

The Future of Gross National Happiness

By Ross McDonald

Before I begin I would like to thank the Centre for Bhutan Studies for inviting me to participate in these meetings and to the organising committee whose efforts in bringing this together are to be applauded. I have been working on issues relating to happiness for a number of years now and I first attended a meeting on GNH in early 2004 here in Thimpu, at which I presented a paper which had a double purpose. First of all I wanted to summarise what we know from the western empirical literature about the relationship between happiness and economic growth, the broad conclusion of this being that the two concerns are becoming increasingly de-coupled. Thus, as individuals and nations increase their volumes of consumption, levels of felt happiness do not seem to correspondingly increase, at least in those wealthy societies we deem to be economically 'advanced'. I think this is now a generally accepted conclusion with many studies validating this basic claim in the interim. The second purpose of my original contribution, and the one I wish to return to today, was an encouragement to look at happiness from the perspective of ethics and to see any policy of increasing national happiness as necessarily involving a deeper commitment to expanding our ethical skilfulness and maturity. At root then, I have long argued that a focus on facilitating happiness must seek to actualise our broader human potential to become more inclusive in our thinking about how we might constructively approach that goal.

Unfortunately in much of western culture, this agenda has only a faint resonance. In consumer societies the twin ideals of happiness and inclusion have become increasingly separated as we have moved from seeing happiness as simultaneously involving being good and feeling good towards a conception that emphasises good feeling alone. In this cultural reinterpretation happiness has been separated from notions of justice, compassion and responsibility. The end result is an overwhelmingly individualistic culture in which ethical initiatives like GNH are prone to compromising misinterpretation as they enter into foreign frameworks in which happiness is deemed to be a merely quantitative and emotional variable. The nuances involved in aspiring to a more skilful mode of securing a more accomplished happiness are likely to be missed under the imperatives dominant in contemporary western societies, particularly in those that are most completely captured by market philosophies. In these settings, the collapse of a qualitative and subtly complex approach to happiness into a simplistic and merely quantitative modality invokes a search only for *more* as opposed to *better* forms of fulfilment and this constraint is likely to collapse GNH's considerable potential to mitigate a range of current global crises – particularly the ethical challenges of improving social justice and enhancing ecological sustainability.

In the many circles I work within, GNH is received very positively indeed and the ideal almost never fails to raise an affirming smile. The general consensus seems to be that pursuing happiness as opposed to economic growth would be a very good idea. However, here and in the generally populist accounts of GNH commonly found in the western media, the concept is not probed into in any depth. Rather it is instead

accepted only superficially and as a kind of exotic curiosity - something unusual and pleasant to behold, but ultimately a foreign idea that is almost impossible to relate to our current imperatives and modes of social structuring. The failure to take on its complex and profound implications is due in large part to its ascendant ideals being unwittingly collapsed to fit into what some writers refer to as the 'moral flatland of modernity.' This refers to a predominating cultural plane in which there are no overarching imperatives towards a qualitative human improvement, but only a range of sovereign individual choices that are deemed to be equally legitimate and rightfully free of normative evaluation. To illustrate this mundanely, if one chooses to drive a heavily polluting car in the name of individual happiness this is a free choice and as such no better or worse (in terms of the happiness produced) than purchasing a minimally polluting equivalent. Thus, the way one decides to seek felicity in consumer cultures is seen as being an issue of individual choice, and this, so we are told, is a sacrosanct space that cannot be impinged upon in a culture dominated by ideals of freedom from institutional guidance and control. As such, the modality through which one secures happiness in modern secular culture is viewed as being largely irrelevant to the value of happiness as an ultimate outcome. If GNH is to fulfil the potential that many invest it with, we need to engage a much more rigorous analysis of what a rightful happiness actually involves. Such an analysis quickly takes us well beyond the limitations of a simple amoral quantification to engage a qualitative view in which happiness exists as only one facet of a more complex human development.

