

## **Sustainable Happiness for Sustainable Development**

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### **1. Background and Rationale**

Despite having economic progress from development, the world has been facing problems from human, social and environmental aspects. This calls holistic concept of development and the move towards sustainable development. For many decades of international movement for sustainable development, problems in environment and sustainable development are still serious or even worse. This should be questionable why the implementation for sustainable development has not been very effective and the sustainable development approach should be rethought.

While there is a need for alternative development paradigm and happiness has been raised as a goal for development, happiness concepts varying by cultures, philosophies, societies, values, and definitions have not sufficiently been analyzed. So far, the issue of happiness has not much linked to the issue of sustainable development, while conventional sustainable development approach still relies on economic, social and environment dimensions only.

Obviously, conventional idea of sustainable development, consisting of environment, social, and economics, still attach to growth (or called 'green growth'). However, continued growth, mainly by consumption-led growth using resources more than necessity, seems to conflict with sustainable development path.

Alternatively, Buddhist approach of development focusing on human mind can limit human desires to appropriate or moderation consumption based on real need. Happiness in Buddhism, focusing on inner happiness aiming for 'sustainable happiness' with the modest use of resources, is in line with sustainable development path. Thus, an alternative development paradigm focusing on inner happiness as a key to drive sustainable development is suggested. This approach tackles the problem from the root cause, while the key inner-human element is missed in the conventional sustainable development concept.

As 2015 is the transitional year from Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the UN and global development community commit to achieve by 2030, it is timely to discuss the new idea of Buddhist happiness

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concept and its implications to sustainable development. This paper, therefore, explains happiness in Eastern Buddhist perspective aiming for 'sustainable happiness' and its implications to quality of life and development. The paper discusses how the concept of Buddhism's sustainable happiness or inner happiness can make sustainable development effective, and thus, sustainable development concept has to link with sustainable happiness issue.

## **2. Happiness Classification in Buddhism**

In Buddhism, happiness rank starts from the lowest level or physical based, which is happiness from acquisition or meeting sensual pleasures, to higher level or inner happiness, which can be obtained from non-acquisition. The inner happiness which is based on mind and wisdom can lead to the highest happiness level with total extinction of suffering that considered as real happiness or sustainable happiness. The following three types of happiness, from low to high, are simply categorized according to Buddhist happiness concept<sup>2</sup>.

### *1. Happiness from Physical Level*

This is the lowest rank of happiness from meeting physical needs or sensual pleasures. It depends on external factors; therefore, it can be unstable and unsustainable. Most of happiness in Western theories and studies relate to this type of happiness. Therefore, this type of happiness can be temporary and be explained by the theories of adaptation or aspiration/ social comparison why happiness can be faded down or not increase proportionally with the increased in income.

However, in Buddhist economics, happiness at physical or material level is needed for meeting basic needs to relief person's physical sufferings or get out of poverty. However, human beings may demand over materials and resources much more than the necessity level of human needs. Human desires at physical level can be classified into two types: 1) the basic need that is really needed for improving real quality of life (real need), and 2) the unlimited wants which are not necessary or over luxury. Following Buddhist economics, when there are internal conflicts in choosing between the two desires, people should go for the first type for improving real quality of life. The second type of human desires which are unlimited and unnecessary can cause problems to oneself as well as to social and environment.

Excessive material accumulation driven by greed may not lead to the increase in happiness and not sustainable, instead it can cause problems. Happiness depending on

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<sup>2</sup> The following happiness classification and explanation are interpreted or extracted from Payutto, P.A. (2011), Payutto, P.A. (2012) and P.A. Payutto, (P.A. (1992).

external pleasures to serve ones' needs may cause conflicts with others who also need them. People can get stress and tensions from object dependent and social comparison, and their happiness can be faded down with higher desire and pressure. This can increase suffering instead. This type of happiness involves a lot of suffering, so it is not considered as real happiness. Eastern Buddhist philosophy explains this type of happiness as temporary and mix of suffering, if not be managed by wisdom.

Thus, physical level of happiness is acceptable in the case that it is supervised by good mind & wisdom and to be used for advancing human development. After the basic needs are fulfilled, humans should be able to develop further to gain higher level of happiness or inner happiness (as indicated in the followings).

