are often openly at odds with health because of the harm they cause on living beings and the environment or simply because they may thrive on disease and death. Some telling examples are the tobacco, alcohol and weapons industries; but there are so many more. In fact, an ailing population may be good for the GDP because the consumption of medicines, clinic and hospital services would increase it. The same would apply to a contentious marriage break-up, the lawyer’s fees and liquidation of household goods would also boost the GDP. No wonder a striking assessment about the GDP’s shortcomings, titled “If the GDP is up, why is America down?”, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in October 1995, concluded that: “By the curious standard of the GDP, the nation’s economic hero is a terminal cancer patient who is going through a costly divorce..” (!) None of the former examples, of course, are very conducive to happiness.

Of course, this kind of health or life-careless approach of the whole GNP notion would be openly at odds with one of the most important tenets of all major spiritual traditions, namely the one of Not Causing Harm (in deed, word or thought): the “Primum non nocere” of Hipocrates, “Ama guaña” of the Incas, “Ahimsa” of Hinduism and Buddhism—and in particular the “Right livelihood” tenet of this (“to be careful to have an occupation that does not involve destroying life or hurting people”).

Health in its broadest conception is the indispensable doorstep to the deeper aspects of Happiness. Because only with a pure body and soul will we be able to see the light, be the light; in other words be wise, and, with it, attain peace and happiness.

### ***Economic Growth, Development and Sustainability***

The GDP notion has been a corollary of other broader economicist and materialistic concepts such as “national economic growth” or “development”. Both of these are intent on endless growth (an unnatural notion since the ideology of growth for growth’s sake is the ideology of the cancer cell) as well as imitation of supposedly advanced

or already developed countries –namely the industrial countries (a notion increasingly called into question as the unsustainability of the ruling industrial model becomes more apparent and glaring). Moreover, the term “development” was first coined after World War II by American President Harry Truman, under the influence of promoters-advisers such as Nelson Rockefeller, who in those days cherished the idea of a worldwide economic expansion in search of markets and resources; which may further explain the economic bias of the concept.

No amount of adjectivizing such as adding the term “sustainable” to “development” will change the picture unless a true paradigm change is undertaken to address the deep-seated flaws of the present dominant model of wealth and progress. As S. Cunnighan ironically has commented: “Sustainability is a great concept, but the world needs restoration first. After all, who really wants to sustain the mess we live in now?” (Cunnighan, 2003).

In the latter light, the official definition of “sustainable development”, put forward by the Brundtland Commission, in 1987 lends itself to some questioning. The Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as “being able to meet the needs of today’s generation without compromising the ones of future generations”. Although a relative progress over previous notions, this definition in our view still falls quite short. Both the biological and spiritual deterioration of today’s generation itself are of such magnitude that its own survival may also be compromised. Thus if “sustainable development” is to be a realistic notion it must be focused also on the immediate threat to the present generation and the “Here and Now”. Those who may view with skepticism the prospect of a total human collapse during the present generation need to be reminded of the fate met by pre-Columbus America: in one single generation a formerly thriving population was erased from the map as a result of all the diseases, destitution and uprooting caused by its abrupt subjection to European conquest. There is no reason why present-day humanity, so much immersed worldwide in a growing quagmire of disease, destruction and environmental contamination and uprooting, may not meet the same fate; if the same unsustainable and suicidal course persists. Of course, the self-nullifying of the present generation, no matter how much material legacy it may leave behind, would automatically imply the nullifying of the succeeding generations. An early end of the game. A forewarning of this may be the alarming drop on men’s sperm count and increase of infertility we’ve been witnessing, as a result of the present biological and spiritual human deterioration, which have brought about the so called “empty cradles” phenomenon, a population drop in most of the industrial world. This “lock up” in the

“demographic wheel”, with serious consequences on the sustainability of the economic, social and public policies in general.

If the concept of sustainability is to make it into the tools of a true paradigm change we would suggest rather the following broader and more relevant definition: “A human productive or creative endeavor is sustainable when it doesn’t exceed the capacity of assimilation or regeneration of an ecological-social system. ” The assimilation dimension would be concerned with what such system can tolerate: for instance, a “development” that disrupts the social equilibrium, because it is unjust or oppressive, cannot be sustainable, just as it could not if it keeps on producing piles of toxic waste which are unmanageable or non-recyclable (which likewise would be akin to a constipation situation in the human body, a root-cause of a myriad of diseases). The regeneration dimension would concern itself with the replenishment capacity of what consumed: a “development” that disrupts the regeneration flow or balance of the natural order, when irrationally and irreparably destroying or contaminating a forest, water sources, the soil, or the complex interrelationships between these, could hardly be considered sustainable.