With this in mind we can constructively begin to explore what exactly we might properly conceive of happiness to be. I have become aware from long contact with many indigenous officials, scholars and commentators that in the Bhutanese view, the concept represents an increasing skilfulness in developing our multifaceted capacities for deep improvement and this of course emanates primarily from a Buddhist sensibility in which a full happiness comes only as wisdom, compassion and self-restraint are brought together in harmonious arrangement. It is apt then to view happiness as being symbolically equivalent to a gemstone – a beautiful entity that finds its shape by virtue of the various facets that constitute its form. Happiness then has many faces, including not least a deep wisdom and insight, a profound appreciation of beauty, a broad attitude of loving-kindness towards others and a spontaneous self-restraint that frees us from constant grasping and greed. All of these aspects shape the quality of our happiness and none can be meaningfully separated from the qualitative fulfilment that GNH ultimately seeks.

In the west by contrast, happiness has lost this multi-faceted richness as it has come to be seen as a simple and separable emotion devoid of such qualitative complexity. The concept has been inexorably isolated from notions of maturity, compassion, wisdom and an enhanced capacity to reflect deeply upon the meaning and purpose of life. Although it is true that through the methodical efforts of empirical science, happiness is being ploddingly reconnected to these variables, the hypothesised relationships remain tenuous and are viewed as existing between fundamentally independent variables. What this observable fact demonstrates is a profound failure to insightfully appreciate the deeper aspects of happiness and their mutual involvement in any personal and social transformation. Thus when we assess happiness from a western viewpoint, it is very easy to completely miss the deeper synergies implied by GNH thinking and to completely miss the fact that we miss this. To fully grasp the meaning

of Bhutan's message then, it is essential that we recall that the happiness aimed for is a complex state of accomplishment that improves in quality as the skilfulness of our engagement with the world grows.

To more fully understand this it is important that we appreciate the essential end points of the qualitative continuum that defines our potential in any Buddhist discussion of happiness. In its poorest and least developed form, happiness is seen to exist in a complex known as *dukkha*. *Dukkha* refers to an unskilful conscious modality that includes happiness, but a happiness that is hampered by an equal tendency towards suffering – hence the constant use of the term to denote suffering as well as happiness. This reflects the basic insecurity of *dukkha* as an incomplete fulfilment and the ease with which it moves from a state of joy into one of despondency. To seek *dukkha* is ultimately to seek mere pleasure and the temporary happiness that is derived from this tends to be unstable, superficial, self-centred and short sighted. As such it tends us towards endless conflict as it demands constant re-stimulation if it is not to fade and fail. This incompetent form of happiness seeking is dominated by what Hinduism would call '*avidya*' (ignorance) or '*maya*' (illusion) but the poverty it incorporates, and the problems that it generates can be transformed as the individual matures and realises a greater potential and as a result of this begins to open to *sukkha* which is a far more accomplished and skilful form of happiness. *Sukkha* as a term represents a qualitatively richer fulfilment in which the superficiality and insatiability of *dukkha* metamorphose into profound forms of stable fulfilment that are freed from the grasping demands for constant and enervating input. *Sukkha* then is a qualitatively different and vastly superior form of happiness not only because it is experienced personally as a secure and pervasive joy but equally because its expression spreads outwards to benefit those who contact it in the broader environment.

This qualitative movement from *dukkha* to *sukkha* can be most clearly conveyed by reference to the concept of attachment. The Achilles Heel of an unskilful pursuit of happiness is that it is derived from a psychological complex in which we become dependent on sources of happiness that lie beyond our control. In other words, *dukkha* depends upon deriving pleasure from externally located objects, persons and processes. There is nothing wrong in this per se - we all derive pleasure from good company, beautiful things and the affection of loved ones and these are all valuable contributors to our feelings of self-worth and place in the world. The problems of *dukkha* stem from becoming dependent on such sources for our feelings of happiness. When such dependency is formed, we begin to engage a process in which frustration, disappointment and conflict are ever-present shadow states. Thus, again to use a mundane example, if a person buys a new cell-phone, it may produce a sudden burst of pleasure as one feels included at the cutting edge of consumerism. It may help us draw admiring glances from others and the quality of the new services now available may allow us to feel more free and empowered. But if one becomes unskilfully dependent upon such an object, then when it breaks down, gets stolen, is lost or super-ceded by a new, more fashionable model, we can be easily plunged into despair. We can see then how in making happiness depend upon external sources, we put ourselves in positions of great vulnerability, for the simple reason that we have little control over the dynamics of the world that lies beyond our own personal boundaries and hence little control over our own happiness.