## *2. Happiness from Mind Development*

Happiness at this level is the start of inner happiness that can generated inside one's own mind. People can be happy from good quality of mind, peaceful and mindful, loving kindness and compassion as well as giving or sharing to others, instead of being happy from accumulation for self-interests. This mind level of happiness can be generated from inner spirit, not from material acquisition for themselves.

This mind based happiness can also be driven by good desires; for example, the desire to be useful for others (not for selfishness), to be happy to work for its own results (not for rewards), the love to learn and develop oneself, etc. It is a higher happiness level than the first one because this is more developed or trained to be, not driven by personal benefit only. People can have good will or aspiration to be good, to be knowledgeable, to be creative, to be skillful, to be useful, to help people out of suffering, to do good things, etc. Thus, this type of happiness would benefit societal development and societal happiness.

This type of mind development can be characterized by purified, calm, and clear mind. Positive psychology as well as meditation can be trained for having this mind-based happiness. When mind is developed to higher level with higher quality, it leads the way for more wisdom. Even with the search for happiness on the level of sensual pleasures/ materials, it will be in a positive direction (i.e., not aim for oneself but for selflessness and more useful for others) bringing more peace and happiness of the society. Humans should be trained to achieve this type of happiness, reflecting higher level of human development.

However, this level of happiness or good mind may involve sufferings due to expectations, attachment to goodness, etc. Therefore, humans are encouraged to move beyond this happiness level to the highest level completely free from suffering.

## *3. Happiness from Insights/ Liberation*

Happiness at this level is the highest inner happiness, characterized by wisdom or insight with full understanding of natural truth; i.e., interrelationship of causes and effects and natural changes. By developing inner happiness to reach this level, one would reach true happiness.

With understanding of natural interdependence and natural laws of the impermanence, the state of suffering, and the non-existing (or selflessness), one would have purified minds and free from any attachment. With fully understand what really matters in a good life and true happiness, one would not attach to any cause of suffering and can achieve completed liberalization. One will neutrally understand everything under the natural truth without suffering. This level of happiness is considered as genuine happiness that human beings should be trained for and it should be the goal for complete human development. People who enjoy this type of happiness fully desire to be good and useful for others. They totally devote to work and help others with selflessness. Thus, the society would be benefit from the people who achieve this level of happiness and societal happiness as a whole would increase.

Thus, the progress in happiness development beyond the first level of material based is encouraged. People are able to be happy from mind development and wisdom based happiness, although they may not fully reach the highest level of ultimate happiness.

### **3. Inner Happiness: the Difference from General Happiness Concept**

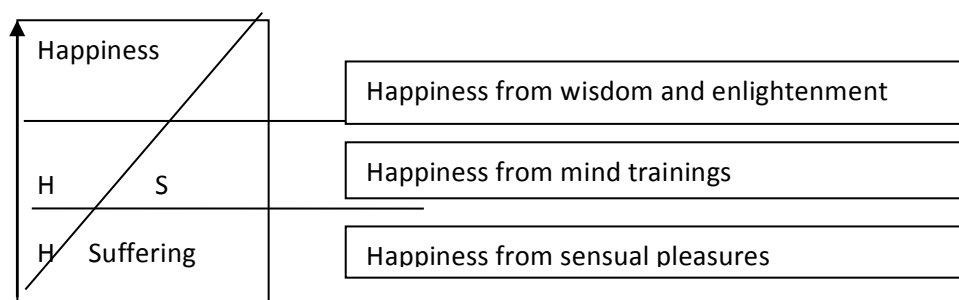
Inner happiness is higher than the physical-based happiness that being discussed in general happiness studies which has unsustainable nature. Those studies may touch on mind-based happiness with emotional factors and life perceptions, but Buddhism's happiness also aims for mind development from mindfulness and purify mind along the path towards 'sustainable happiness'. Although current happiness surveys may cover spiritual wellbeing as one element in their happiness domains (composing of various psychological and economic factors in the same rank), spiritual aspect is not the special focus (unlike Buddhism's which give higher rank for inner happiness). While happiness economics today explain the unsustainable happiness from theories of social comparison, adaptation and aspiration, they do not suggest a solution or how to exit from this problem (while that of Buddhism guides the direction to higher/ inner happiness to obtain sustainable happiness and be free from suffering).

The difference in happiness concept in Buddhism and that of general theories may easily be illustrated in Figure 1. As happiness is the opposite status of suffering, Buddhist happiness aims for completely free from suffering at the highest level by encourage people to move happiness level upward or developing themselves with inner

happiness, while happiness in general theories still attach to the first or the lowest level involving a lot of suffering.

