

GNH, a label for quality information

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Introduction

The previous GNH conference in Bangkok finished with a question and comment round.

Some of the proposals and thoughts expressed brought me to the idea that the experience of happiness depends on both the individual management of the human mind and the external conditions that influences our lives.

The external conditions of our lives on the other hand are part of the geographical, historical, cultural and natural environment of the societies in which we are born.

I engaged in a non exhaustive exploratory research of the why and wherefrom of an historic derailment that led humankind to the present state of unbalanced welfare, life threatening usage of the limited resources of the earth, and growing discomfort and unhappiness in the lives of millions of people. How did it come that far and how can we possibly redirect the evolution on the right track?

The outcome of this exploration is a proposal to create a tool that would enable societies to partly correct this derailment in order to achieve a more balanced experience of happiness and well-being for people all over the world.

Three examples

I would like to start this explorative paper with three true stories. They will be followed by a historical bird flight of the relation between human needs and a specific tool used by society to influence their fulfilment. Finally I will present a proposal for the creation of a practical tool to evaluate the quality of information that invades daily the lives of millions of people.

My first story comes from Australia where I am currently living. Tim, the son of my Australian friend Michael, is an excellent student and, aged eleven, has remarkable skills in mathematics and technology. During his leisure time he became, as so many kids addicted to computer games. He also tends to eat nothing but junk food. His parents do not understand this. Their efforts to direct him to healthy food remained fruitless.

Tim belongs to the 25% of Australians suffering from obesity. Obesity is complex illness that has been linked with many other diseases. Health research has indicated that for the first time in human history the younger generation may not have the life expectancy of its parents.ⁱ

Scientific research has shown, hidden seducers have been introduced into computer play games for children and youngsters by junk food multinationals. These entice players to consume junk food.

Obesity is threatening the future societies of the US and Australia in the near and long term. This problem is just starting in Europe. The human and economic cost in the long term is immense.

The second story I would like to tell happened to a good friend of mine in Belgium. Her daughter Anne, 14 years old, is suffering from anorexia nervosa. Stupefied and shocked by a totally unexpected life-threatening crisis and after a recovery period of three months in a specialised revalidation hospital, her mother has been searching desperately for a cause for the anorexia. Numerous doctors, psychiatrists, social workers and educational staff at Anne's school got involved. They concluded that Anne, who is genuinely interested in the arts and driven by a deep wish to become a fashion designer, is indoctrinated by the idea of an ideal female body; a concept brought to her by the available publicity channels of fashion design, women's magazines and clothing advertisements.

The photographic manipulation of pictures as practised for the promotion of fashion presents female bodies in a state of physical starvation as ideal attractive models. There is no doubt that this has to be linked with the increase of anorexia nervosa cases in young girls and the psychotic obsession with being overweight amongst women, which is statistically proven.ⁱⁱ

I was confronted with the third story when living in India.

Gita lives with her four children and husband in a small village in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India. The villagers are very poor and depend on the erratic harvest of crops from small fields. When the monsoon fails to occur, many small farmers in the region commit suicide.

The village of Gita has not one latrine. People go behind a bush or on the banks of a stream. Open defecation without privacy is common. The very personal and sensitive nature of the act often forces women and girls to do it inside their houses on the floor or to wait till nightfall. This increases chances of urinary tract infection and chronic constipation. Hygiene is below all standards and illnesses reign proportionally in accordance. Some of the reasons for women to hide are the possibility of sexual exposure which can lead to loss of dignity and becoming unmarriageable. This is an overall stress factor.

At the same time, in Gita's village nearly everybody has a TV; at every crossroad is a small shop selling Nescafé, Coca cola and other brands produced by multinational food companies. Every second year Gita's husband buys a new mobile phone on credit. Publicity for providers,

mobile suppliers and special credit schemes at extraordinary interest rates is presented via 30 TV channels and advertising billboards scattered in the small fields. Farmers commonly rent out their fields to allow the placement of big billboards, as this represents a welcome surplus of income needed to survive. ⁱⁱⁱ

These stories clearly indicate that something is wrong. The knowledge that the lifestyle of people is intended influenced by externally organised incentives is not new, but it is time to take a closer look at it and to deal with it.