A further illustration of this important point can be gained by considering one of the most prone sources of felt happiness, our relationships, where we can clearly see the same dynamics at work. In any situation where a partner becomes dependent upon another for their felt happiness, conflict and suffering become equally constant potentials. Should the other person decide that they wish to break the relationship then our happiness is put under threat. Where there is a high level of felt dependence there will be an immediate transformation of happiness into suffering, as love turns into hate and fulfilment fades into emptiness. The conflict this often prompts commonly expresses itself in a spreading misery through which spurned husbands, wives and lovers become angry, abusive, and violent as they attempt to hold on to what they believe they depend on for their on-going happiness.

The movement out of *dukkha* and towards *sukkhā* demands an undoing of this unskilful dependence on an external world to deliver our happiness and a transformative shift such that we come to rely on the deeper and more stable fulfilments that can be derived from the cultivation of our own internal resources. This is not imply that the pleasures derived from externally located goods or relationships lose their legitimacy, but rather that we can move beyond a clinging dependence on these for our primary sense of wellbeing. Thus, as we mature we come to realise more of our own developmental potential in the psychological, social and spiritual realms. As we move towards actualising these inherent resources, we move away from dependency, short-sightedness, superficiality, conflict, insatiability and the other tyrannies inherent in a less mature striving. In the realm of our relationships this allows us to extend non-controlling respect towards others as equanimity, compassion and a greater wisdom come to confer a deeper, more stable and less dependent joy that is relatively immune to the vagaries of external change. Similarly, material goods can be appreciated without causing upset when they are denied, destroyed or fall out of fashion. The happiness that *sukkhā* represents comes as an inherent facet of a broader maturity that recognises the inevitability of change and the futility and violence of externally-directed dependency.

If we compare this qualitative appreciation of an improving happiness, that ranges from an unskilful, vulnerable and destructive form into a skilful, invulnerable and generative form, the contrast between this and the simple quantitative model of western conception reveals the extent of the latter's limitation. We are of course, now witnessing a rapid outpouring of books, courses and studies of happiness as it moves into a western secular consciousness and in this we can see that happiness is indeed being viewed largely as a simple and non-complex quantitative variable. Individuals are encouraged to find more happiness, nation states to look for policies that will increase the amount of happiness but it is very rare to find any corresponding call to find a better happiness. The extent to which this is true is revealed in the basic epistemology and methodology employed in the western framework. In the mounting number of studies in which happiness is the variable of primary interest it is invariably assessed on a simple numerical scale. Witness for example the plethora of studies in which people are asked to report on how much happiness they feel given the conditions of their own lives. On one side this is a purely quantitative exercise, demanding a response on a scale of say 1 to 7 or 1 to 10 where there is no orthogonal assessment made as to the quality of that happiness. But it is important to note further how completely this is locked into a narrow assessment only of the self and its outcomes. We do not find studies in the main academic literature addressing the

question of how happy we might be with the broad conditions of others lives. People are not asked about how satisfied they are with the opportunities their children may grow up to experience. This individualistic mode of analysis sets us up to view happiness in a very narrow and compromised light, as a variable devoid of social or moral referents. Through such an approach, we unwittingly validate the most unskilful modes of finding only a constrained happiness and undo the corrective pull away from *dukkha* towards developing a fuller humanity. As we collapse happiness into this cultural flatland we obviate its transformative potential, and with it the potential of GNH to prompt a deeper rethinking of our global priorities.

My fear in this regard is that the necessary movement towards seeking *sukkhā* will be bastardised by the prevailing non-aspirational mode of western culture and that a renewed pursuit of happiness will do little but reinforce this destructive dynamic. In part this comes from the realisation that the search for happiness has already been corrupted in this way. Thus, when Bhutan proposes that GNH would be a better outcome to seek than GNP, it is not in fact introducing a wholly new consideration into the western mind as many seem to think, because western society in its present capitalist mode is already all about seeking happiness, albeit a narrowly bounded one. If one looks at the philosophical substructure of consumer capitalism, its processes are clearly justified in terms of maximising individual and collective 'utility' or pleasure. The terminology itself reveals not only the centrality of happiness to modern economic doctrines but also the extent to which it is implicitly tied to a *dukkha* mode and the characteristic dependency this invokes in relation to the external world. The cultural problems generated by western individualism exist then not due to an absence of happiness in western strategic thinking, but rather because of a redirection of a fundamental search for fulfilment into the marketplace and its promises of a narrowly conceived and externally derived set of material pleasures. In its present form western material culture suggests that our ability to find happiness is largely, if not wholly dependent upon our ability to secure pleasure in the external marketplace. Essentially then, our spreading global dilemmas come not from a disregard of happiness as such, but from disregarding the qualitative complexity of happiness and the immaterial means by which it might be more reasonably secured.