Figure 1. Degree of happiness and suffering at different happiness levels.

Inner Happiness



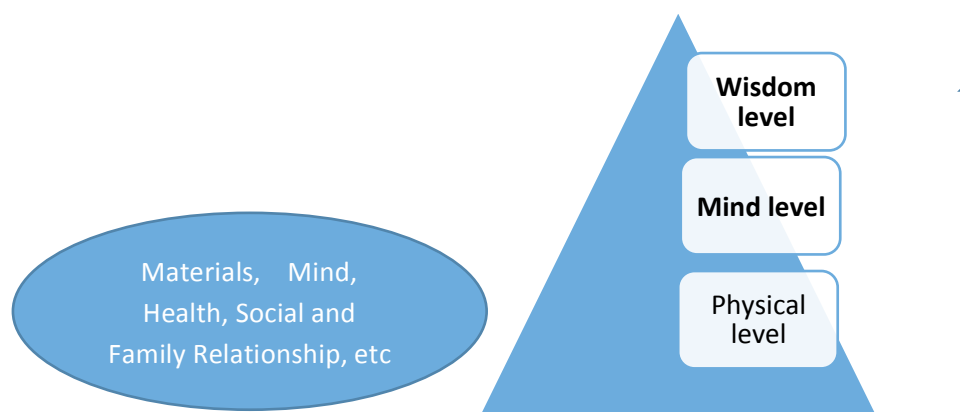
The bottommost level is happiness from sensual pleasures which is temporary and involves a lot of suffering, so it can not generate much true happiness. The middle level represents the mind based level, which involve more happiness generated by oneself. Suffering is reversely dropped with the degree of increased inner happiness. The higher inner happiness one can gain, the less suffering one would have. That is why people should aim for higher level of happiness. When inner happiness can be increased to the highest wisdom level, there would be no room for suffering left.

Western happiness studies such as those of positive psychology also consider inner happiness from mind level, but unlikely to cover wisdom level of understanding natural truths. Positive psychologists believe in positive thinking and state of mind that influences individual's happiness. However, high level of happiness in Buddhism requires high quality level of mind development from trainings such as mindfulness and meditation practice in order to gain insight of the law of nature.

So far, happiness economists somehow have adopt tools to research and measure happiness by applying happiness concept of Jerame Bentham (1789)'s the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers, and mostly refer happiness to sensual pleasures. Psychologists and economists have measured happiness or subjective well-being with questions regard to life satisfaction (of which the concept can be vary according cultures, societies, philosophies, etc). Their happiness domains in questions may include happiness determinants at both physical and mind level, but they are given equal value (or same weight) for the total sum of happiness or life satisfaction score. In other words, happiness is seen as a combination of various influences from the same level/ dimension. In contrast, happiness in Buddhism are ranked in different levels from

low to high categories. These concept difference may be roughly illustrated as in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Comparison of various happiness domains in the same rank in Western concept and different steps and kinds of happiness in Buddhism



Current happiness studies mostly explain happiness influenced by various domains; such as, from materials/ income, health, family & social relationship, mind and spirituality, etc. in the same level of equal importance; whereas, Buddhist concept of happiness distinguishes the higher and lower forms of happiness and encourage people to move from the lower to the higher levels which is more important. However, this encouragement in Buddhism does not mean to force all people to accept and practice; it accepts that different individuals have different levels of human development. However, ones should try their bests.

#### **4. Implications of Inner Happiness to Development and Quality of Life**

Unlike general happiness concept, inner happiness has different implications to development. Inner happiness created internally can come from higher development of human mind and wisdom inside each individual. The higher mind development human beings can achieve, the less need to exploit or do harm to others and nature for self-interests. One can be happy from goodness, kindness towards others, or helping others to be happy. Therefore, instead of taking advantage or accumulate materials for themselves, they are happy to share them to others or allocate to the needy of the society. Real consumption is for the purpose of usefulness and real quality of life. By clarifying the distinction between real needs and unnecessary wants, natural resources

should be used more for real needs. With people's inner happiness, natural resources can also be saved from less wants. Real quality of life is to meet basic needs (which can vary across time and places), not from unnecessary wants. The optimum is where happiness is maximized with real quality of life.

