CAN MONEY BUY HAPPINESS?

by Shirley Melikian Armbruster
That age-old question is getting a 21st century examination by Fresno State professor Robert Levine and other members of an international United Nations team working on a “New Development Paradigm” to enhance well-being throughout the world.

To get a unique perspective, the team traveled to the kingdom of Bhutan, a Himalayan country smaller than West Virginia and larger than Maryland, where happiness is part of the national conversation.

“It’s a very poor country where you see a relatively high level of psychological and social well-being, very few homeless people, very few starving people, almost no beggars,” says Levine, an internationally recognized author and scholar who’s been teaching at Fresno State since 1974.

What’s up with Bhutan and happiness?

Levine explains: The value of happiness was elevated to national status 40 years ago when Bhutan’s king established Gross National Happiness (GNH) as an alternative model to Gross National Product (GNP) to measure national progress. GNH targets the overall quality of life — educational attainment, physical, psychological and emotional well-being and cultural and ecological integrity.

“Their leaders understand that making money is a part of happiness but it’s not the entire answer,” he says.

The concept gained international credibility in 2011 when the U.N. General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution placing “happiness” on the global agenda and appointed Bhutan to spearhead the project.

Last fall, Levine was invited to be part of a U.N. team of writers, philosophers, economists and other social psychologists from around the world. It was right up his alley, having spent decades researching and comparing various cultures and countries.

“One of the international economists on the project made an observation I really like – that the point of a healthy economy is to serve people,” Levine says. “With the Gross National Happiness project, we are developing a new model of economic development for improving the quality of life in the world.”

“I would like to see people begin to talk more about a new economic paradigm, to think about it, to re-evaluate values. And to try to avoid economic treadmills and take a little better control over the quality of people’s lives.”

We can’t legislate happiness, Levine says, but wide-scale discussions allow ideas to become part of the vocabulary and lead to culture change.

While he watches to see if that will happen, Levine expects to return to Bhutan for more work. On his first trip, he met the fifth and reigning Dragon King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and Queen Jetsun Pema, and he had dinner with the country’s prime minister.

Levine also will incorporate his experiences into the classroom at Fresno State.

“One of my interests, the goal of my teaching, is to give people some tools for enhancing the quality of their lives. And as I meet and work with people from throughout the world, I hope to get our students involved in projects in direct and indirect collaborative research.”

That should make Fresno State students happy.