In fact, an interesting measurement of the GDP adjusted to account for factors such as income inequality and resource use, named Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), found that when these kind of factors are brought to bear the GDP picture in a country like the USA shows a steady decline since the 1970s – not an increase as the official views claims (Haggart, 1999).

Returning to the notion of the balance of the Natural Order, how much more sustainable and happier would human societies be if they adhered fully to its fundamental laws of functioning! These have been particularly honored by native cultures of the world (the ones that have lived in close communion with the Earth). Chiefs Seattle’s internationally renowned manifesto is an embodiment of these laws. Its passage: “The Earth doesn’t belong to man but man belongs to the Earth...Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself” is memorable in that regard. But the natural laws in fact have been honored too in all major religious traditions, because they are another way to refer to the divine laws.

Among the laws of the Natural Order stand out the following: The Law of the Unity of Life or “All is one and all is alive” (akin to the law of emptiness or interdependence of the Buddhist, which gives ground to compassion as ultimately “enlightened self-interest”), The Law of Cause and Effect (akin to the law of karma of Buddhist and Hindus), The Law of Impermanence (particularly highlighted in Buddhism), The Law of Analogy, The Law of Life Moving in Spiraled Cycles, and The Law of the

Complementarity of Antagonisms. If all human endeavors could be framed within these laws they would indeed naturally lead to healthy and happy human communities.

A recent interesting contribution to the furthering of the concept of sustainability from an ecological viewpoint is the one of “the ecological footprint” (EFP). This compares renewable natural resource consumption with nature’s biologically productive capacity. A country’s footprint is “the total area required to produce the food and fibres that country consumes, sustain its energy consumption, and give space for its infrastructure” (WWF, 2002). According to this index, humanity’s ecological footprint is already exceeding significantly earth’s biological carrying capacity, and a planetary imitation of the consumption patterns of a country like the US would require of three planets earth –which would make such model inherently unsustainable. The EFP, on the other hand, overlooks two important factors which, as said early, cannot be separated from the physical natural domain: the internal social sustainability of humanity itself (including its possible own collapse before the one of the planet’s) and the intricate ecological services or inter-flows (like the water, wind and temperature “cycles”) which go beyond any demarcated physical areas.

Ultimately any true well-being should be inherently “sustainable”, “social”, “fair”, etc; or otherwise it wouldn’t make much sense.

On the limits of measurement as well as the importance of qualitative aspects and people’s empowerment.

On the other hand, the ruling GDP and macro-economic account system is overly-biased towards valuing everything in money terms, and disregarding what cannot be translated into these. Money has been made an overpowering end unto itself within the GDP mind-set, rather than a means to reflect real and sustainable value. The former ultimately stemming from the “original sin” of capitalism namely being born out of the charging of interest over loaned money, which made money acquire a value in itself that earlier lacked. The mighty power “to create money out of nowhere” with which society has endowed bankers has become self-propelled and entrenched in vested interests. In fact, as it has been noted, worldwide: “almost all the money we use (i. e. except the notes and coins which today are only 3% of the total) came into existence as a result of a bank agreeing to make a loan to a customer, at interest. This is why it is called “debt-money”,...the true purpose of the Global Monetocracy is that of money growth in order to maintain the current debt-based money system” (Madron and Joplin, 2003).

In fact, the most important things in life such as health, love, peace and happiness, do not lend themselves to being bought or sold, nor depend fundamentally on money-priced material goods. In spite of this, the dominant “development” or “well-being” conception has clearly tended to emphasize the quantitative over the qualitative, the monetary over the non-

monetary, income over a decent and fulfilling occupation, competition over cooperation, and the material over the spiritual.

The blatant disregard of the GDP for social and environmental costing, the contribution of the “underground economy” (the economy of love, reciprocity and solidarity), the qualitative aspects of human well-being, makes it indeed a very limited and flawed expression of the well-being of a nation or community.

Concerning the bias of the ruling paradigm towards quantitative measurement, the shortcomings of this to assess something as complex and qualitative as human well-being cannot be over-emphasized; in order to avoid distortions or delusions in this endeavor. In fact, interestingly enough, the sanskrit word “Maya”, referring to “that which causes delusion to understand reality” also means literally “the measurer” (!).

On the other hand, it may be said on behalf of the GDP that the handful of economists and statisticians that created it perhaps never had in mind that the GDP should become the paramount yardstick of human well-being which powerful economic and political interests later made, nor the universal projection that the UN blessing imparted to it. In fact its early technical creators designed it primarily to deal with the specific needs arising from World war II both for the facing of the war and post-war reconstruction efforts; in retrospect something achieved with remarkable success. In the light of this, the American economist Simon Kuznets who, under the ideas of his British colleague John Maynard Keynes, first brought about the application of the GDP system in the USA itself, noted later on with concern the pretense of converting it into a measurement of full human well-being and devoted the rest of his life to caution against the shortcomings of the GDP in this regard (Haggart, 1999).

