

## **Understanding the Development Philosophy of Gross National Happiness**

### **Interview by Bhutan Broadcasting Service with Dasho Karma Ura, Director, Centre for Bhutan Studies**

**Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS):** Everybody—from the layperson to the politician—is now talking about GNH. What are your views on this discussion and are people getting it right as originally envisioned?

**Dasho Karma Ura (KU):** You ask my views on why GNH has become topical these days and then the second part of your second question asks if they are talking about it in the way it was originally envisioned. I think there are four main reasons why GNH has become intensely topical these days. They are: (a) New institutional structures and decision-making processes that better reflect GNH, (b) Presentation of action plans or manifestos of political parties and prospective candidates with GNH as their organizing principle, (c) Steady coverage of GNH issues by TV and newspapers, both national and international—hardly a week goes by without some news on happiness or Gross National Happiness around the world, and (d) Elaboration of GNH as a sound concept and the construction of GNH indicators for application in plan and policy formulation.

I would like to explain each of these four reasons in a little more detail.

- a. With regard to new institutional structures and decision-making processes that reflect GNH, there has been a profound institutional innovation, as you know, crafted by His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. His Majesty established a new institutional mandala of GNH, so to speak, when, in January 2008 the GNH Commission was founded in order to function as the apex strategic body for the nation. The decision to open GNH committees at the ministerial, dzongkhag (district) and gewog (block) levels was also announced by the Prime Minister. These changes more clearly define the structures and processes of decision making unique to a GNH state. By the way, our constitution describes the state and the government as having responsibilities to pursue GNH. GNH should become a serious arbitrator of public policies and plans from now onwards. Correspondingly, there must be institutions to apply this to policy and programme formulation. The recently created institutions and processes will take this role by forging stronger and clearer links between concepts of GNH and their application

to policy and programme formulation. What I expect from these changes is that GNH will shape the nature of our political economy, our legal foundation, our health and education systems, and so forth, much more distinctively in the course of time.

- b. The action plans and manifestos of political parties and candidates have popularized GNH among the ordinary people, and they have done it very extensively and directly by word of mouth, not through media or television. This creature called GNH is now, more than ever, a puzzling thing in the people's mind. The candidates and the parties have often presented GNH in terms of fulfilling objective goods and services; I am sure the dialogue will become more complex and nuanced in the future, by taking account of subjective aspects of GNH as well.
- c. The third reason concerns GNH as a point of discourse in the media. The discourse that television, radio, and newspapers have conducted is vital in stimulating and deepening a popular conceptualization of GNH outside of academic research groups—the public also needs to understand it and needs to contribute to its formulation. That is a very vital role that the media has played. GNH itself has appealed to journalists both national and international, and there is some inherent power in the idea of GNH, that is why there is coverage. Part of the international coverage on GNH is a shared curiosity: What is this country doing? That sort of attitude stimulates their coverage. There is also a part, which is very serious, which reflects a deep-seated search for genuine, alternative, holistic development. That is why GNH sometimes appears in very scholarly books and academic journals. Here, we have to pay tribute to His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan, the true author of GNH, and also pay homage and tribute to the carrier of the GNH legacy, His Majesty the Fifth King of Bhutan.
- d. Finally, the discussion on GNH, at a slightly more academic level, is fueled by the elaboration of the concepts of GNH by research organizations such as CBS. This is also true for the discussion on the construction of GNH indicators, which also involves the drafting of GNH policy screening tools and GNH projection prioritization tools.

The second part of your question asks whether all of this chatter and conversation on GNH are true to the original intention and proposition of His Majesty the Fourth King. Let's go back to the time when His Majesty was still a teenage monarch, when in 1972 he spoke to an American newspaper about GNH and questioned the then prevailing assumption that GDP alone could deliver happiness and wellbeing to society. It was really a breath-takingly bold and profound question,

moreso because it came out of the mind of a teenager. The world-wide development experience of the last 36 years shows his question to be absolutely pertinent, because much of economic development has failed, somehow, providing satisfaction, especially in the industrialized wealthy north where the level of satisfaction is stagnating although economic prosperity is going up. As so happens with born leaders, his insights were ahead of his time by decades.

In the reign of the Fourth King, the actual road map for good development in terms of corresponding laws and policies were developed, and we enjoy that legacy now. As inferred from his kashos and other proclamations or other policies heavily influenced by him, he firmly believed that happiness is an indicator, is a signifier, is a sign of good development and good society. He also believed in the legitimacy of public deliberation, public discussion, and public opinion in defining any goal, whether it is GNH or something else, through democracy and enlightened citizenship. That is why we are where we are with political parties, discourse, voting, and so forth. His visions of GNH and democracy for our country are complementary. We must strive to be loyal to both aspects of his vision; with democracy, through enlightened citizenship, and enlightened views of citizenship, we will come to prefer collective happiness as the goal of society.