Central to all the preceding discussion is the fundamental problem of selfishness and the tendency this creates towards separation from others and a fundamental disregarding of their interests. In the basic blueprint for forging a market economy, the motivational complex that is to be encouraged above all is one of narrow individualism and intense competitiveness. At the level of the individual, Adam Smith's famous philosophising (along with more recent purists like Hayek and Friedman) provides the most articulate and influential summary of this basic belief. At the level of the nation state, David Ricardo's theorising is equally illustrative of the tendency in its focus on the competitive advantage of nations. The theme that ought to be taken from these and other formative works is that the search for happiness, should be operationalised by employing strictly narrowed boundaries of consideration. The end result is an encouragement towards a form of self-centredness in which individual persons or nation states can legitimately seek their own fulfilment without taking into account the corresponding interests of others - a dynamic that clearly violates the basic grounding of ethical maturity. In employing such narrow modalities everybody and everything that lies beyond the enclosing boundary of the self or the nation may

be disregarded, or indeed exploited, as a means to securing 'my' or 'our' exclusive happiness.

That this is the case is I think obvious if we look at the present arrangement of a world shaped by these non-aspirational perspectives. The globalising dynamics that are driven by these narrow modes of finding happiness cause endless suffering and conflict. Over a billion people in the poor world are currently unable to secure enough food for normal daily activity while another billion in the wealthy world are clinically obese from an excess of calories. A woman in Sierra Leone has a one in eight chance of dying in childbirth, while one in Sweden has only a one in eighteen thousand chance of suffering a similar fate. So the boundarying of individual or national interests is no trifling matter as it inflicts very real suffering on the swathes of vulnerable others who are sidelined, ignored and literally left to die. This is of course a profound ethical problem and it comes in large part from the cultural dynamics through which happiness is 'legitimately' freed from ethical maturity. Such an ethically oblivious mode of seeking consumptive gains can only be supported when some other grand abstraction (like a god or a perfect market mechanism) is proposed as a compensating counterforce to the obvious problems that are likely to emerge. Such abstractions allow us to continue our narrow indulgences and to believe that a qualitative maturation is unnecessary.

If we are to lessen the lamentable consequences that follow from a failing responsibility then mystifying diversions of the form just mentioned must be challenged and replaced by a more clear-headed vision that reunites our simultaneous searches for improving justice and improving happiness. In saying that we have come to adopt a narrow and competitive view of happiness seeking in which conflict is inherent, I am not implying that suffering and polarisation are actively condoned within a western model of culture and economy, but rather that they are ignored in the cultivated faith that our own outcomes can be sought by our own efforts while those of others can be provided by forces larger than ourselves and over which we have no influence. This doctrine can now only be sustained by profound ignorance and inattention as to the real consequences of hyper-competitiveness on a global level.

At the roots of the free market model of happiness the dim remnants of an ethical consciousness remain. In utilitarianism, the doctrine that provides the fundamental ethical underpinning of contemporary consumer society, the search for individual happiness is always to be balanced with a conscious consideration of others legitimate interests. But the need to actively employ an ethical calculus in achieving personal happiness has largely fallen into practical desuetude as markets have claimed for themselves super-ordinate abilities to deliver a general thriving regardless of the ethical quality of individual motivations. In western consumer culture there remains only a faint echo of an integrated maturity. Yet in contemporary western culture there are many ways in which we could resuscitate a reconnection such that happiness and ethics might once again become complimentary facets of a genuinely progressive human improvement. This is essential if we are to embrace the deeper spirit of GNH thinking and have it play a synergistic role in reconstructing our wayward tendencies. I would like to demonstrate this if I may by taking a brief detour into the psychological understanding of moral development as it is commonly conceived in the west - and in particular by reference to the ways in which individuals have been

found to qualitatively improve their understanding of what is just and unjust as they mature into more accomplished modes of being.

