

Be Decent Be Happy: Apprehending the Truth of Sustainable Happiness

WIBOON KEMCHALERM

Summary

Headman Wiboon, an intellectual leader of Eastern Forest Conservation, has collectively learnt from the reality for several decades. Trial and error interventions were done through his practices. His life was at stake between win and loose. He did everything the others done for instance cash crop farming, airline laborforce, military officer, herbal healer or even ordained to a Buddhist monkhood. However he loosed. When he has done different by means of learning process. Ultimately he has found the truth of sustainable happiness. It was right understanding to life as a natural ground. Be sufficient bring about sustainable happiness to life.

Background

I was born on the 29th of December 1936 at Koh Kanun Sub-District, Panom Sarakham District, Chachoengsao Province, about 100 km. from Bangkok. My father was an expert on herbs and held a traditional medicine shop. My mother was a farmer and died when I was 5.

I completed my 4-year elementary education at Wat Phongsaram School at the age of 14 and headed for Bangkok to earn my living. I spent my life as an adult and searched my way to continue learning on my own, what often caused my changing occupation, as I wanted to have time to learn. I finally completed secondary school at the age of 20. It was, according to Thai tradition, the age for ordination to monkhood. I went back home to do so, and spent 6 months in the temple. Then I disrobed and went back to Bangkok to work in the catering section of Japan Airline. I had then to go back home for military conscript.

In the military service, I worked in the archive office where I learned about the first national economic development plan, and was interested in the policy of export of agricultural product.

I ended my military service in 1961 and went back home and worked together with my brother Vijit Kemchalerm at Huay Hin Village. We started to cash crop agriculture being at the same time middleman buying agricultural products from farmers and sell them to traders in town. At the beginning the business ran quite well, but due to rain shortage, the harvest was bad, we had more loss than gain.

In 1969 I was elected to be headman of Huay Hin village due to my large acquaintance of people in that area and due to my knowledge and experiences I had obtained from Bangkok which I had more than other

people, especially my skills in contacting local officials. I belonged to that generation of village heads that could retain the office till retirement, but I earlier resigned in 1993.

Trial and Error

Let me go back to my agricultural activities in 1961. At that time I grew soybean, popcorn and cassava as being promoted by the government. The problem started to arise in 1971-1972 when the price dropped. In 1973 was the worst year for cassava. Many farmers moved to rice growing, what nobody in that region had done before.

In 1976 I planted cotton as a joint investment with other villagers. At the beginning we made good profit, but as many farmers did the same thing, the price dropped, and we suffered with heavy loss. I led farmer movement to campaign for better price threatening to go into demonstration. It did not help much though. Local influential people threatened me for life.

Investment in cash crop was a risk as they required high investment, with the main aim of selling the product. I suffered loss and the debt increased, and due to my involvement in the farmer movement, I was forced by the banks to sell more than 30 hectares of my land to repay my debt. In 1981 was left with only 1.2 hectare of land, and had to rethink about how to survive with this amount of land.

Be Different

My life changed. I had to think first of how to survive, and not how to gain profits as I used to. I started with growing what I would need the shortest time so that my family and I could eat, the surplus was then sold so that I could have some cash to buy other things. I did so over a year and learned that if I grew vegetable for consumption, even if I had no cash in the house, I could still survive without so much problems.

As I used to be close to my father, an herbs expert, I have some basic knowledge about herbs, I started to collect herbs in order to take care of the health of my family and myself. Herbs have become another source of my income. Besides, I have income from fruit trees and other plants, which multiplied gradually in my limited space, but with much more variety. Some of the plants are grown to home use, some only to keep balance to the nature, to be food for birds and animals, to keep the ground fertile.

The problems in the past have taught me that if the products were linked with the market, farmers would never succeed in their occupation because they have to respond to the needs of the market more than their own need. I changed my mind from producing for the market to producing for family consumption. The surplus is then sold in the market.

I started experiment new mode of agriculture by imitating the natural forest, growing many plants. My long years of experiments and testing have

come out to be a successful model called "Forest Agriculture", which is a management of land without relying on other people's labour and on the market.

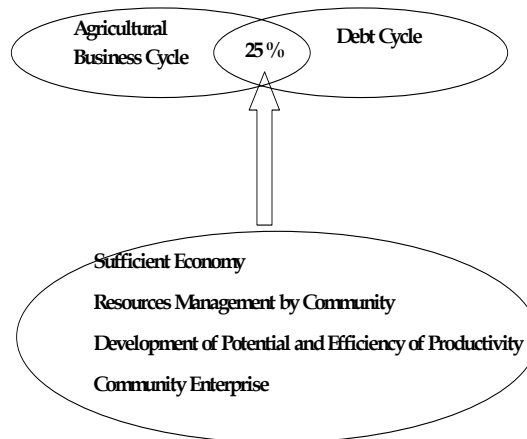
I have been sharing my ideas and experiences with other farmers, using my own Forest Agriculture as a learning place for communities and those who are interested in new mode of agriculture. I am invited to speak in seminars and training also in the universities. I set up a library, a roadside market for our community to sell their local products, learning activities for children and young people to experience sufficiency and being close to the nature. All of this take place in the Forest Agriculture site.

Be Decent Be Happy

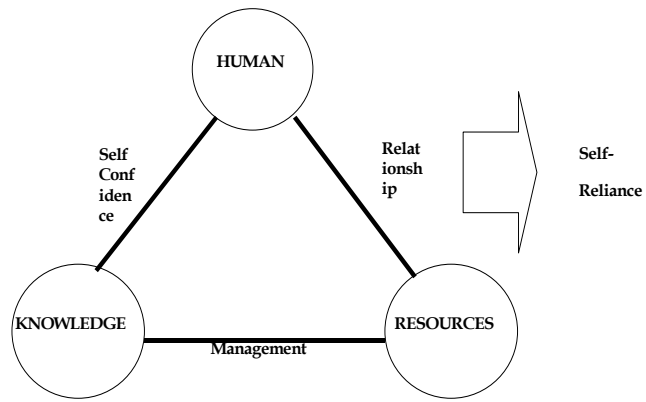
To be self-sufficient is not that easy, but it is something that we have to do, starting "from within". The following is what I mean with "self-sufficiency".

Building a self-sufficient base for economy, a balance between life and income. Farmers can survive if they save one-fourth of their land to work out for their own livelihood. I do not reject the market, but I am against depending totally on the market. You need to have something to eat. Once you have enough to eat, the cash from selling products can be saved, and the products from other three quarters of land could still be source of income.

- Get deep understanding of life, spirit, and interest;
- Learn to know yourself - your expenses;
- Learn to know your problems - debt and income;
- Learn to know your natural resources and your potential;
- Regain self-confidence, believe in your own potential;
- Create plan or guidelines for life, based on self awareness;
- Life and family plan for self-sufficient economy;
- Community plan to social security;
- Natural resource and environment management in a sustainable way;
- Develop knowledge and capacity in resource management in order to



rely on oneself in at least 5 things:



Learning Process for Self-reliance

Rice: the whole system management;
Food: health building;
Herbs: alleviate illnesses;
Home use issues: you can do it yourself (shampoo, soap etc.); and
Soil rehabilitation with bio-fertilizer.