**The key implication which is different from the mainstream economics theory is that people can be happy with real quality of life with modest consumption and acquisition.** Thus, they have no need to over accumulation/ consumption/ production which leads to massive use of natural resources that are unnecessary to increase happiness. Being less want for themselves and less dependent on materials, higher or inner happiness can lead to less resource utilization and more societal happiness or peaceful societies as well as more equitable resource distribution. Individual and societal happiness can be achieved with low costs.

Thus, promoting inner happiness (with less wants) would lead to efficient consumption for real needs and efficient resources be used only for the purposes of usefulness, efficient work and time used for usefulness, and more allocation of resources to the disadvantaged. With inner happiness, resources would be more allocated to the needy, resulting in fairer distribution of resources between the have and the have-not. The societal happiness as a whole would be increased. People should receive basic needs more equally (resulting in reducing poverty and inequality) to allow them to advance their human development. The concept is pro-poor and pro-equity as well as inclusive development to relieve sufferings for all.

Therefore, real quality of life in this concept relates to the purpose of usefulness for individuals and the societies. Quality of life in Buddhist concept does not imply higher consumption for over comfortable or over-luxury life style, which resulting in the overuse of resources and inefficient resource utilization for the society. The meaning of quality of life in Buddhism may be different from the general quality of life concept relating to happiness (mostly at physical level) in the current Western concept.

In sum, this process of limited unnecessary demand (resulting from higher level of happiness) is missed in mainstream economics and development concept which believe that the higher consumption implies the higher well-being (as explained in conventional economics' utility function). **In contrast, inner happiness in this concept with less consumption and resource utilization can lead to higher (subjective) well-being.** Most of theories and approaches have not incorporated this happiness issue, especially sustainable development concept which still relies on supply-side management of resources but not tackle the root cause of over resource utilization from the demand-side.

## **5. Buddhist-based Happiness Concepts.**

Some examples of related Buddhist development concepts that have emerged recently in the Eastern world are: Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) and Gross

National Happiness (GNH). In addition, this paper also proposes a new Buddhist Sustainable Development (BSD) focusing on inner happiness as a pathway towards wisdom and holistic sustainable development. These concepts concern more than physical aspects of sustainable development that discussed in the green growth-based and ecological based concepts.

### *1. Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP)*

The sufficiency economy philosophy initiated by King Bhumipol Adulyadej of Thailand can be seen as a practical development model of the Buddhist concept. It is based on the Buddhist principles of self-reliance, contentment, moderation, reasonableness, the middle-path, wisdom/ knowledge and morality, which are consistent with Buddhist economics. The word “self-sufficiency” in this concept means having enough to live on and to live for, as well as being satisfied with the situation (i.e., people are satisfied with needs at the moderate level, less greedy and more honest, consequently less trouble towards others).

Sufficiency economy means a philosophy that stresses the middle path as the overriding principle of appropriate conduct by the population at all levels. “Sufficiency” means moderation and due consideration in all modes of conduct. It also requires the strengthening of morality of all sectors and groups to adhere to principles of honesty and integrity, and serves as a balanced approach combining patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence to appropriately cope with critical challenges from socioeconomic, environmental and cultural changes derived from globalization<sup>3</sup>.

Therefore, sufficiency economy philosophy is beyond economics but shares Buddhism’s core concepts for right living. Sufficiency economic principles rely on the concepts of three-elements under two-conditions, as shown in Figure 3.

### **Figure 3.**

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<sup>3</sup> Summarized from Philosophy of the “Sufficiency Economy” page in *The King’s Sufficiency Economy and the Analyses of Meanings by Economist*, The Office of the National Research Council of Thailand, 2003.



## Principles & Conditions of the Sufficiency Economy

### Three principles

- Moderation “Satisfaction”
- Reasonableness  
“Being aware”
- Self-immunity  
“Down-sizing risk”

### Two conditions

- ⚙ Knowledge
- ⚙ Ethics



## 2. Gross National Happiness (GNH)

Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness or GNH places the core value of happiness into a relationship with four main dimensions: 1) sustainable and equitable socioeconomics, 2) good governance, 3) promotion and preservation of culture, and 4) environmental conservation. Viewing economic growth strategy as misdirection in pursuing individual and societal happiness, GNH has inspired a new paradigm for development. Bhutan proposed to the UN and global development community to promote happiness as a new development paradigm<sup>4</sup>.

