



The Happiness Initiative

While economists the world over argue the key to happiness is obtaining and enjoying material development, the small country of **Bhutan (known as the Land of the Thunder Dragon)** argues that **amassing material growth does not necessarily lead to happiness**. Upon Bhutan's admission to the United Nations in 1971, their Druk Gyalpo (King) announced "our country's policy is to consolidate our sovereignty to achieve economic self-reliance, prosperity and happiness for our country and people."



[1]While the emphasis is placed on both prosperity and happiness, the latter is considered of more significance. The reigning fourth Druk Gyalpo emphasized less than 10 years ago that for Bhutan "Gross National Happiness," is more important than "Gross National Product."

In Bhutan, the four main pillars of Gross National Happiness are: 1. Equitable and equal socio-economic development, 2. Preservation and promotion of cultural and spiritual heritage, 3. Conservation of environment and, 4. Good governance which is interwoven, complementary, and consistent.

While conventional development models stress economic growth as the ultimate objective, the concept of Gross National Happiness is based on the premise that **true development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other**.



[2]Now, in case you're thinking this is a "nice" concept that probably works on a commune somewhere in northern California, Bhutan is a country with 634,982 inhabitants and a land area of 38,394 square kilometers - quite a bit bigger than a hippie enclave! Further, **the concept of "Gross National Happiness" has greatly enabled Bhutan to create a government dedicated to facilitating community, to reducing the gap between the rich and the poor, and to ensuring good governance and empowerment of her people**.

Can such a concept work here in the United States where most people think of money as defining happiness, and this to be directly linked to increased income?

For "[The Happiness Initiative](#) [3]," emotions are just one part of happiness. **The Happiness Initiative defines happiness as "satisfaction with life," meaning whether you are living the best life for you, and feel your life is worthwhile**. They look at the conditions in which we live and satisfaction with our lives. According to Musikanski, "By including the conditions of happiness in a definition of happiness, one acknowledges the internal and external are integrated."

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Working with a team of researchers led by Dr. Ryan Howell at [San Francisco State University's Personality and Wellbeing Lab](#), [4]the Happiness Initiative developed a survey. It is a set of scientifically validated questions most likely to accurately predict conditions of wellbeing. Dr. Howell kept the nine domains measured by Bhutan and added a tenth, workplace experience, identified as an essential condition of wellbeing by Gallup and others.



[5]When you look at your own happiness, you need to see if you have balance or imbalance in your life that fosters or undermines your affect and satisfaction with life. The conditions of happiness the Happiness Initiative uses to define happiness (along with affect and satisfaction with life!) are:

- **Material Well-being** - Evaluates individual and family income, financial security, the level of debt, employment security, and the quality of housing.
- **Physical Health** - Measures the effectiveness of health policies, with criteria such as self-rated health, disability, patterns of risk behavior, exercise, sleep, nutrition, etc.
- **Time Balance** - Looks at the use of time as one of the most significant factors in quality of life, especially time for recreation and socializing with family and friends. A balanced management of time is evaluated, including time spent in traffic jams, at work and in educational activities.
- **Psychological Well-being** - Assesses the degree of satisfaction and optimism in individual life. The indicators analyze self-esteem, sense of competence, stress, spiritual activities and prevalence of positive and negative emotions.
- **Education and Learning** - Considers factors such as participation in formal and informal education, development of skills and capabilities, involvement in children's education, values education and environmental education.
- **Cultural Vitality** - Evaluates local traditions, festival, core values, participation in cultural events, opportunities to develop artistic skills and discrimination due to religion, race or gender.
- **Environmental Quality** - Measures the perception of citizens about the quality of their water, air, soil, forest cover, biodiversity, etc. The indicators include access to green areas and system of waste management and transportation.
- **Governance** - Assesses how the population views the government, the media, the judiciary, the electoral system, and the police, in terms of responsibility, honesty and transparency. It also measures involvement of citizens in community decisions and political processes.
- **Community Vitality** - Focuses on relationships and interactions. It examines the level of confidence, the sense of belonging, the vitality of affectionate relationships, safety at home and in the community, and the practice of giving and volunteering.
- **Workplace Experience** - Evaluates employment satisfaction, work-life balance, job conditions, productivity and compensation.

Empowered by this data, anyone anywhere can revitalize and reframe the debate and provoke richer, broader conversation on a local and national level about what really should guide policy makers in governing our country.

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