In this literature in general, and particularly in the specific theories of writers like Lawrence Kohlberg and his protégé James Rest we can see a very strong alignment between the qualitative model of happiness dominant in Buddhism and a similarly qualitative ideal of moral improvement. Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist spent an enormous amount of his professional life interviewing hundreds of people in an attempt to uncover how our understanding of ethics changes as we mature. Just as with a Buddhist model of qualitatively improving happiness, in Kohlberg's scheme there is a parallel process of improvement in the ways in which we perceive justice and this unfolds as a function of maturation. As a result of his extensive researches into how we resolve moral conflicts Kohlberg identified three basic stages of moral reasoning. He argued that we begin looking at ethics in a constrained and unskilful way known as pre-conventional reasoning. During pre-conventional reasoning the individual defines justice and injustice by primary reference to the consequences that accrue to the self and only to the self. Thus, a pre-conventional individual will see someone stealing from them as being unethical – the self loses. But if the individual herself can steal from another and gain in the process that action can be defined as perfectly just as a function of the personal gain that results. In pre-conventional reasoning then, the boundary of consideration is drawn tightly around the self. In its crudest form this veers towards a clinical sociopathy in which the individual is willing to assault, kill or rape others for their own pleasure and shows little if any ability to relate to the sufferings they inflict on others. Fortunately most people develop well beyond these limitations, as the boundaries of inclusion expand. As we mature then, we begin to take into account the interests of those with whom we are most familiar, typically those we have face to face relationships with. Friends, family and neighbours become worthy of consideration as their interests are included in our calculations of what constitutes fair conduct. As we move further through the pre-conventional stage we come to include the interests of the broader communities of which we are a part, or with which we identify. This may a village, a tribe, an occupational group, a religions brotherhood or any other community. As a result these constituencies interests are balanced with our own personal outcomes allowing for the possibility of self-restraint in order that fairness be maintained.

This process of expanding inclusiveness works throughout the stage of pre-conventional reasoning but still by its end, one witnesses a continuing boundarying of interests as 'our' outcomes continue to be defined to the exclusion of 'their' interests - setting the pre-conventionalist up for constant conflict and friction. But Kohlberg argued that we do not need to stay entrapped in these poorly accomplished realms and that we can and should move beyond them to attain a greater maturity in the form of conventional reasoning. In Kohlberg's studies conventional reasoning is revealed in (among other things) an increased capacity for balancing personal and group interests with the larger national interest. Thus in conventional reasoning sub-groupings are willing to contribute to the general well-being in the form of taxation for example, or through adherence to the laws of the land in order to ensure collective stability - even in instances where personal gains are sacrificed in the process. Medical care, social support, universal education and respect for human rights are all derived from this broadly considerate mentality, but again this generosity remains constrained as the interests of those with out the nation state are ignored or actively violated in the name

of the national interest. If national income can be increased by exploiting others resources or labour then 'fair enough'. Kohlberg referred to this level of socially-inclusive thinking as conventional because he believed it represented the most common mode in western society, yet not the peak of our potential unfolding. Beyond conventional reasoning lies another much less common realm of truly skilful and accomplished ethical sensibility, this being post-conventional reasoning.

In post-conventional reasoning, the ethical limits of the national interest are transcended as we come to realise the importance of more universalised principles – ones that extend the right to inclusive consideration beyond the self, the family, the community and the nation state to cover all humanity regardless of location, faith or race. Thus for instance, the basic rights not to be tortured or abused by authority is seen to apply regardless of location or leaning. If workers are being exploited to produce cheap goods this is as unacceptable if it is happening in Bangladesh as it would be in Birmingham and as a result self-gain or even national gain can be tempered in the name of distant others. Issues of inter-generational sustainability also come into play as the interests of not only the present generation but also of future generations come to demand recognition as do the interests of other communities of living things.

