

## **Gross Domestic Happiness - Measuring GDP gives an inadequate picture of the health of a society.**

American citizens are conditioned from birth to act a certain way, to value certain possessions, and to respect certain attitudes. This is why we as a society feel the way we do about our lives and our selves. If we learn to value thin people, we will be happy when we are thin. If we learn to value wealth, we will be happy when we are wealthy. The problem arises when we are conditioned to want something that our society cannot provide.

As a nation, we want several conflicting things: we want to be wealthy, we want a family, we want leisure time, we want to be successful, we want myriad other things that vary greatly between individuals. However, success often requires long work hours, to the detriment of family life. To gain more income, most people would have to take a second job, severely limiting their leisure time. There is a conflict here that cannot be easily resolved within the framework of our existing system, but that must be addressed if we are to become collectively happier.

The small Himalayan country of Bhutan has addressed this by focusing on the things that matter to their people, while gently bringing their nation into the 21st century. They have preserved the essence of their culture, but allow their citizens to choose between traditional and Western ways of conducting their lives. They are a unique example of how a society can gracefully integrate itself into the global community without losing its identity.

In the case of America, our eponymous collective dream is to become wealthy. And our dream is the root of our discontent: nothing is ever enough. Wealthy executives feel the need to steal. Why? Why would a millionaire commit a minor insider trading violation, or skim off the top of an employee pension account? To gain a fraction of their monthly income? No. It is because most of us cannot pass up an opportunity to have *more*.

There are many people with little access to the American dream: those who face institutional discrimination, crime, poor educational opportunities, natural disasters, or just bad luck. But middle and upper-middle class American citizens have comparatively little to complain about - yet seem to do little else. We have clean water, warm homes, high relative income levels, access to a varied diet, and high rates of depression.

The problem is not only that our measuring system views society as an economic statistic, it's that American citizens view their *lives* as economic statistics. It is a change of attitude that we need, and perhaps a change in our definition of happiness.