

# Toward a Fully Harmonious Society that Puts Wellbeing First

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## End of a 2500-year Expansionary Phase

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We are currently leaving behind a long-running phase in which growth was achieved by expansion in scale and entering an entirely new era of shrinking populations. This represents a major turning point in human history, with Japan at the global front line of this change due to its population having already started to fall, a consequence of rapid aging and a low birthrate. The accompanying paradigm shift means that existing systems and sets of values are losing their relevance. Wellbeing, too, will most likely take on different forms in a society where contraction is the norm compared to one predicated on expansion.

The tendency under the expansionary system of the past was to aim mainly for physical and economic forms of wellbeing, which in its crudest sense meant seeking visible forms of value such as money, goods, and status. In the study of wellbeing, these are called positional goods that deliver satisfaction through comparison with other people. It has been found that the feelings of happiness they invoke are not long lasting as no matter how many of these goods people accumulate, they are always left wanting more. Nevertheless, people have been able to experience happiness as expanding production has kept up the supply of such goods. Looking

back over history, the major transitions that have taken place – the Agricultural Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the Information Technology Revolution, and so on – have all been expansionary in nature and humanity has seen more than 2,500 years of relentlessly expanding production and the ongoing supply of positional goods.

In contrast, a society that is shrinking on the basis of a falling population or that has reached a steady state will not be able to deliver happiness through expanding production. What such a society needs to aim for is the happiness of non-positional goods, namely, forms of wellbeing that do not derive from comparisons with other people. Examples include things that express the richness of mind, body, and society such as love, freedom, health, a sense of belonging to a community, and personal fulfilment. It is known that the experience of happiness invoked by these intangible forms of value persists over time. While there is nothing very new about this insight, it seems that these things provide people with happiness on a more fundamental level. Moreover, this realization also represents a way back to a more human way of life that has been lost amid all our economic growth.

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## The Study of Wellbeing for Practical Ends and the Four Factors of Happiness

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Traditionally, consideration of wellbeing has been the preserve of philosophers. While the scientific study of wellbeing from objective and statistical perspectives has been an active field since the start of the 21st century in particular, it has yet to achieve a genuine synthesis that incorporates philosophy and the humanities, with much remaining to be done before it can be put to use across society as a whole.

I myself started out as an engineer in the private sector. However, wanting to work on something that would contribute more directly to people's happiness, I embarked on research that takes an engineering approach to uncovering the mechanisms of wellbeing. This was based on the belief that, rather than just addressing the topic in subjective terms, elucidating the principles and overall structure and adopting methodologies that are based on an understanding of the mechanisms involved would provide a shortcut to wellbeing. I am currently working across a wide range of academic disciplines, including psychology, behavioral economics, engineering, and neuroscience, with the aim of developing a

synthesis that brings together the different research findings on the subject.

One such research finding involves an analysis of the factors of happiness. This looks at the factors important to happiness, considering whether they fall into the positional goods or non-positional goods categories discussed above. A factor analysis was undertaken to ascertain this. The analysis focused on the psychological factors related to non-positional goods and used a survey of 1,500 Japanese people that asked 87 questions on 29 subjects. An analysis of the responses identified four ways in which the wellbeing of today's Japanese people is influenced. While many factors influence happiness, it was found that these could be consolidated into just four. Dubbed "the four factors of happiness" for the sake of practicality, they are as follows.

- **Factor 1 "Let's try it!" (self-realization and growth)**

This represents the factors of self-realization and growth that relate to happiness with one's self, including whether you have capabilities of your own, whether those capabilities are being put to public use, whether you are the sort of person you want to be, and whether you have strived to be better still.

- **Factor 2 "Thank you!" (connection and gratitude)**

These are the things that make you feel happy through the appreciation of others and engagement with them, including whether you like pleasing others and are yourself liked by others, and whether you appreciate those around you and are treated with kindness.

- **Factor 3 "It will turn out all right!" (positive and optimistic)**

This represents those happiness factors that relate to being forward-looking and optimistic, including whether you have an optimistic outlook, are in control of your own feelings, are able to maintain close relationships with others, and whether you are content with who you have been without resorting to self-denial.

- **Factor 4 "Be yourself" (independence and "my pace")**

This represents happiness factors that relate to self-reliance and sense of self, such as being able to be yourself and avoid comparing yourself against others.

Together these four factors make up a single whole, a four-leaf clover of happiness. Moreover, the different factors influence each other, and the best outcome is to satisfy them all without exception. It is not advisable, for example, to competitively denigrate other people if your aim is to achieve self-realization, and in the study of wellbeing it is not considered desirable to lose sight of yourself by overemphasizing harmony with those around you. Given an understanding of the mechanisms at work, the brain will naturally take account of these and act accordingly. By keeping these four factors in mind as you go about your life, you will hopefully create

a virtuous circle that brings happiness both to yourself and those around you.

