Shades and Breadth of Happiness in GNH Index

Contributed by Dasho Karma Ura

GNH has a four-decade gestation period in modern Bhutan. But the older Vajrayana Bhutan looks back at least a millennia of prolonged thinking about happiness. It happened since the repeated visits (four times in my estimate) of Guru Rinpoche in the 8th century. In the Vajrayana tradition, an individual restructured her consciousness, given brains plasticity in modern vocabulary, towards peace and happiness. The basic perennial question in Vajrayana is not how life should be endowed with a great longevity and rich texture with many deep experiences. That those things should be present in people's lives was clearly emphasized in olden Bhutan, as is obvious from aspirations of *tshering nad med phunsum tshog*. Instances of longevity cycles and life extension rituals (Samuel 1993, 2001, Cantwell and Samuel 2010) as well as various healing systems (now derided as alternative) supported this Himalayan societal objective. But a deeper question has been how our life-courses can be made interdependently meaningful and how in our brief life, we can experience non-fluctuating happiness learnt through meditation of practitioners and balanced lives of the lay people.

From such a profound concept of ultimate happiness of Vajrayana Buddhist Bhutan, we had to adapt and devise, since 2006, a GNH Index measuring many slippery subjective elements of GNH largely based on self reports of numerous aspects of people's life collected through periodic national surveys. The 2010 GNH survey covered 7146 respondents giving a representative sample up to the district level. 24 out of a total of 33 indicators used in the construction of GNH Index are qualitative; the remaining 9 are quantitative. Qualitative indicators have lighter weights and quantitative ones have heavier weights. Minor changes in the weights do not alter the GNH Index; it went through robustness tests. Some indicators are inherently subjective. But with more resources for survey, some of the qualitative data should be collected as quantitative data in future. The broad orientation of GNH and its index is postmodern because it incorporates in large measure non-material and non-consumption dimensions of wellbeing.

The 9 domains of GNH are equally weighted to reflect equal importance of each domain for happiness. They reflect the purposes of governance and values of the society. Increasingly, the nine domains should be the main narrative framework of our developments. Socio-economic plans and their documents should be framed by them. Institutions could be reorganized to focus on them. The 33 indicators are on their own useful for practical purposes of different agencies. If certain indicator signals deterioration in a domain, it should prompt public discussion and policy corrections. Index can be decomposed for relevant groups and this disaggregation property makes it useful. It can be broken down at many nationally representative sub-group levels. Subcomponents of GNH indicators are reported for each of the 20 districts, by gender, by rural-urban area, and, for illustrative purposes, by age and certain occupational categories.

GNH is partly normatively based, and its index is statistically robust and policy relevant. GNH Index is calculated using Alkire-Foster methodology (2007, 2011). It is important to note that GNH index uses two cutoff or threshold levels. The first threshold is set at the level of each variable. To give an example with respect to income, an income of 1.5 times the income poverty line is set as the income threshold. 8 hours is the threshold for sleeping time. 'Very good' in a four point likert scale is the threshold for self reported health. Sufficiency thresholds were set based on international norms, national standards, and consultative decisions to arrive at normative judgments of what is a suitable sufficiency for happiness.