A step back in history

I'd like us take a walk back into history to have a look at the relation between human needs and the experience of happiness.

A subjective feeling

Happiness is a concept that we have been taught to conceive as being the equivalent of material welfare.

But is it all that simple?

The experience of a need that is not a basic survival need (let us call it for a moment a subjective feeling) is part of the realm of the mind.

Via the channels of the human senses the human mind is constantly bombarded by internal and external incentives. Internal incentives can be regulated by the mind.

Buddhist meditation practise proves that the experience of desire, need or craving can be managed in the long term.

Scientific research via MRI of the mind in meditation of long Buddhist practitioners resulted in the observation of an astonishing capacity of the human mind to transform destructive incentives into a peaceful and joyful equanimity state. ^{iv v}

It is my belief that the Buddhist emphasis on training the mind by managing thoughts, emotions, and concepts on the one hand deserves a collective enforcement from society. This could involve educational schemes which would include specialised mind training methods to increase skills in mind management.

A material need

Let us come back for a moment to the fulfilment of **basic survival needs** and the technical solution that humankind invented for it.

The fulfilment of basic survival needs was eased by the invention of a symbolic icon of value (money) that made the exchange of the material satisfaction of needs possible. First the exchange of goods led to barter. The mechanism facilitating exchanges for the fulfilment of needs based on money led to trade capitalism, industrial capitalism, imperialism, financial capitalism and the globalised capitalist economic world system that we live today.

This human collective economic organisation to fulfil the basic material needs proved to need regulation. Humankind created a system that provides only part of the world population with enormous material welfare, while for others basic needs are still not satisfied.

This system also started to lead a life in itself to the extent that it became an end instead of a mean. Out of fear that the functioning of the mechanism would slow down, the system, including its featuring parts and mechanisms of action, is worshipped as a god who may not be questioned but on the contrary whose wishes and requirements all have to be satisfied.

The name of this god is “economic growth”, also known as “capitalism”.

The fact that the majority of the world population has not yet reached minimum standards of material welfare is not seen as a sign that the system may not work properly, but rather as a justification for the need of this system to further be developed, and to support the not to be criticised and eternal satisfaction of the economic growth god. A breathtaking fear for an eventual stand still of the global economy made economic leading responsible blind for the limits of a competitive growth economical system.

In its turn, the **creation of needs** was invented and started, as a servant of economic growth, to lead a life of itself, with in its wake the following paradigm: the more symbols of value I possess, the more my needs are satisfied and as a consequence the happier I am. Or: the more symbols of value I possess (money or property), the happier I am.

As an extrapolation of the narrow stereotypical economical concept based on growth reigning the world, **artificial needs** started to be created to fulfil the needs of a production oriented economic activity. The uncontrolled publicity

and advertisement promoting products that are cynically generalised as “goods” operates as an outstanding tool used to create these artificial needs.

A tool to create needs

The creation of needs is a mechanism in its own.

Originally products were advertised through a simple announcement of where goods were available.

Later, following the expansion of trade capitalism, production and competition increased.

The take off of the industrial revolution in the 19th century was accompanied by an acceleration in the technical revolution of the arts and the reproduction of images.

In the 20th century a second acceleration caused by the automation of production and mass supply was accompanied by the development of mass reproductive design and printing techniques. ^{vi}

Studies and research in western art history have detected that contemporary ways of seeing (and as a consequence the experience of reality) incorporated in contemporary publicity and advertisement find their origins in the historic tradition of oil painting later transmitted via graphic and photographic techniques. ^{vii viii}

This tradition of ways of seeing continued in the third acceleration of the information age and its infinite possibilities of publicity in search engines of the worldwide web, in online play and video games, in pop-ups and text messages.

The infinite increasing production and competition has led to an ideology of how to create and promote artificial needs ^{ix}, through advertising of new products, often totally unneeded or even harmful.

Beyond the fulfilment of basic survival needs both the material life conditions and the human mind are subject to a comfort zone that is open for the endless creation of surplus and artificial needs. It is this zone that is discovered and skilfully played on by the ideology of the promotion of false needs.