Kohlberg's model of improving ethical reasoning is not presented here as the be all and end all of ethical perspectives in the western academy but only as a useful perspective that more easily aligns the essential dynamics of qualitative improvement in both our ethics and our happiness. It suggests to us that we can move from very narrow and conflict-ridden modes of consciousness towards more accomplished and harmonious modes of considering the general interest. Put simply, this scheme is about how we can overcome the problematic selfishness that underlies all interpersonal, international, inter-generational and inter-species conflicts to adopt a qualitatively better mode of conscious engagement. But what you may ask has this got to do with the preceding discussion of the qualitative dimensions of happiness. Well, it has everything to do with these and the linkage is simple.

If it is true as GNH and a host of other perspectives suggest, that the primary outcome we seek in life is happiness, the additional consideration of ethics in this context introduces the question of whose happiness we should be concerning ourselves with? If we are to say that everyone values happiness to an equal extent then the issue of improving morality is one of an increasing appreciation of the importance of others happiness to our considerations. As we become more mature, we can come to see a broad harmonious happiness as the outcome of ultimate importance, one which like the happiness to which it connects, is qualitatively different and superior to a more self-enclosed and oblivious form of happiness seeking. Here then we have a clear parallel to the ideals of qualitative improvements in happiness in the Buddhist tradition and the movement out of an unskilful, superficial and dependent mode that derives its pleasures from exploiting the external world. In the qualitative improvement of moral reasoning we see another dimension of this broad human development as appropriate conduct increasingly comes to be defined by the ability to skilfully overcome the limitations of selfishness. When these twin facets of a proper development are brought together they imply a very important understanding – that as we move from the pursuit of a purely personal happiness towards a more skilful

pursuit of a considerate and inclusive happiness, the quality of the happiness experienced is an improving one.

This bringing together of the ethics and the psychology of happiness is profoundly important and essential to realising the potential of GNH as a transformative force in the modern world. The current mode that drives us towards systemic injustice and unsustainability comes from a biased pursuit of a purely personal happiness that denies the needs of the whole. As I previously mentioned the movement of happiness into the western mind has overwhelmingly been directed at achieving results of value to a pre-conventional mentality that continues to emphasise the importance of feeling good and not of being good. Inherent in this is a continuation of the idea that the individual's happiness is the overwhelmingly important focus of interest and this will continue to be the case unless the tendency is directly challenged. In the absence of this, a shift from seeking more material wealth to seeking more happiness will fail to ameliorate the profound structural problems secular-economic culture continues to spawn. Rather, it will in fact continue them as an underlying individualism retains its legitimacy and shifts only to change the object of its attentions while leaving the means by which it seeks them in an unimproved state.

The only practical solution to our current and very profound malaise is to realise that the happiness that we seek within competitive and individualistic frameworks is inherently a lesser happiness, and that our own wellbeing and that of others are not in necessary conflict as the contemporary structuring of consumer culture would suggest. This is a deeply unskilful view, one related to the stunted miseries of *dukkha* and pre-conventional reasoning and it must be transcended if we are to truly progress as a species. We must come to realise that the interests of ourselves and others are in fact completely harmonious when viewed from a mature perspective. Thus, the more we include the interests of others the more we gain in terms of the strength of our relationships, the security of our communities, the vibrancy of our environment and the profundity of the happiness we experience.

If we are to take these arguments seriously then, GNH needs urgently to be placed in an explicit framework that moves it beyond the compromising rationalisations that western consciousness makes possible and one constructive option is to align it more directly to the seeking of an ultimate harmony. It is the harmonisation of our own interests with those of other nations, species and generations that offers us the best hope of a spreading and deepening wellbeing and it exists as an ethical imperative at this point in our collective history. The pursuit of a narrow, superficial and fleeting happiness guarantees continuing conflict and misery and to fail to explicitly state this in the context of GNH is, I believe, to feed into the contemporary destructiveness by leaving its fundamental roots undisturbed. I would like to suggest then that if we are really to facilitate the constructive movement of GNH outwards into a world prone to misperceiving it, we need to more firmly integrate it in a multi-faceted appreciation of its necessary connection to improving respect for others and their search for fulfilment.