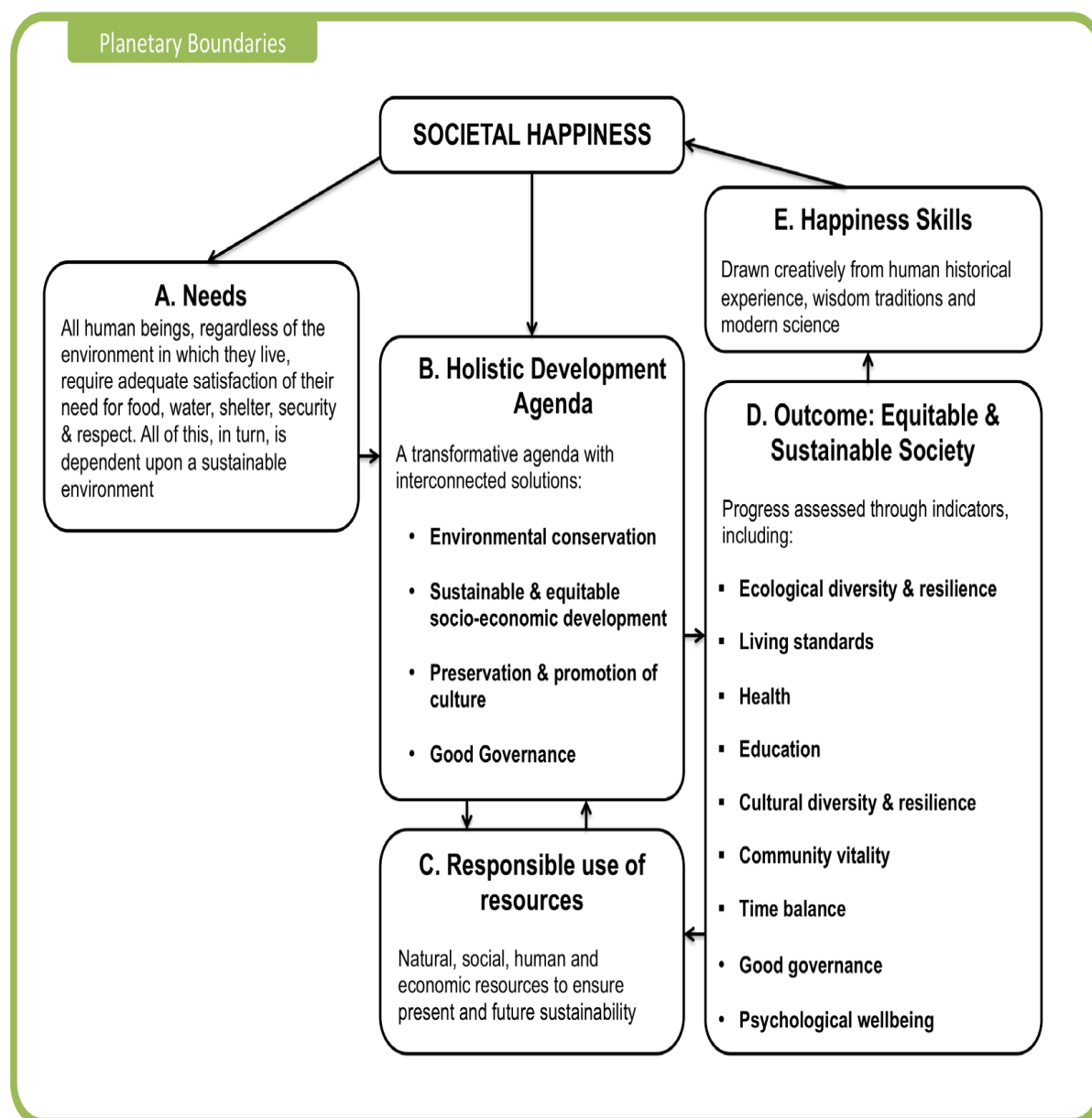
In the new development paradigm (NDP), genuine happiness arises from a deep sense of harmony with nature, with compassion and contentment. It also acknowledges basic needs from society and the environment (i.e., clean air and water, good health and decent living conditions, knowledge, peace, security and justice, meaningful relationships, etc.) as preconditions for human-beings to flourish and achieve true happiness. It values the sustainability of all life on earth (e.g., humans and other species) and interrelatedness. With global crisis in all dimensions, it addresses the need for holistic views on development. The new paradigm is expected to influence the transformative post-2015 development agenda.