In light of the former, the responsibility for GDP’s outgrowth and hegemony would more a consequence of the misplaced priorities of governments, business and societies, unable to uphold more meaningful human well-being indexes. But in terms of the past or present responsibility of technicians, to leave it at this, would be too evasive or self-indulgent. In the face of an accounting system such as the GDP not only having ceased to be part of the solution but having as well become part of the problem because of its head-on collision with true well-being and sustainability, in a world threatened with collapse, statisticians cannot rest indifferent but should take an ethical stand for truth and life, denouncing the flaws of the GDP and actively joining the movement towards alternatives. In fact, the GDP hegemony has also held down technical material resources to foster alternative accounting systems of well-being (reflected for example on the utter under-staffing or under-equipping of the public agencies charged with the monitoring of social, environmental and health indicators).

Now all the above is not to suggest that the powerful economicist Central Banks or similar institutions that dutifully calculate every year

national GDPs should now be mechanically replaced by some kind of new social central banks that should come up with some sort of “social GDP”. The transformation called for requires not only a change in the tools and methods but on the very premises of the present system.

In this latter regard, two key aspects are the enhancement of quality and the advancement of people’s empowerment—both addressing two major shortcomings of the dominant system.

***Some International Efforts to Redefine Well-being and Progress***

Many initiatives have been proposed internationally to address concerns such as the formerly stated. In retrospect, a particularly groundbreaking and pioneering one was the one of the International Meeting on More Effective Development Indicators, held in Caracas in 1989, with the attendance of a number of the leading experts on the issue from diverse corners of the world, a meeting which the author of this presentation was instrumental in convening in his capacity of Coordinator of the Office of the South Commission in Venezuela. The findings of the meeting highlighted some key concerns that would become central to the subsequent agenda for change. In view of this, we reproduce *in extenso* the following summary about the its conclusions:

“The Meeting noted the limitations to the advisability of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) continuing to be the main reference for measuring development and pointed to formulas for correcting or improving it in order to obtain a more integral and effective means of measuring the socioeconomic condition of peoples. This in turn was complemented by the proposal for parameters to measure the quality of life in such aspects as poverty, the biological condition of infancy, health, education, nutrition, employment and income, pollution and the destruction of natural resources; and how this measurement could be harmonized at the international level, as was once the case with the GDP, so that countries might have a “common language” and make a better job of channeling the collective effort in favor of development. In turn this was related to the discussion of whether the new forms of measurement should be reflected by a composite (GDP type) index or a broken down index or set of separate indicators (to avoid the oversimplification of the GDP); opting in the end for a healthy middle-of -the-road formula which proposes a list of basic indicators at the international level, leaving open the option for countries to continue to try more ambitious formulas—including composites indexes-national circumstances and information gathering capacity permitting. Likewise, considerable importance was given to the need for the indicators proposed to be easily understood by the population and have significance at the local level and the level of social groups, so as to ensure authentically participatory and decentralized types of

development" (Office of the South Commission in Venezuela/TOES Books, 2000).

Two years after the Caracas meeting, in 1990, The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) launched The Human Development Index (IDH). In fact, among the attendees of the Caracas meeting there had been a prominent participation from the in-the-offing HDI initiative. The HDI, unlike the GDP, concerns itself with the social performance on issues such as health, education and purchasing power, that is quality of life issues primarily. Its chief architect, late former Minister of Planning of Pakistan Mahbub Ul-Haq, used to highlight that "a healthy and long life" should be the ultimate yardstick of human well-being, a goal kept by the HDI up to the present time. Its simplifying composite or bundled nature (as the GDP it basically sums it all up in a single number), has been complemented with wider "external themes"-focused annual reports. With its annual ranking and reports as well the long-reach UN institutional clout, the HDI has challenged the short-sighted GDP ranking and made a significant international contribution to stimulate a change of vision on the issue of well-being indexes. On the other hand, just like the GDP, its primarily simplifying composite-quantitative character has made it prone to miss out important qualitative dimensions as well as to keep the Index only as territory of the qualified technicians who can make its complex calculation - to the detriment of people's empowerment in both the compilation and monitoring of their own well-being. One illustrative case is the emblematic issue of longevity on which we'll elaborate later.

The targets and indices of The Millennium Plan, adopted by the UN in 2000, have been another effort in the right direction, even though they are still too much influenced by the monetary income-related notion of poverty as well as they have not brought about a sufficient mobilizing echo (the Plan's chief laudable concern)-particularly at the level of national policies.