Finding harmony is the only corrective for a world riven by conflict. Harmonious resolutions to the worlds parlous state will as a matter of course, provide for an increasing happiness, but an uncritical focus on happiness alone will not be sufficient in and of itself to ensure a positive shift in our attention. I have made mention in the

preceding discussion of the positive movement from *dukkha* to *sukkha* and of the interpersonal conflicts which become inevitable as the interests of one or some are posed against the interests of others in a competitive and controlling sense. But disharmony is equally evident in two additional thematic arenas that deserve mention. The first of these relates to the intra-personal realm in which the pursuit of a pre-conventional and dependent happiness creates conflict with our own deeply set needs to unfold our potential and realise our full maturity if thriving is to be genuinely experienced. In many of the advanced material economies this is closely connected to the deliberate deceiving of mass populations as to where their interests genuinely lie, a profound problem that I have raised in the context of advertising on a number of occasions. I noted above that the fundamental problem of commercialised societies is that the search for happiness has been so effectively diverted into the marketplace. This diversion, through which we are encouraged to lock ourselves into an ignorant and harmful immaturity, builds an essential conflict within ourselves as our immaterial needs for personal growth are ignored and the internal resources we have available to us are left to atrophy. As this occurs, we lock ourselves into continuing dissatisfaction. The consequences of this are evident in the growing discrepancies we observe between our levels of material consumption and our levels of experienced happiness. They also reveal themselves in the insatiability of our resource use as we consume more and more of the planets resources in a futile attempt to compensate for our own lack of inner fulfilment. Furthermore, the inherent emptiness of a consumptive approach to finding happiness is ignored only by employing increasingly distracting evasions that move us even further away from the potential for a genuinely conscious resolution of these basic disharmonies. Indeed this is apparent at the heart of those societies in which levels of consumption and happiness are separating most egregiously. Thus in those societies where commercial intrusion is most complete we can readily observe the relentless rise of increasingly potent means of distraction – in the form of ever more sensational media, commercialised experiences, intensified work schedules and cocktails of mind-altering drugs of both the legal and illegal form. The end result is a poverty of time and attention which denies us access to the inner resources that would direct us towards the internal transformation necessary for securing a better and more considerate form of happiness.

This intra-personal conflict leads into a profound and troubling conflict with the needs of future generations whose interests are ignored even by the vast majority of conventional thinkers. A superficial material happiness demands constant feeding and as the encouragement to consume expands in intensity and reach, more and more of our collective resources are being consumed in the here and now, leaving potentially disastrous shortfalls for our children and grandchildren. Our present happiness is pitched against their future happiness, and once again we find that a divisive and competitive perception as to how happiness might be best secured lies at the root of this problematic dynamic. And inherent in this is the growing conflict between ourselves and the natural systems upon whose regenerativity all life-forms depend. Humanity is now clearly over-exploiting natural resources in a misguided search for fulfilment leaving the needs of other species - for space, soil, water and food - in critical shortfall. We are over-fishing our seas, chain-sawing our forests, over-farming our land, draining our aquifers and actively killing off fellow creatures in a fit of consumptive greed that demonstrates our failing humanity. We have mounting evidence as to the profundity of this destruction and if we add to this the potentially catastrophic impacts we are having on the earth's climactic system we can readily see

how our failure to realise a harmonious happiness is threatening a great unravelling in which suffering will spread and deepen across the whole living system.

In light of all of these problems, many are turning to happiness as a solution. Clearly the spreading conflicts that immiserate the world are exacerbated by a runaway economic system, but to realise this is only to realise the most superficial aspects of the problems at hand. The deeper dynamics are driven by an insatiable greed and a narrow selfishness that seeks satisfaction in reckless and violent ways. At the deepest level it is driven by the ignorant belief that happiness can be legitimately secured in the absence of responsibility and maturity. As we look to resolving these problems it is imperative that we realise that a focus on producing merely more happiness offers no corrective to these problems. The declining state of much of the worlds living systems demands that we seek out a qualitatively better form of happiness in qualitatively better ways. GNH properly understood offers a tremendous opportunity for us to begin such a reformation but it will demand a wholesale transformation of our political, social and economic structures and this can only begin with the transformation of the psychological and cultural structures that underlie them. In conclusion then, I believe it is imperative that we urgently come to appreciate that what Bhutan offers us is not a simple opportunity to gain more superficial satisfaction in the short-term, but an opportunity to seek our fulfilment through the actualisation of our deepest potentials for compassion, self-restraint and wisdom. In the end, it is these and only these that will save us from the momentous misery that now stalks our global future.