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## **Paradox of Working Style Reform in Light of Economics and Wellbeing Studies**

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Considered in terms of economics, self-realization and growth factors can be thought of as triggers for the individualistic form of happiness that one seeks to bring about through the exciting pursuit of a dream (as in the example of a Silicon Valley startup), while connection and gratitude factors trigger a collectivist happiness that emphasizes harmony and engagement with people.

While these may appear to be incompatible, by holding a workshop where people can talk about what they want to do, for example, a company could boost self-realization and growth (Factor 1) while also raising the level of connection and gratitude (Factor 2). An environment where people are able to talk to each other about their ambitions, which is to say a workplace that provides scope for both self-acceptance and the acceptance of others, should give rise to relationships of mutual trust and respect. It should, as a result, encourage optimistic and forward-looking outlooks without fear of failure or the judgement of others and allow people to act forthrightly (in accordance with their own nature). As noted above, the four factors are mutually reinforcing and interdependent.

Considered in this light, one can see how the smooth and organic interaction with other people and the culture of emphasizing harmony present in Japanese society and businesses has been a major contributing factor to happiness. Since it has become modernized, however, Japanese society has leaned more toward western-style individualism and it could be said that it has lost this favorable attribute that supported happiness as companies, especially since the bursting of the economic bubble in the late 1980s, have embarked on severe rationalization and efficiency measures with short-term profits as their top priority. It also seems likely that, however much prosperity this has delivered in material and economic terms, it is what is behind the lack of improvement in wellbeing and indeed an inexpressible sense of oppression that surrounds corporate organizations and society as a whole.

The working style reforms that are being so stridently called for at the moment should also place top priority on the happiness of workers. Part of the logic behind these reforms is that they will enable the dramatic improvements in labor productivity needed to sustain economic growth in the presence of labor shortages caused by a shrinking population. Unfortunately, in a future predicated on the contractionary society discussed

earlier in this article, this way of thinking faces a major contradiction with respect to treating happiness in terms of the past paradigm of material wealth and positional goods.

It may seem that putting happiness first conflicts with the goal of improving productivity. In practice, however, workplaces that fulfill the four factors of happiness referred to above will likely provide a highly innovative environment where enthusiastic staff work with a high level of teamwork. Research into happiness by Hitachi Fellow Kazuo Yano found that teams with a high level of happiness have about 1.3 times the productivity of teams that are lacking in this respect. In other words, success at improving the happiness of staff will in itself boost corporate productivity and thereby enable economic growth.

Unfortunately, the current situation is in the reverse order. Along with being in a period of transition, talk of making work more efficient and shortening working hours is taking precedence. As noted above, companies have been exhausted by excessive rationalization and efficiency measures. To keep pushing efficiency and time-saving under such circumstances will impede worker initiative and accelerate the deterioration of communication, diminishing happiness for everyone by placing them under even more stress. Calling for creativity and new ideas in this environment, let alone productivity improvement, will only serve to continue a deteriorating trend.

What a contractionary society should be aiming for is the type of happiness that arises from non-positional goods. A shift from working for money to working for the joy of it, from hard work to enjoyable work. There is an opportunity to create an inclusive participatory society in which worker happiness is put first. The fact that we are experiencing a major paradigm shift in human history means we also need a paradigm shift in working practices.

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## **Overcoming Nationalism to a Fully Harmonious Society**

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Wellbeing has been a preoccupation for people right back to the time of Aristotle. The reason it is attracting so much attention at present is likely because so many people are feeling dissatisfied. Along with being in a period of transition from an expansionary to a contractionary society, this is also likely due to the worsening strains evident in society as disparities in wealth increase.

Japan has experienced two major episodes of leveling that have alleviated these strains on society. These were respectively the Meiji Restoration and the Second World War. The strains that built up in the late Edo Period from the spread of the monetary economy were relieved by reforms, while the fresh batch of strains that resulted from factors such as militarism and the oligopolistic nature of the zaibatsu economy were alleviated by defeat in the war.

One way of looking at Japan's recent history is to split it into separate periods of reform. From the Meiji Restoration to the end of the Second World War was 77 years. Likewise, 2022 will mark 77 years on from the defeat. In the present day, only a few years short of this date, Japan is again seeing rising disparities in wealth accompanied by the emergence of social strain. Nor is this restricted to Japan, being rather a worldwide phenomenon that is also happening in places like the USA. One of the emerging symptoms is that of nationalism. The current international situation of rising tensions as each country pursues its own national interest is much like the pre-war period, such that some people warn that our current path risks leading us into another world war.

Behind this growing inequality is the capitalist economic system that has lasted for several hundred years. Adam Smith expressed the idea of the "invisible hand" whereby leaving people free to compete on equal terms to a certain extent would maintain social harmony and avoid increases in inequality. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is not being borne out by events and capitalism has become a system of increasing disparity.

I have come to call the current social model that has arisen from capitalism a 20th-century version of the game of survival of the fittest. This is a society based on the law of the jungle in which individuals compete in a struggle for survival and try to bring each other down. As the losers are always forced out, inequalities of wealth expand relentlessly. The nationalism referred to above is just an extension of this. The goals of such a society are the positional goods of money, material possessions, and prestige, with their acquisition being what defines happiness and identifies winners. Unfortunately, as we have already seen, however much one strives to acquire these things, they do not deliver happiness in the true sense of the word as it is understood in wellbeing studies.