The World Bank itself, in spite of all its stakes in the dominant system, has put forward the need to widen the concept of capital with a view to include: "natural capital" (natural resources), "construction capital" (infrastructure), "human capital" (quality of life), and "social capital" (family, community, solidarity, etc), in order to achieve "a more holistic approach to development". Nevertheless the former proposal still keep certain bias to continue to consider human and other living beings, as well as the natural environment as "inputs" or means for the productive process, rather than end in themselves to which, on the contrary, the productive process should be subservient. Of course the seeming change of stand in the WB position is an acknowledgement of the increasing pressure of world public opinion to check the contemporary versions of the blind economist paradigm: "neoliberalism" and "globalization. These were given impetus by the so-called "Washington Consensus" and have been promoted by



international organizations like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank itself and the World Trade Organization. The popular challenge has been led from the grass-root of peoples and civil societies, but has also counted on thinkers coming from the system itself like Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize in Economics and former Chief Economist of the World Bank. Stiglitz has denounced the insensitivity and blindness of the “economic adjustment programs” or “economist reforms” of recent times, and in particular its devastating effects on populations, the environment and the dismantling of national economies, citing in particular the telling example of the ill-fated experience of Latin America in that regard. Interestingly enough, in his analysis on the reach of the adverse effects of the reforms in the Latin American region Stiglitz has noted on the other hand that: “.. the subsistence farmers isolated from the market economy were among the less affected by these”, an evidence that would lend further weight to the merits of self-reliant communities, even if on austere standards, to guard against the perilously misguided policies of the international economy.

It is apparent that there could be and must be another type of free market: one with ethics, social and environmental responsibility, as well as on a more human scale to facilitate accountability. Just as there could be and must be another type of globalization: the globalization of responsibility and solidarity. Another world is possible-as the motto of the contesting World Social Forum has proclaimed !

More recently, in October 2003, the ICONS meeting in Curitiba, Brazil, was another encouraging initiative. ICONS was convened by an alliance of Brazilian civic society organizations and businesses, with the concurrence of sectors of the new Brazilian government and the support-inspiration of international partners such as noted alternative indices pioneer Hazel Henderson (Henderson, 2003). The meeting drew an attendance of about 700 hundred participants, in order to boost in particular the cause of alternative people’s-based well-being indicators in Brazil and, on a broader plane, to encourage further international efforts in this regard.

Of course Brazil is just one of a number of countries world-wide where leading initiatives have or are being tried or proposed, both from the government and non-governmental side. Among them, we could also mention by way of example the cases of Costa Rica, Canada, Iceland, The Netherlands, Denmark, Sri-Lanka, Mongolia and, of course, the case of the country that has motivated the Meeting for which this paper has been prepared: Bhutan, about which we’ll comment more later. Even in USA some interesting attempts have been made, mostly from the non-governmental side, such the Calvert-Henderson Quality of Life Index, an unbundled set of indicators aimed at encouraging communities’ mobilization and self-affirmation, and the earlier mentioned Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), an attempt on the composite side to reform the GDP.

However, in spite of all the efforts undertaken so far, the GDP hegemony has not yet been substituted by the primacy of a new more convenient system, for factors we will as well focus on later.

***Longevity As an Emblematic Yardstick.***

As commented earlier, the Human Development Index has highlighted the key significance of longevity. However, in order to rate longevity the HDI has focused on the conventional statistic of “life expectancy”, the number of years individuals of a population are on the average expected to live, a figure convenient to the purpose of the final IDH composite number but one that also runs the risk of oversimplifying or disregarding the underlying basis of longevity.

In fact, in the contemporary scene it has been customary to say that the increase in life expectancy has been one of the major achievements of western civilization. The increase from an average of 50 years in Europe and the USA at mid-20th century to over 70 at the dawn of the 21st century in life expectancy has been an accomplishment of modern industrial societies, with its allopathic medical services and generally better quality of life, we have been told. This argument disregards that much prior to the mid-20th century longevity rates in many western and non-western societies were much higher than the 50 years average of both Europe and USA in 1950; and in fact even higher than the climb to 70 achieved later in the West. Moreover the gross life expectancy statistic doesn't tell us anything about the quality of longevity: while people may be leading a longer life today than 50 years ago, very often the old are dying riddled with all kinds of degenerative diseases and as a big burden to the national treasuries that keep them alive on huge medical costs. In the face of all the above, the correct conclusion would be that today, longevity-wise, we may be worse off, not better off, in terms of western-based evolution.

