

Interview with His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Global Humanitarian and Founder of the Art of Living

What Makes Us Happy? — the Eternal Question for Human Beings

By Naoyuki Haraoka



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Philosophical Search for Happiness

Economists have been searching for the road to human happiness ever since the 18th century when Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, considered the bible of capitalism by some contemporary economists. Smith posited the idea that free competition among industrial firms and individuals running businesses for profits could be a foundation of wealth and happiness. Since then, in capitalist countries, working hard to pursue business profits while observing social rules and ethics has been believed to boost the welfare of a nation. We have also believed that a rise in national welfare would literally mean a rise in happiness. Specifically, an increase in gross domestic product (GDP) has been roughly considered as an increase in a nation's happiness. A country which has enjoyed continuous high economic growth as measured by GDP has been regarded as the happiest nation in the world. Japan, having achieved a double-digit GDP growth rate during the 1960s and 1970s, has sometimes been regarded as one of the happiest nations in the world.

GDP growth, I believe, is still a good measure of national happiness, as I believe that the largest part of human happiness still derives from material wealth. The richer you are, the happier you would be. However, even though assuming that material wealth would make it possible for you to enjoy an affluent life, it is certainly true that we all have today many other issues concerning the "quality of GDP growth" which could affect the concept of happiness. For

example, a clean and beautiful environment is now considered by many as one of those qualitative aspects of economic growth and an important element of human happiness. Equal income distribution is another important qualitative aspect of growth. The rise in income inequality all over the world today provokes social conflicts between the rich and the poor or the elites and the non-elites. As the income gap grows, these frictions become more serious and thus social incoherence and instability also grow. Japan is no exception. Arguments to justify the need to raise the consumption tax to better prepare for increasing social welfare expenditure in an aging society tend to be ignored or dismissed by the majority of people who are now very skeptical about the credibility of the governing elites. They think the economy has not been doing well under the policies of those very elites, as shown in particular by increasing income inequality today, and so doubt that their policies will work well in the future either.

They not only distrust the elites but also dislike them. We see much of this not only in the context of tax policy disputes but also among companies. The management elites are occasionally hated by their subordinates, and increasingly serious friction between them can sometimes end up in a greatly retarded decision-making process. In quite a few cases, in order to beat the competition and maintain profits, managements force their employees to work under extremely bad conditions, such as very low wages or excessively long working hours, by trying to take advantage of the growing

Photo: Art of Living



Sudden squall and immediate sunshine over World Cultural Festival 2016, Delhi, India

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number of poor workers ready to accept such conditions. These will be mostly young people who will have to continue to work under such poor conditions for most of their life.

Growing income inequality brings despair and anxiety for poor people, and creates social incoherence and instability between the elites and the masses, which can make a whole nation unhappy. In Japan, the rate of the suicide is relatively high, at 20.9 persons per 100,000 people, much higher than the OECD average of 12.4 persons per 100,000 people (2014).

Diversity of Means to Achieve Happiness

But happiness is a matter for the individual to pursue, not for any authority to seek to impose. Though economic growth could provide a sound basis for happiness, this is not the only way to achieve happiness. There must be a diversity of means to achieve human happiness, and I think that providing a sound basis for mental resilience is as important as economic growth in this regard.

Yoga exercise, becoming increasingly popular worldwide, is one such means of achieving mental resilience. Meditation is a crucial part of yoga. I practiced it at Asakusa Civic Hall in Tokyo on April 1 this year under the guidance of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (hereafter referred to as Sri Sri), a renowned Indian spiritual leader and yoga master who was visiting Japan to give a series of lectures on yoga. Just 20 minutes of meditation with closed eyes and deep breathing provided me with a peaceful state of mind, having enabled me to eliminate anxieties about the future and other negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, and hostility. In other words, the exercise seems to have reminded me of exactly what engagement or mission I should pursue with passion in my life, and this gave me a sense of happiness and a positive attitude towards life.

Sri Sri mastered natural science and Indian religion and philosophy in his very early years and founded Art of Living, a voluntary-based humanitarian and educational NGO, in 1981 in India. It aims at expanding happiness and peace of mind all over the world through yoga meditation and exercise, and its activities have expanded to over 156 nations today. It has special consultant status



Dance from Mongolia, World Cultural Festival 2016, Delhi, India



Sri Sri gave yoga lessons to a group of Japanese Diet members in the International Conference Room at the parliament building, May 2017.

with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

In March 2015, Art of Living organized the International Happiness Festival in Tokyo with yoga meditation exercises conducted by Sri Sri, which was attended by more than 5,000 people. In March 2016, Art of Living celebrated its 35th anniversary in India in an event called the World Cultural Festival 2016 with 37,000 dance performers from all over the world, 3.5 million attendees from 155 nations and 172 world leaders. Then in June 2016, Sri Sri had a meeting with the leaders of extreme left-wing Columbian political activists who had been pursuing a civil war in the country for a long time, and talked with them about yoga and its merits for achieving peaceful solutions to political confrontations. Columbian President Juan Manuel Santos, who won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2016 for his achievement in ending the civil war, greatly appreciated his contribution to peaceful reconciliation in the country.

In early April this year, Sri Sri made his second visit to Japan and gave lectures on yoga and meditation at Asakusa Civic Hall, the University of Tokyo and the Indian Embassy in Tokyo. He also gave yoga lessons to a group of Japanese Diet members in the International Conference Room at the parliament building. Upon this occasion, the Diet members declared the establishment of an association of Japanese Diet members promoting yoga exercise and meditation.

Yoga and meditation is now not only considered a way to achieve peace of mind and happiness but also as a symbol of India-Japan friendship.

One of our Editorial Committee members of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, Mohan Gopal, is the head of the Art of Living Tokyo branch, while working as an IT engineer for Hewlett Packard Japan. He has been a longtime friend of Sri Sri, and we were thus able to arrange an interview with him during his visit to Tokyo. The interview follows this text.

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