Nationalism and societies based on survival of the fittest pose risks for humanity as a whole and for global sustainability, such as exacerbating conflicts of religion, nationality, and ideology and the potential for a relentless increase in inequality as well as environmental degradation, food shortages, and unforeseen pandemics of contagious disease. Moreover, being driven by individual self-interest makes it difficult under this model to take the broad view and adopt long-term measures. Even when confronted with problems that demand urgent action, we lack the power to do anything about them.

If the human race is to avoid extinction and instead achieve sustainable global progress, then I believe that the only way forward is for all of us to love one another and for all people to live in harmony. This means that we need to fundamentally re-think our model of society.

What I am proposing in response is a 21st-century fully harmonious symbiotic society, one in which people are considerate of one another and that achieves society-wide harmony while allowing each person to express their individuality and creativity. While people are cooperative, altruistic, and interdependent, these relationships are flat and people of different types form networks organically and live in an autonomous and distributed manner. While it might look chaotic at first glance, it is like a forest that exists in a state of balance and is rich in diversity.

The model of inclusive harmony takes a broad view of the world in terms of both time and place. By prioritizing global sustainability above more immediate concerns, it is also well suited to resolving future problems that manifest on a global scale.

While there are people who talk about focusing on the facts rather than an ideal, is this not just the same as the already existing attitude of the modern West that looks at things in terms of a conflict of opposites? What is needed now is not conflict but harmony. If we only consider the current situation without holding to an ideal, then we will remain stuck in our current competitive society that is obsessed with personal gain. We should address reality with an ideal in mind. If we do so, should it not be possible to draw on the wisdom of humanity and progress toward a happy society one step at a time?

Recall the four factors of happiness. A simple way to describe a society that successfully manifests these would be one in which a diverse range of people can live vibrant lives that put their respective strengths to good use, and in which people trust one another, living their lives their own way in a forward-looking manner. This is what is meant by a 21st-century fully harmonious symbiotic society. For people to put happiness into practice, for them to seek happiness together in a global way that transcends nationality: all of these things point us in the same direction.

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## Signs of a Bright Future Evident in Youth

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Young people are instinctively aware of this tide in history. Around me, I already see large numbers of young people who are taking steps to pursue new types of happiness in place of those offered by the expansionary society. These include people leaving jobs at large corporations to work at venture businesses, people who give up work to pursue their own interests outside the big cities, people who are genuinely interested in helping society, and students who are starting their own businesses rather than looking for regular employment. I hear some people saying that the youth of today lack drive and are unable to make up their minds. But there are also many who are not like that at all. These young people

are not interested in power struggles or making decisions on the basis of past paradigms. They appear to be very happy in their purity and altruism. Emerging from this cohort are communities where people naturally help each other. From what I can see, such people already make up about 10% of the public and their numbers are only likely to rise in the future.

Frederic Laloux's concept of "Teal organizations," an idea that has risen in prominence in recent years, can also be seen as representing a natural progression of society, a fully harmonious symbiotic society. Even before Laloux's book became a best-seller, there were young managers putting the idea into practice without even realizing it. Whereas most companies in the expansionary society adopted a managed pyramid structure in order to engage in rigorous rationalization, the corresponding new forms of organization allow people to work as they please in an autonomous and distributed manner with flat relationships like in a club or class meeting. Moreover, companies with energetic organizations that feature high levels of diversity and fluidity are enjoying significant growth in new markets.

Among large companies subject to numerous constraints, there are also those like Hitachi, with its Social Innovation Business, that have been opening up possibilities by taking on new initiatives where they can. A new movement is emerging from this through "new combinations" of the diverse capabilities of youth.

This raises the question of where all of this is taking Japan? Some adopt the pessimistic view that the increasingly uncertain era of artificial intelligence (AI) will only leave Japan to continue bumping along the bottom. My own view, in contrast, is one of optimism.

Japan boasts a high level of technical capability and diligence together with an attitude of mutability and selflessness that is accepting of everything new. Having struggled through times of rapid change that have demanded quick decisions, Japanese people have absorbed a variety of different cultures and have the ability to reach novel compromises that allow for a soft landing. This means we have a real chance in this new coming-of-age period. Continuing diligently to go about your work in your own way opens up possibilities for the future and will likely result in a fresh blooming in some form or other. As so often happens, just when you think you are running half a lap behind you discover you are actually half a lap ahead of everyone else. In fact, Japan has survived as a nation for more than 1,500 years. Now more than ever, in this time in which everyone is fighting for supremacy over things like AI and the Internet of Things, I believe that Japanese companies should be continuing to look half a step ahead without obsessing over the short-term outcomes of immediate concerns as they seek to develop the industries of the future that will contribute to richness of spirit and human happiness.