Advertisement has invaded all channels of information and communication.

It is entrenched in all existing media. Publicity is, to paraphrase Buddhist language, “the Big Vehicle” of economic growth. Publicity is the fuel to capitalism.

As a consequence of the narrow focused economic organisation and of a continuing specific tradition of ways of seeing that is incorporated in publicity, populations worldwide are flooded with one-sided views on wealth, welfare and happiness.

The derailment

Due to a lack of regulation, the balance between needs and sufficient supply derailed. The aberrant consequences of this derailment are multiple in size, sort and amount.

They appear in all kind of societies, different cultures, rich and poor. They have in common that the controls of the instruments that create the needs are lacking.

A reciprocal verification of the real needs of well-being in accordance with different life and survival conditions worldwide is lacking.

I refer to the stories I told earlier as examples of the “wrong increase” of needs.

Everywhere in the world people are flooded with unnecessary products.

In the **richer parts** of the world people are, even if they try to resist aggressive advertising, often forced to replace - still well functioning - products by a newer version because the producer makes the existing version incompatible or irreparable. People's mind is continuously stressed by the confrontation with new so-called indispensable products.

Thanks to publicity people consume for the sake of consuming, caused by production for the sake of production. (One of the side effects is an endlessly growing mountain of garbage that cannot be destroyed and pollutes the earth irreparably.)

The mental fixation on the endless collection of more property or money is a similar aberrant development in the human mind that often leads to extreme depression and unhappiness.

In the **poor countries** of the world, the promotion of unneeded goods hinders or replaces the fulfilment of the basic survival needs.

To keep it simple: televisions and Coca cola are available in regions where people die of starvation.

Again here the creation of false needs has resulted in the negative habit of pure consumption for a growth production oriented economic system that has no interest in critical evaluation, let alone regulation.

How to remediate the derailment?

An enforcement of the capacity building for the management of the human mind to judge and resist false needs via the introduction of specific methods of mind training in education programs is but one remedial instrument for the derailment.

The creation of a quality label

The analysis of the existing reality in terms of economy and publicity in relation to the experience of needs and a related feeling of happiness or unhappiness brought me to the idea of another instrument to remediate to the problem: the **introduction of a quality label** (I call it easily the **GNH-label**) **on information**, with in the first place a focus on commercial information, publicity and advertisement.

This label should guarantee both the need for the promoted product and the quality (e.g. non-misleading) of the message in the information. It would be based on a verification both these elements before publication. The visibility of the GNH-label will inform the consumers on the indisputable need for a product and on the quality of the message.

This label could be based on a set of criteria as defined and controlled by competent international, national, regional and local authorities.

To define these criteria existing ethical codes such as those protecting human rights, international antiracism, antislavery, or legislation such as labour legislation etc. can be used as corner stones.

Existing quality labels such as the Eco-label and criteria for well-being as developed by NEF's Happy Planet Index or National Accounts of Well-being could become defining components of the protocol.

The development of a protocol

The creation of a GNH-label guaranteeing quality information, applicable in the sector of advertisement and publicity, should be based on the **development of a protocol** that defines the criteria for application of the label.

The application of a GNH-label on information aims to restore the balance between needs and specific type of supply on a national and local basis taking

into account the human and eco-maintenance needs of the human population and the earth.

Focussing on the sector of commercial publicity in the first place, the protocol for the development of a label has to take into account at least the following elements:

- For the GNH-label to be recognized as premier award for quality information which is a genuinely better choice for the human well-being, fulfillment of basic survival needs, mental welfare capacity building, and the environment.
- To help information and services providers, manufacturers, retailers, to get recognition for good standards, and purchasers to make reliable choices.

Key aims

- **to achieve significant human well-being improvements** - by developing, publishing and promoting criteria that push the production and publicity market forward, in order to minimise the mental and material polluting impacts of a wide range of information products and services over their whole life-cycle;
- **to ensure the credibility of the award** – by efficient administration and through **criteria** which:
 - are ethically strong;
 - are based on good science, including the precautionary principle of the real need of the product;
 - take account of consumer mental and material health;
 - require good product performance;
 - are developed transparently and cost-effectively
 - are reasonably attainable;
 - are environmentally strong;
 - are up to date.
- **to encourage** information and services providers, manufacturers, retailers **to apply for the award**, to publicize their own participation in the scheme, and to promote the availability of GNH-labelled products and information about them;
- **to encourage purchasers to buy products and services with the award;**

- **to improve consumer awareness and behaviour** regarding the ethical optimal use of information products and services in accordance with human well-being criteria.