A milestone study published in *National Geographic* in its January 1972 issue, on the “most longevous peoples of the world”, found them in the valleys of Hunza (Pakistan), Vilcabamba (Ecuador) and the Caucasus (present day Azherbarjan). In all of those cases the harboring societies were rural (non-industrial), and lacked allopathic hospital or medical services; a far cry from the modern western recipe or stereotype. In Vilcabamba the study found 300 times more centenarians (people over 100 years) than in the USA; and, even more important, in all the three examined cases, and in fact in all known similar cases of other traditional societies, the high longevity traits were chiefly due to: i) the consumption of healthy natural foods ii) pure air and water iii) regular physical exercise iv) the elders feeling useful to the community and appreciated by it as well as leading lives in spiritual values. If all these features are compared to the present western civilization, it may be noted that it fares badly on all fronts, certainly a poor basis to expect any good quality and lasting longevity -particularly when the

artificial and costly medical arsenal runs out of ammunition. Moreover, a post- National Geographic story monitoring of the Hunza, Vilicabamba and Caucasus cases showed that as these formerly relatively isolated societies integrated more into modern society their historically high longevity rates experienced a significant drop -something observed as well in other cases (modern, western, society as some kind of “cultural Aids” on healthy traditional societies?).

Helena Norberg-Hodge’s classic first-hand account of the change undergone by a traditional society like Buddhist Ladakh in North India from a similar rapid modernization, brings to bear the formerly stated in a broader perspective:

“In Ladakh I have known a society in which there is neither waste nor pollution, a society in which crime is virtually nonexistent, communities are healthy and strong, and a teenage boy is never embarrassed to be gentle and affectionate with his mother or grandmother. As that society begins to break down under the pressures of modernization, the lessons are of relevance far beyond Ladakh itself...I have seen progress divide people from the earth, from one another, and ultimately from themselves. I have seen happy people lose their serenity when they started living according to our norms. As a result, I had to conclude that culture plays a far more fundamental role in shaping the individual than I had previously thought” (Norberg-Hodge, 1991)

Now, all the above is not to suggest either a romanticizing of traditional societies or a demonizing of modern ones. There are always grades and shades in any picture. Some traditional societies have been carrying on in some respects a degeneration of their own. On the other hand, on the side of the new influences it would be inaccurate or unfair to say that there is some kind of evil inherent in modern development or that traditional societies should be deprived of some of its certain benefits -who could deny, for instance, the convenience of modern communication technologies to bring people closer together and to enhance the possibilities of education? Something as forceful as modern western civilization has not happened out of nowhere, but has been the result of a particular set of historic circumstances, actions and omissions in human evolution and learning. But it is apparent that modern civilization has gone too far in its materialism and negative and self-destructive features and that it needs to be checked with a recouping of lost higher wisdom, as well as an enlightened alliance between the old and the new and between the like-minded sectors of both the besieged traditional world and the modern; in order to ensure the salvation of humanity and the planet. The Bhutan Meeting to which this contribution is presented may be a hopeful embodiment of all this.

### ***The Importance of Environmental Factors***

One key dimension of health, of course, is the environmental one. Human beings and the natural environment are one. In fact in many native cultures the words “environment” or “nature” don’t even exist, as the concepts they represent are imbued in human identity. Remember again Chief Seattle’s words: “Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. “. Because of this all the pollution and environmental destruction man has been causing has turned against him in terms of all kinds of serious diseases, both physical and mental, to the point that man today may have to be added to the “list of endangered species”, because of his self-inflicted habitat’s damage or destruction: the story of the dragon eating up its own tail, or, as the Bible puts it: “God bringing ruin on those who have ruined the Earth”. For example, the increasing cancer afflictions, and particularly some such as breast and prostate cancers, has been linked to the myriad of cancer-causing chemicals, endocrine-disrupting chemicals and ionizing radiation present all in the air, food and water we ingest today. The culprit of a number of these pollutants are some of the industries which contribute the most to the GDP, chiefly among them the petroleum and petrochemical industries, determinants in turn, because of their strategic character, of many key patterns of consumption, production and technology of the sickness and pollution-prone dominant civilization. On the other hand, it is most regrettable that in countries like my own, Venezuela, an emblematic oil producer that for over 100 years that has catered to an insatiable world economy, up to this very moment oil concessions are still being given in areas devastated by earlier oil exploitation, in an utter insensitivity and irresponsibility of the System to first acknowledge its great “ecological debt” and to clean up or repair former contamination or damage –to the extent this may be possible, indeed, on account of the irreversible or profound nature that much of it has.

Just as the physical and spiritual healing of human beings is a prerequisite for salvation, the healing of the planet from all the wanton environmental destruction and damage it has suffered by the reckless behavior of human beings is a priority issue for the coming years. In view of the magnitude of the task, environmental restoration could, with its myriad of activities, provide, on the other hand, a much needed boost and new frontiers for the economies, in the context of more sustainable values. And beyond, of course, the limitless promising new productive frontiers of the new “ecological economy”, including, among other things, all the plethora of renewable environmentally-friendly energies, just waiting for humans to make up their mind to harness them in a new wisdom.