Those who do not meet this sufficiency threshold are regarded as insufficient in that variable. There are 124 variables when the 33 indicators are unpacked, so the chances of everyone fulfilling sufficiency threshold in each of these variables are low. It is also not necessary for happiness. It is obvious then that the first of the two ways to increase GNH is to increase the % of people to reach up to the sufficiency threshold in variables that they do not do so so far. In the way the GNH Index is designed and constructed, there is a greater incentive for the government and others relevant bodies to decrease the insufficiencies of not-yet-happy people. This can be done by mitigating the many areas of insufficiencies the not-yet-happy face. Rural people are less sufficient in education and living standards. Urban people have less sufficiency in governance, time and culture. All Bhutanese achieve sufficiency in values, safety, native languages, family relations, and mental health, and life satisfaction, and environmental attitude and government performance.
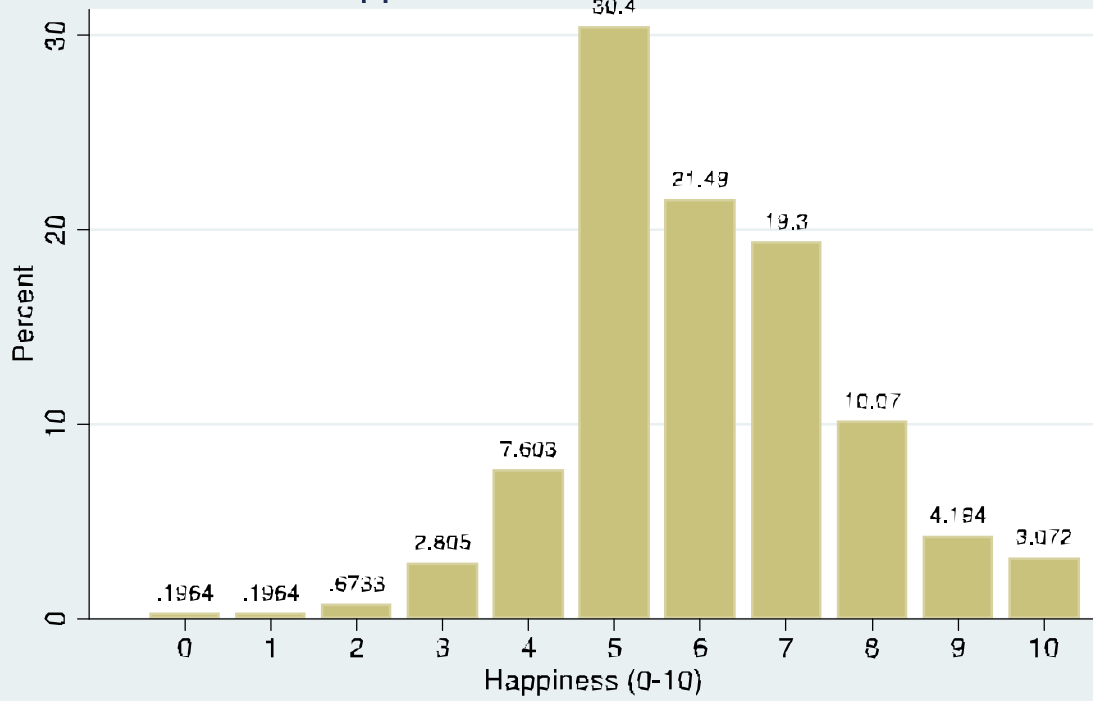
The sufficiency threshold works within a variable in deciding whether a person has reached sufficiency level in that variable. The second cutoff or threshold level is the overall happiness threshold and it is used in deciding a cutoff point across the variables. The happiness threshold is the chosen dividing line taking a reasoned judgment of how many variables are needed for a person to be happy. Not all people need to be sufficient in each of 124 variables to be happy. People are diverse in the ways and means they can have fulfilling life. Not all variables need to be present to be happy. People have freedom of choice in which ways they can make life fulfilling, so not all variables have universal applicability. Since variables are clubbed into domains, it can also be described as taking a reasoned judgment to declare how many domains are needed for a person to be happy.

We can have various gradients of happiness enjoyed by different subgroups of population. Population has been divided into four groups corresponding to the extent they have achieved sufficiency in domains. If a person has achieved less than half of the 9 domains she can be classified as unhappy. If she has achieved 50-65% of the 9 domains, she can be classified as narrowly happy. If she has achieved 66-76% of the 9 domains she can be classified as extensively happy. Finally, if she has achieved more than 77% of the 9 domains, she can be classified as deeply happy.

But if we are to divide the population simply into two groups (happy and not-yet-happy) for policy purpose, one dividing line must be set so that it is easy to monitor through a single number whether GNH is declining or improving. For such purpose, the happiness threshold was set at 66% of the 9 domains. Using 66% as the happiness threshold, GNH Index value is 0.737 for 2010. It shows that overall, 41% of Bhutanese are identified as happy (meaning they are extensively or deeply happy), and the remaining 59% enjoy sufficiency in 57% of the domains on average. Recall that 48.7% of these 59% are already narrowly happy in the four-fold classification, but because we wish to enhance GNH we consider them not-yet-happy for policy purpose. Following this criteria`, according to 2010 GNH Index, 10.4% of people were 'unhappy'; 47.8% are 'narrowly happy', 32.6% are 'extensively happy'; and 8.3% are 'deeply happy'. Happy people have balanced life. Women (69% of them), rural (84% of them), older 40+ (57% of them); uneducated (90% of them) are unhappier if we dichotomize the population into happy and not-yet-happy for policy purpose.

Abroad, happiness is quantified usually by asking people to judge and rate their satisfaction with life as a whole on a scale of 0 to 10. One of the questions in the 2010 GNH survey posed to each of the 7146 persons was how she considers her happiness to be on a scale of 0-10. The results to this question show subjective happiness or subjective wellbeing, and the national average was 6.06 (SD = 1.6) for 2010 suggesting a very good level of happiness in Bhutan. The table shows the percentage distribution of the population on scale 0 to 10. Not only the national average, the distribution of the people over the scale of 0 to 10 is important. If we group the people into three classes according to the level of their scores, 3.87% of the population scored between 0 and 4. We might consider this group to be clearly desperate people. The bulk of the population 78.79% score between 4 and 7, and 17.3% score between 8 and 10.

Happiness on a scale from 0-10

Source: GNH Survey 2010