Criteria to be defined for the GNH-label.

The points of reference for a GNH-label are standards to be set up by a GNH Standards Committee, in which ethical organizations, stakeholders, producer organizations, consumer organizations, publicity and advertisement experts and external experts should participate.

Reference to a living wage defined as one which "should always be enough to meet basic needs and to provide some discretionary income" is to be made. This commitment, that is missing from most corporate codes of conduct, is one reason for its presence within the criteria as constituting "a model code". Measurable criteria such as sustainable livelihood, literacy, access to good health supplies and sanitation, access to education, should be conditional components of a GNH-label for quality information.

I refer to the following websites as resources for further development of criteria.

www.fairtrade.net

www.ifat.org

www.worldshops.org

www.eftafairtrades.org

www.paradiso-fp7.eu

www.eco-label.com

The introduction of the label

The creation and the application of a GNH-label on quality information on a broad scale can only succeed if it is introduced on all competent governmental and legal levels.

A strategy to reach the policy levels should take into account at least:

- existing schemes that are part of a global concern... (see ecolabel, paradiso...) ^{x xi}

- existing bodies, governmental and non-governmental, on multinational, national, regional and local levels.
- awareness campaigns for competent authorities, organisations and the public.
- the joining of existing programs with the same vision that are already active in the field and that have the resources to support financially the project of a GNH label. See the existing EU structure as mentioned above.

I refer to the EU Integrated Product Policy (IPP) within the new Action Programme. The IPP is a key innovative element of future environmental policy and sustainable consumption and production.

Strategically, the GNH-label could be in line with the principles, goals and priorities of the 6th action Programme "Our Future, Our Choice" of the EU.

The joining of existing structures could facilitate and prevent the re-invention of implementation structures and prevent double spending of costs, labour and material.

Other governments with an existing framework or with sensitiveness to a similar awareness policy should be approached.

It is obvious that as guests of our Bhutanese host we have here the best example.

A proposal and a thought

The application of a quality label on publicity and advertisement might seem at a first sight a huge and complex project.

But could it not be appropriate to act now? Now that we live, due to an ongoing financial and economic global crisis, a high awareness of the need to review and regulate a major part of the global economy?

People ask for labels. People are in demand of the assurance that their lives are unthreatened by food and consumer products.

Why not start to use the strong tools available as a side effect of a sane instrument such as a regulated sustainable economy? Why not start to use the enormous effectiveness of publicity to inform the public of real needs in accordance with their environmental conditions? Why not use a controlled advertisement system to educate populations about healthy priorities for the development of the society, community, family and the individual?

In other words: would it not be a great result if a latrine became the real status symbol in the village of Gita?

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^{iv} Mingyur, Y. Rinpoche., Swanston, E. (2007). *The joy of living: Unlocking the secret and science of happiness*. New York: Harmony Books, 2007, p. viii

... As a result, experts in Buddhist mind science have been working with neuroscientists to design research that will document the neural impact of these varieties of mental training. ... This research has yielded stunning results, which if replicated will alter forever certain basic scientific assumptions – for example, that systematic training in meditation, when sustained steadily over years, can enhance the human capacity for positive changes in brain activity to an extent undreamed of in modern cognitive neuroscience....”

^v Mingyur, Y. Rinpoche., Swanston, E. (2007). *The joy of living: Unlocking the secret and science of happiness*. New York: Harmony Books, 2007, p.5

... More remarkably, the measurements of the long-term practitioners' EEG activity during meditation were apparently so far off the scale of normal EEG readings that ... the technicians were forced to eliminate the possibility of mechanical malfunction and confront the reality that the electrical activity associated with attention and phenomenal awareness transcended anything they'd ever witnessed...”

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x www.eco-label.com

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