### ***Mental Aspects of Disease***

The mental aspects of disease have become a central feature of the modern world’s pathologies. Violence is often an ultimate manifestation of

those. Violence, a great scourge of the times we live in, has been defined by the World Health Organization as: "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation". In fact, violence causes harm not just to others but ultimately and in any case to the perpetrator because in view of its anti-natural character and "boomerang resonance" damages both the victim and the victimizer. In fact, a surprising amount of present violence is outright self-inflicted as well. According to WHO data, of the 2.6 million people worldwide who lost their lives to violence in 2000, around half were suicides. Depression, on the other hand, that renunciation to keep going in life that may precede suicidal actions or the breakdown of the immune system if not checked in time, is also affecting an increasingly major proportion of the world population, to the point that WHO has predicted that in 20 years time may become the second leading health problem.

### **Concerning Primarily The Contentment Dimension**

#### ***Contentment and Happiness***

So much for health as a fundamental dimension of happiness. But let us go back to the broader outlook of happiness to further the analysis on its essence. Let us now deal with the contentment dimension. Buddha said: "If health is the highest gain, contentment is the greatest wealth".

Contentment lies in inner peace. As H. H. The Dalai Lama has said: "Since we are not solely material creatures it is a mistake to place all of our hopes for happiness on external development alone. The key is to develop inner peace" (HH.. 2003). Happiness indeed depends ultimately on inner contentment or peace.

Amassing material wealth doesn't make us necessarily happy, inner satisfaction does. Greed is insatiable and thus a cause of permanent discontent or unhappiness. As Gandhi said: "The world has enough to satisfy everyone's needs but not enough for one single man's greed". A man is truly rich in proportion to the number of things he can live without rather than the number of things he possesses, which ultimately makes the "Art of Living or Being" more important than possessions themselves. As Sander Tideman has put it: "... happiness is not merely determined by what we have, how much we consume, but also by what we know, how we manage our lives and express ourselves creatively, ultimately by who we are -being rather than having" (The Dalai Lama Visit Foundation, 2000).

Transient acquisitions or possessions cannot guarantee us happiness either. Even our physical bodies-destined inexorably to decay or even to an unexpected death, our friends, relatives, partners and loved ones in general, cannot be a foundation of happiness, since sooner or later they will all go

away. Further, as Sogyal Rimpoché has said: "It is not the quantity of life but the quality. When you begin to realize that you don't have too much time to live you focus on what's most important. The word "body" in Tibetan is *lūi*, which means "something to be left behind", like a luggage. Everytime we say *lūi*, we remember that we are only travelers who have taken temporary refuge in this life and body." (Rimpoche, 1992).

Thus ultimate happiness lies in holding on to the transcendental, to the immortal, to the most permanent. And this we could only attain on the spiritual plane, the most superior domain of our identity, because, as it has been said, ultimately "we are not human beings in pursuit of spiritual realization but spiritual beings in a human experience" -which changes the whole conventional picture.

Certain aspects of the way to view happiness may depend on different cultural outlooks. The way a Bhutanese may have to approach happiness may be quite different in fact in a number of respects from the way a native from tropical Amazon may do it. Even within nations, this kind of legitimate diverse outlooks may be there, and should be accommodated in the context of "Unity in diversity" and mutual enrichment for higher common aims. Observance of cultural diversity, both among and within nations, thus naturally has an important place in people's cultivation of happiness, just as it does to explain the diversity in religions or traditional medicines. Interestingly enough, the forthcoming 2004 Human Development Index Report is to be devoted to the theme of the importance of cultural diversity.

But some common basic tenets will remain as members of the same human family; foremost among them is the pursuit of happiness. In fact, as HH the Dalai Lama has said: " We tend to forget that despite the diversity of race, religion, ideology and so on, people are equal in their basic wish for peace and happiness" (HH.. 2003). In fact the latter has been attested by an international opinion poll committed by the UN prior to its Millennium Heads of State Summit, held in New York in 2000. People in some 60 countries were interviewed in the largest public opinion poll ever undertaken. Its chief finding: "people value good health and a happy family more than anything else"

Concerning the latter is interesting to note that the family-community dimension of happiness is particularly stressed in the cultures of aboriginal peoples of the world. The word *oriwaka*, for example, earlier listed on the first page of this paper, corresponds to "happiness" in the language of the *warao* people, an ancient aboriginal nation who inhabit the delta of the Orinoco river in Venezuela. The word is made up of two roots: *ori*, which means "together" and *waka* which means "to wait, to expect"; for a combined meaning of "to wait or to expect together". Other common usages are: "partying", "joy from sharing with peers", and " paradise or the place where the dead live happy". All previous meanings emphasizing the

community-based, contentment and transcendental dimensions of happiness.