In the NDP model, the vision of societal happiness views human progress within planetary limits, thus it becomes necessary to focus on real needs and the fulfilling of the needs of *all* humans rather than the “wants” of just a few. The NDP also recognizes happiness skills as necessary personal tools to experience human and social happiness. The NDP framework can be illustrated as in Figure 4.

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<sup>4</sup> NDP (2013)

**Figure 4. New Development Paradigm (NDP) framework**



Source: NDP (2013: p. VIII).

Under this concept, wellbeing conditions and measurement can be assessed according to the nine domains currently used in Bhutan's GNH Index: ecological diversity and resilience, living standards, health, education, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, time balance, good governance, and psychological wellbeing. These are under key four components of GNH: environmental conservation, sustainable or equitable socio-economic development, preservation & promotion of culture, and good governance.

In sum, Buddhist related concepts of Sufficiency Economy and GNH recognize non-growth dimensions of well-being and the relationship with nature; thus, providing a holistic view of development. They also promote a balanced life style with moderation and contentment, rather than materialism and consumerism as the economic growth model. Obviously, the two models disregard growth and place value on their own pathways, which can guide for happier development for their societies rather than following the mainstream one.

Given the above existing concepts, another Buddhist approach introduced in this paper (so called “Buddhist Sustainable Development” – BSD) focuses on inner happiness as the key factor to make sustainable development goal effective as well as indicates direction or a pathway to reach the goal of sustainability. Inner happiness which can be generated inside human beings and independent to external factors is beyond physical level of happiness that generally discussed.

## **6. The Need to Rethink Sustainable Development Framework**

The widely used global definition of sustainable development from the Brundtland report<sup>5</sup> defined sustainable development as:

*“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”*

This concept considers meeting the needs of present and future generations only - without due consideration of unlimited desires of human beings. This is a practical problem for implementation. This framework is also unclear in the concept of inter-generational well-beings and how to reach the goal. This sustainable development framework seems to concern only physical well-being and seem to request present generation to concern for future needs. The question is whether it could be possible if the people of this generation still have greed and unlimited wants as well as attach to low level of happiness for themselves. This concept misses the path of ‘how to’ and seems to ‘trade-off’ with their present happiness (from fulfilling unlimited wants). People may not be happy or willing to do so due to their attachment to the material consumption/ accumulation; thus, the request is unlikely to be possible or sustainable. This concept seems to neglect the root cause of human greed and selfishness, the main obstacle of sustainable development.

Without well-trained mind, human desires will not end and lead to more and more consumption, leading to excessive energy and resource utilization. This type of behavior would definitely be in conflict with limited natural resources available in the earth as well as conflict among human beings. The world would not be in sustainable

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<sup>5</sup> From the World Commission on Environment and Development’s *Our Common Future* (1987)

path with the escalation of consumptions over time and over materialism in the consumption-led growth economy. This is the key problem threatening sustainable development. Particularly, the world problem is escalated by the increased population and urbanization as well as industrialization that increase more materialistic societies.

Problems of over materialism and consumerism arise at country and global levels. Developed countries with more materialistic have utilized resources more than their resource availability and may invade or bring adverse impacts in environment to less developed countries. The more developed economy is likely to have the higher rate of resource use. For example, USA. alone with about 5% of world population has consumed about 40% of the world resources and 30% of world energy, and accounting for about 30% share for total global warming. One could imagine when emerging economies or big countries/ regions; i.e., China, Brazil, India, or ASEAN, etc., have become more urbanized, industrialized and materialized, much more resources would be needed to serve those increased consumption and investment.

Therefore, given that resources in the planet is limited, a socioeconomic system that stimulates people to continuously consume more and more with unlimited wants regardless of usefulness is unlikely to go along with sustainable development goal and that is why the current development paradigm under the consumption-led growth model could not solve the world problem of unsustainable development.

Given that conventional idea of sustainable development has long been used and has not solved environment and sustainable development effectively, it may be a time to change the development mindset and rethinking sustainable development framework with the right path and right views, which could shape a new direction for effective sustainable development. Putting inner happiness as the key factor for driving sustainable development could be a critical change.

