

## A shift in priority to 'happiness'

By TAKAMITSU SAWA

Per capita gross domestic product is a highly valued as yardstick for measuring the degree of "affluence" enjoyed by the citizens of each nation. The figures of various countries are usually converted into U.S. dollars to determine how countries rank internationally.

Japan, which ranked 17th among the member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1980, moved up to No. 10 in 1985, eighth in 1990 and third in 1995 and 2000. In 2005, though, it fell to 13 and then to 18 in 2006.

Posting the highest per capita GDP consistently since 1995 is Luxembourg. Runners up were Switzerland in 1995 and Norway in 2000 and 2005.

Even though Japan's ranking has dropped, its citizens have not necessarily suffered a degradation in lifestyles. Conversely, I do not readily agree with the argument that the Japanese people necessarily enjoyed "affluence" around 1995 when its per capita GDP was among the highest in the world.

That begs the difficult question: What is affluence, really? That may never be answered.

Indeed, I suspect there is hardly any relationship between "affluence" and "happiness." I recall from my own experience how Japanese saved money during the early stage of Japan's high economic growth (1958-1973). Many bought what the "three sacred things" that they had longed dreamed of: a black-and-white television, a refrigerator and an electric washing machine. It must be said that these three items created unprecedented "happiness"

among a large majority of Japanese households.

Even though the incomes and amounts of consumption of the Japanese people have since increased several-fold, I don't think the degree of "happiness" or "affluence" they feel has even doubled.

Although a positive relationship exists between "happiness" and "affluence" on one hand and per capita GDP on the other, it seems crystal clear that the former is determined by a number of factors other than GDP.

I believe it is incumbent upon all of humanity to work toward realizing a society in which every individual can lead an "affluent and happy" life. Unfortunately, however, it is virtually impossible to find a yardstick to measure "happiness" even though a number of methods quantify "affluence."

In his book "Being Attracted to Bhutan," Yoshiro Imaeda quotes King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of the Himalayan kingdom as saying that "gross national happiness (GNH)" is more important than GDP. The fourth monarch of the primarily agrarian country, with a population of about 600,000, is said to have made the comment in 1976 at a press conference during the fifth summit of the nonaligned nations in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo.

According to Imaeda, Queen Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk explains the king's "gross national happiness" theory in her book, "Treasures of the Thunder Dragon," as follows: "In a most simplistic way, the theory of GNH is based on the belief that man can neither become happy nor gain a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction by means of material wealth alone, and that economic development and modernization should not be attained at the sacrifice of the quality of life or traditional values."

She goes on to say that the king established several priorities for implementing his policies and that his fundamental policy guidelines are targeted toward achieving fair social and economic development to be shared by citizens from all walks of life in every part

of the country, protecting and promoting a pollution-free environment, preserving and enhancing Bhutan's unique cultural heritage, and realizing a political system in which all citizens may participate and take responsibility.

In short, the king's philosophy, as described by the queen, proves that the concept of gross national happiness based on Buddhist teachings and thinking has taken root in the Buddhist country of Bhutan.

Townsend Harris (1804-1878), who arrived in the port of Shimoda at the southern tip of Izu Peninsula as the first U.S. consul general in Japan in 1856 and was promoted to minister two years later, made an interesting observation about Japanese people. He said they appeared quite happy even though they were by no means wealthy.

In his diary Harris said people in Japan dressed modestly, behaved courteously and had high intellectual standards. Harris made these observations during his travels between Edo (later Tokyo) and Shimoda. Harris seemed impressed in the same way that today's visitors to Bhutan are impressed.

Many economists argue that economic development is the key to making people "affluent" and "happy." They are convinced that a free and competitive market economy is indispensable for achieving rapid economic growth; that economic growth cannot be achieved without deregulation, privatization and smaller government; and that there is no reason to be concerned about inequalities or disparities that may arise in the process of economic development, except in unusual cases.

These economists go a step further by saying that disparity motivates people to work harder, that Japan must rid itself of its unique egalitarianism, and that the benefits of economic development "trickle down" to the lowest social stratum. Therefore, top priority must be given to economic growth.

I don't accept this way of thinking. Although Japan has become a country without religion, Buddhist teachings and thinking still influence people, just as

they influence the people of Bhutan.

Many Japanese cannot remain indifferent to the miseries suffered by other people. They detest disparities and do not like winner-loser divisions. This presumably is one reason why a large number of Japanese leaned toward Marxist economic theories in the past.

In my view, it is undeniable that the Japanese lack the ability to be a player in the market economy. What is required now is to work toward building a nation in which priority is given to "happiness" over "affluence."

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