In any case, the more we go beyond “relative happiness” (in terms of insatiable material wants, transient possessions or relationships, and cultural outlooks) to embrace “absolute happiness” (which is self-referred and related to the more superior and permanent aspects of our common identity), the more we will secure ultimate happiness.

To this end the key command may be “to transcend”. Vivekananda said: “Time, space and causality are the lenses through which we view the Absolute, but in the Absolute there is no time, nor space or causality”. We have to be, indeed, mindful of our transcendental nature and purpose and be geared to them beyond physical time and space. That timeless and spaceless “Absolute”, “Mindfulness”, “Consciousness” is the ultimate nature of reality, devoid of all misconceptions. With it everything that matters will fall into place, including our wisdom to behave towards ourselves and towards others, as well as our relation with the inner and the outer.

But the dominant civilization seems to have a pathological concern with time, and, worse, the mechanical clock-time, as well as with the future. This comes at the expense of neglecting the leading of a full and mindful life in the Here and the Now, in tune with Nature’s rhythms and wisdom. To put it in the words of Lama Thubten Yeshe:

“Although the future depends on the present, it is the human ego’s nature to worry about the future instead of how to act *Now*...Unfortunate is a common pastime to worry about the future. “I must be sure to have enough of this or plenty of that for the next few days”. Perhaps you will die before the week is out. Worrying about the future is simply a waste of time and energy. It is easy to predict what the future will be. A positive, wholesome attitude today bodes well for tomorrow. If the cause and conditions –milk, heat and so on- come together in the evening, the result will be a bowlful of yoghurt next morning.. Therefore it is waste of energy to fret and worry about the future. What we should *worry* about is keeping ourselves as peaceful, positive and aware as possible.” (Wisdom Culture, 1999).

### **Criteria, Elements And New Alliances For A New System Of Indices**

Experience has shown one key factor to explain why the efforts to replace the GDP have fallen on the deaf ears of elitist policy-makers and statisticians has been not having taken the issue of new indices “to the streets”. The task of the hour is to turn the apparent energy of discontent of public opinions into forceful and steady pressure on the Establishment as well as creative and proactive activism to bring the new indices to bear.

This implies that the indices have to cease being the narrow domain of technical or economic elites, so they may be comprehended –including a role in their designing- and apprehended –including involvement in the monitoring-by ordinary folks, communities and peoples; the only way these could effectively utilize them to rate the performance of government officials and business as well as their own performance as self-rating communities, with a view to ensuring adequate accountability and any needed corrective policies.

As recommended in the earlier summarized Caracas Meeting, the latter in turn imply that next to the choices of bundled indexes such as any amended GDP (in order to address its major flaws-to the extent that this, indeed, may be possible) and even the relatively more qualitatively-sensitive IDH, we must have, as a first priority, indices which are simple, unbundled, dynamic and easily comprehensible and manageable by communities and individuals.

Such indices could and should have a universal relevance. After all, the six billion of us who inhabit the planet belong all to the same human specie, with a number of common basic needs.

As they could and should have a national dimension, particularly in the cases where this stems from a long and deep-settled consensual identity. On the other hand, In the transition towards a political order more decentralized and democratic, the political entity known as The Nation-State –a relatively new figure in human history which has not been exempted from misuse or oppressive abuse- should be responsibly acknowledged and managed in these times in which it is under siege in so many places by reckless forces such as overrunning globalization or fundamentalist cultural activism; with a view to safeguarding legitimate national spaces and not further compromising the already pressed international stability.

But such indices could and should too attend to regional and local specificities, as well as social, and age groups. In particular bearing in mind circumstances stemming from ancestral cultures or conditioning natural-geographic environs. Something which if not recognized may also compromise the cause of world stability and sustainability.

As well as they should address ultimately the most decisive space of human self-determination: the one of the individual, realizing himself or herself in self-responsibility, justice and dignity. A common space In which all the natural tensions or dialectics from the various planes of diversity would naturally melt. This would resonate fully with the spirit of Bhutan’s proposal on the “Gross National Happiness” (GNH) as reflected in the following statement of Bhutanese Minister Dasho Meghraj Gurung: “The ideology of GNH connects Bhutan’s development goals with the pursuit of happiness. This means that the ideology reflects Bhutan’s vision on the purpose of human life, a vision that puts the individual’s self-cultivation at



the center of the nation's developmental goals, a primary priority for Bhutanese society as a whole as well as for the individual concerned".