## **7. The Concept of Buddhist Sustainable Development (BSD)**

This new sustainable development approach, focusing on Buddhism's inner-happiness discussed in this paper, may be called as Buddhist Sustainable Development (BSD). This places the emphasis on inner happiness as an essential for effectively sustainable development. While other sustainable development approaches mostly focus on environment and resource management or supply side, this approach focuses on human behavior or consumption management which is the demand side of sustainable development.

As unsustainable development rooted from human greed and destructive behavior, the proposed Buddhist Sustainable Development (BSD) emphasizes happiness issue and provide a direction to eliminate the root cause with inner happiness. This proposed sustainable development framework promotes the limitation to real needs with real consumption for true quality of life while not trade-off with truly

human well-being or happiness. The present generation would not trade-off for the future generations' happiness, as they can be happy presently with limited real needs and higher forms of happiness under this Buddhist concept.

The Buddhist concept of development encourages people to realize real value of products/ materials using or consuming only for improving real human development. This can restrict the unnecessary use and over-exploited resources of human behavior. Humans cannot live without basic physical needs for survival, but can live happily without excessive materials that are over luxury. With inner happiness in mind, the limited desire close to standard quality of life (real need) would reduce the overwhelm use or consumption in luxury or unnecessary production and mindful to consume what really good for life (real or efficient consumption). Human beings would have less unnecessary wants and less production as well as less intervening natural resources, while have more time to do useful things in life. Human well-being can be maximized by minimizing consumption and least resource exploitation.

The application of this concept could limit unnecessary material uses and over-exploited behavior of human beings who have unlimited wants. This concept believes that people can be happy (and even increasingly happy) by living in moderation. People can have high levels of happiness with moderate consumption and resource uses.

With the middle way of life under Buddhist economics, consumption and production can be modest and achieved in the most efficient way with the least utilization of resources. Thus, more saved energy and resources can be utilized for social development and provided to the needy. With love, care and gratitude to nature, human beings would have less conflicts with nature and other lives. Economic well-being would no longer be a natural trade-off.

Wisdom and mindfulness is the key to drive the new direction of development. Human beings would have higher quality spiritually to move towards caring and sustainable society by deep understanding of relationship of all beings under the law of nature. Human needs to learn to appreciate nature that enrich human well-being and human relationship should be under the culture of loving kindness and cooperation. This kind of inner happiness development would lead to sustainable path of development.

In sum, **this new approach of inner-happiness focused sustainable development suggests that human beings can live happily with moderate consumption, cooperation and compassion to others, as well as harmony with nature.** This type of development can increase subjective well-being of individuals with contagious effects, leading to societal happiness and global sustainability.

Such development requires sustainable happiness, developed along the path to purify minds towards highest life's goal of liberalization, as well as appropriate systems allowing middle-way of life and middle-way economy. The relationship of human, social, economic, and environment in this system can use less quantity of natural resources, which is a pathway towards real sustainable development.

*This paper was presented for the International Conference on Gross National Happiness on GNH, held in Paro, Bhutan from 4-6 November 2015*

The existing framework of sustainable development emphasizing only on compromising needs of inter-generations may be difficult to achieve as long as individuals normally concern for their own happiness at low level. Unless people are developed to be able to enjoy their higher or inner happiness, they would not care for others or future generations.

**That is why the new approach of sustainable development has to focus and analyze happiness issue and stress the path for higher or more sustainable happiness that can result in effective sustainable development.** New sustainable development approach proposed in this paper promotes the limitation to real needs with real consumption for true quality of life while it does not trade-off with true human well-being and happiness. **With modest and efficient consumption, people can be happy with higher forms of happiness.**

Under the BSD framework, human behaviors would be driven by wisdom, rather than by self-interests and unlimited wants as assumed in conventional economic theory. This human spiritual focus is neglected in the mainstream sustainable development concept, and perhaps that is why it cannot solve current global problems effectively. Therefore, right views towards life goal (with inner freedom/ happiness) is a firm foundation for right behavior to others and nature, leading to sustainable path of development.

This paper, therefore, suggests holistic approach for human spiritual development as a foundation for sustainable happiness for all and sustainable development. Thus, human development for sustainable happiness is an additional key element to the mainstream sustainable development concept consisting of economic, social, and environment elements. Given that sustainable development goals are targeted to be achieved by global development community towards 2030, more happiness analysis in relation to sustainable development is encouraged for the future.

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<http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/> Center of Bhutan Studies (CBS).