Thanks to the great advance of material civilization, our life has changed drastically since a few decades ago. Everything has speeded up and we are able to travel from continent to continent within several hours by jet plane. Communicating with people living in the other side of the globe is even easier than visiting our neighbors. Instead of going to the market, we are able to buy almost anything using internet stores. Just like the “Second Life”, life in virtual reality may not be only in the world of scientific fiction.

But, are we happier than before? According to Sodekawa and Tanabe (2007), the proportion of Japanese people who are satisfied with their daily lives remained about the same (ca. 60%) between 1958, when Japan’s economy was still small and the high-growth era was about to start, and 2007, when the GDP per capita had become several times larger. Happiness, or psychological well-being, is clearly not a simple function of wealth and convenience.

Then what is happiness? Although all people would answer yes or no if they were asked whether they are happy or not, in fact the standard of “happiness” greatly varies in its nature, among people and across time. Some people may say that they are happy because they are rich and find no problem in making a living, whereas others, like homeless people, may say that they are happy because they have survived another day in spite of not being far from starvation. Happiness is a completely subjective feeling and it keeps being a big word in psychology; a satisfactory definition seems hardly possible.

Notwithstanding, happiness is something that people want to obtain. In the Global COE Program entitled “Revitalizing education for dynamic hearts and minds” (D-07, Kyoto University, 2007–2012, http://www.educ.kyoto-u.ac.jp/gcoe/en/) (Program leader: Masuo Koyasu), we pursued education that would enhance happiness. We proposed three essential feelings that should constitute a sense of happiness. The first is a sense of capability obtained through the acquisition of knowledge and skill. The second is a vital sense of life obtained through connection with nature and society. Finally, by making the full use of these senses in attaining a certain goal, one can obtain a sense of achievement. How these elementary senses are obtained is a recurrent central question in creating a society where people enjoy their lives.

In this special issue of Psychologia entitled “Constituents of happiness”, we have collected seven papers that address this and related questions from various perspectives.

The first two papers discuss similarities and differences between cultures in how students enhance and how teachers encourage happy feelings. In “Effects of
communicating success with friends on self-esteem in Japan and the United States,” David Dalsky describes a very interesting difference regarding a sense of achievement between two cultures. That is, whereas US students feel happy when they tell of their success to friends, Japanese students do so when their success is appraised by their friends. In “Happiness in pedagogical institutions: An analysis of outward bound schools in Japan and Germany,” Ruprecht Mattig observed and interviewed young participants of Outward Bound schools in Japan and Germany. He found a similarity in when they feel happy but at the same time a slight difference in how social dimension is considered by both teachers and participants between the two countries.

In the following paper, entitled “Relationship between concentration and temporal duration estimation: Implications for flow experience,” Jun Saiki and Eiko Inoue ask how flow experience, or strong concentration often accompanied by happy feelings, alters sensation of time. They found that concentration speeds up subjective feeling of time but not judgment of duration, whereas attention changes the latter. They suggest that this effect of flow experience may be adaptive for survival.

The next two papers, on neuroscientific studies of happiness, discuss brain activation involved in happy feelings. Shintaro Funahashi, in his contribution entitled “Brain mechanisms of happiness,” reviews brain imaging studies on how various brain areas are related to happy feelings. He points out that contributions of cortical and subcortical areas differ between “liking” and “wanting”. He also suggests that encoding and causing pleasant feelings may be different processes in terms of brain activities. The next paper, entitled “Happiness associated with Noh-mask modulates the mesolimbic reward system: An fMRI study based on neuroaesthetics,” by Naoyuki Osaka and Takehiro Minamoto, reports an fMRI study on brain responses to watching Noh masks of happy and neutral expressions. They found enhanced activation of nucleus accumbens (Nacc) while viewing happy masks, possibly due to enhanced dopaminergic activity in this area associated with reward.

The following paper, by Michio Nomura, entitled “The interplay of genetic and environmental influences on prefrontal function and self-regulation of impulsivity,” reviews behavioral, neuroimaging and pharmacological studies on self-regulation of impulsivity, which benefits people’s well-being. By discussing the association between gene polymorphism and impulsivity, he suggests bright sides of the risk allele.

In the final paper, by Makiko Yamada and Hidehiko Takahashi, entitled “Happiness is a matter of social comparison,” the authors review studies on neural mechanisms of emotions to perceived inequity. They suggest that the brain is predisposed to generating social emotions such as envy, schadenfreude, empathy and counter-empathy in response to others’ corresponding conditions.

As an advance notice, two more papers may be printed in the following issues. These include a proposal for subcategories of positive emotion, and a discussion of usefulness of emotion as an intervening variable in considering welfare of captive chimpanzees.

No matter what we scientists know or do not know about happiness, people know when they are happy and when they are not. They want to be, and struggle to be, happy or
happier. A possible definition of happiness could thus be a psychological state that people pursue; i.e., happiness may be studied in the context of choice behavior. However, it is immediately clear that at least a short-term version of this definition is unsatisfactory; people sometimes choose hardship for the sake of potential, never guaranteed, gain in the distant future.

I stress that the papers compiled in this issue are important contributions in their own right. But at the same time, they may be still placed at the entrance of the scientific study of happiness. However, this kind of empirical research is indispensable to understand the nature, function, and mechanisms of happiness. I believe we are now one step closer to understanding happiness than before.

REFERENCES