To all the above ends, in addition to a greater forthcomingness on the side of governments to realize all the stakes and act accordingly, for the sake of the higher public good to which they owe themselves, we need much more sensitive and responsible mass media (with a key role to play to educate and as a watchdog on the new indices, a long way from the largely ominous role they have been playing so far in the direction of decadence) and business or the productive sector (to reshift its values and production of goods services and technologies to serve the new well-being paradigm, a long way too from the socially and environmentally irresponsible behavior they have been mostly immersed so far). Indeed an enlightened alliance of like-minded people of these three sectors plus similar counterparts in civic society, on the basis of, again, a common identity of dissatisfied and threatened human beings, is not only possible but a must, as a basis for an enlightened broader mass movement. As Sogyal Rimpoche has stated: "... today a great proportion of the human race must take up the path of wisdom if we want to save the world from the internal and external perils which threaten it. In these times of violence and desintegration, the spiritual vision is not an elitist luxury, but something indispensable for our salvation." (Rimpoche, 1992).

### **A Proposal of a Set of Basic Indicators for Happiness**

On the basis of all that has been formerly stated, and drawing on joint work with Dr. Keshava Bhat (see Bibliography – he'll further elaborate in his own contribution to the Seminar), we would submit the following list of Happiness indicators, that could be useful to individuals, communities and nations:

#### ***Happiness Indicators***

Primarily concerning well-being –health:

- Having food to eat –both in quality and quantity;
- Evacuating three times a day or as many times as one eats (the capacity of elimination of body waste as a simple indicator of bodily health);
- Participating in food production or preparation for oneself or others;
- Being able to produce as much as possible of what one consumes;
- Having access to information, instruction and training in ways to live better;
- Having work to do and with pleasure;
- Being able to obtain a comfortable, spacious and adequate place to live in near one's place of work;

- Getting care, and the possibility of cure and compassion in case of illness or death;
- Being able to feel protected and secure in the society in which one lives;
- Being able to enjoy Nature without damaging it, as well as caring for it;
- Enjoying air (including proper breathing), water, light and space in sufficient natural quality and quantity; and
- Sleeping well and waking up rested.

Primarily concerning Contentment:

- Being able to express creativity;
- Being respected and respecting others;
- Being able to express one's feelings and thoughts freely;
- Having a personal ethical code; and
- Being able to cooperate and share with others.

If indicators of happiness as basic and simple as these, within easy comprehension and monitoring not just of leaders but of common people, could be the focus of all societal, international and inter-community, action and policies, indeed we are certain this would be a way conducive to happiness; happiness as the greatest wealth as Buddha said.

### **Some Concluding Remarks**

It has to be saluted with praise and hope that a country like Bhutan has chosen to launch an initiative like the "Gross National Happiness" in substitution of the notion of the GDP still remaining the dominant central yardstick of wealth and progress-in spite of all its apparent major shortcomings, flaws and contradictions, as earlier stated.

If nothing else, if the Bhutanese though-provoking initiative contributes to further liberate the world from the universal delusion and straight-jacket of the GDP mind-set, to try out other more meaningful systems of well-being -whichever these may be, a lot would have been achieved already.

But the grave and pressing world problems compel us to try to do more. An operationally effective new system of human well-being centered on happiness, of universal relevance but respecting human diversity, is possible, as also shown in this exposé. A system designed to meet the needs of the times we live in while drawing on a timeless wisdom concerning our more superior identity and aims.

Bhutan is a small country that seems to be particularly well-positioned to lead in this endeavor. Its deep ingrained Buddhist tradition, a wisdom with so many enlightening insights into true human nature, its commitment

to preserve its ancestral culture; its enlightened policies to preserve its natural environment and landscape; as well as its new awareness of international and intercommunity interdependence and responsibility, make it, indeed, a promising launching ground for a new way to view human satisfaction. In this major endeavor, Bhutan certainly will not be alone, as this kind of initiative widely resonates with pressing needs of the cross road Humanity finds itself in at the moment.

Great things have often started in small places. Because of the greater nurturing energies usually present in small human scale, and because the small usually hold less stakes in dominant mega-systems and have greater creativity and mobility to conform to the new than the big hooked on those. Particularly when the mentioned nurturing and seminal energies are anchored in the high ground of spiritual values, the domain of the greatest force, transcendence, and infinity.

In the light of the above, The Dalai Lama's following admonition acquires a particularly significant meaning: "...the great movements of the last one hundred years or more –democracy, liberalism, socialism–have all failed to deliver the universal benefits they were supposed to provide, despite many wonderful ideas. A revolution is called for, certainly. But not a political, economic or even a technical revolution. We have had enough experience of these during the past century to know that a purely external approach will not suffice. What I propose is a spiritual revolution" (HH The Dalai Lama, 1999).

Ultimate happiness, nirvana, or whatever we wish to call it, is not just the most fundamental human aspiration but it is something within the reach of every human being, for the simple reason that it is the defining reason of the superior identity of all of us, because "From joy we come, for joy we live, and in sacred joy we melt

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