**BBS:** What does GNH really mean, especially considering that different people have different views on GNH?

**KU:** There are two parts to your question. What does GNH mean really, for an ordinary citizen? The second part asks how we can consensually define GNH in light of its diverse interpretations. Let me answer the first part of your question. Overall, GNH means the creation of a society or nation in which collective happiness is the goal of governance. The purpose of government would be to create more collective happiness. Now, a society is not created, as you know, in a single moment by a god or something like that. What it means is that a society adjusts and adapts increasingly towards certain goals it defines for itself, in this case: collective happiness. Why do you have to adapt and adjust? Because there barriers and competing ideas that may take you in different directions. This is the present experiment taking place in Bhutan; there are competing and conflicting interests and challenges that can take us in a different direction. But if you are very conscious and wish to pursue it, you can design a society in that way. We have had this experiment initiated and guided by the enlightened leadership of their Majesties the Fourth and Fifth Kings. It is also partly true that such adaptations are continuations of efforts in Bhutan's past; documents as far back as 1695, and again in one legal code of 1795, it mentions explicitly that the purpose of governance as happiness (generally referred to as *dewa*).

When we say that collective happiness is the goal of governance, GNH should not be misunderstood, as a kind of simple, reductionist concept where citizens are only concerned with happiness for themselves, obsessed with feeling pleased. This is not the view. Nor is the view correct that under GNH the government would just maximize aggregate happiness. If it were, it is too simplistic, and many objections would arise to this type of thinking. GNH is a very rich development philosophy and it is also an enlightened personal ethos. Objections that Bhutan will maximize subjective happiness are quite misplaced. Suppose if I just think of you as a pleasure-maximizing being, and I am not concerned with justice, compassion, and so forth, all I would do is feed you some drugs and you would be happy. Though I could keep you in that position, there is no humanity in that approach.

So GNH really stands for a holistic concept guiding governance and development; it also stands for the holistic needs of the people. These needs include physical needs (we must not be in poor circumstances where our body and soul are torn apart) and it recognizes emotional needs, spiritual needs, social needs, economic needs, so and so forth. Secondly, GNH stands for preservation and renewal of a holistic range of wealth or capital. Wealth is not exactly the right word, because when we talk about wealth, we normally talk about material things, so maybe we should use the word capital. In that respect, it is not only economic wealth or capital, which is measured well by GDP, but there are also other capitals which we should value and measure: ecological capital; social capital, things like trust, reciprocity, positive emotions; human resource capital; and cultural and spiritual capital. If we value and measure the ups and downs of all these capitals over time, then we get a true picture of whether society is developing or regressing. If we just focus on measures of economic capital and omit our attention to what is happening to other forms of capital, we may find ourselves one day facing great costs and our lives quite impoverished. For this reason, in GNH we take account of a wider set of resources and point out that these must be preserved if we are to continue pursuing collective happiness in a holistic way. Measuring GDP alone will not tell us enough about holistic development. This was the essence of the message His Majesty communicated when he said that “GNH is more important than GDP”. The understanding of what humans need to make them happy is quite comprehensive in GNH. Equally comprehensive is the range of wealth as capital that we should value and cherish.

GNH, as you can see, is quite holistic in its approach, in part because it addresses development at two levels. At one level, it addresses material needs on the physical realm. It also addresses the inner, invisible realm—the intangible things. Wellbeing also accrues from the intangible side. Addressing needs at the outer physical realm and the inner, mental invisible realm corresponds to subjective and

objective conditions of life. Subjective conditions, at the end, are what you feel from objective stimuli or material circumstances. Development has to be assessed on whether indicators of both subjective and objective realities are moving ahead. If one is moving ahead and the other is stuck—that's also good. If one is regressing and the other is stuck, that's quite bad, and if both are regressing—that's terrible. So the assessment of the progress of society must include a blend of subjective and objective indicators.

The most interesting challenge is how GNH is translated into practice at the policy and programme level, as well as at the level of individual behaviour. We citizens must also have a different kind of attitude and behaviour if we are to obtain and contribute to collective happiness. In regard to the implementation at policy and programme level, recent developments consist of the creation of the GNH commission and GNH committees at various levels of government. Complimenting these Royal initiatives is the introduction of GNH indicators.

We have to adopt GNH indicators. Some people dismiss it as superfluous, unnecessary, mathematical, statistical...but in any case we are being governed and ruled by numbers, as you know. We look at numbers to tell stories about where we are going. If you use the conventional indicators, they express a different set of values. If the underlying values are different, which I am sure they are bound to be if we are professing GNH, then the type of indicators we use should also be different from conventional indicators. Indicators as targets display our purpose and progress, helping us navigate our socio-economic journeys towards them. However, we need other tools to steer towards social targets before we know, through impact studies, whether we are walking in the right direction.

To navigate ourselves towards GNH targets, we need pro-GNH project selection tools and pro-GNH screening tools so that the policies and programmes we select are aligned directly with the targets of GNH. The GNH commission and GNH committees will be adopting these GNH instruments to translate GNH from philosophy to practice. I mentioned before how GNH captures a holistic range of capital or wealth, both tangible and intangible. Our GNH indicators, policy screening tools and project prioritization tools must also have an equally broad scope of concern. In line with this, GNH indicators include many components like subjective happiness, mental health, emotional balance, spirituality, culture, human rights, trust, social support, education, health, living standard and ecology.

As regards your question on the diverse of opinions on GNH, several points must be made. Firstly, you mentioned that different groups have different interpretations of GNH, and that there can be disagreement on that point. Is there a way we can converge on some acceptable definition? While we measure levels of subjective

happiness, there is no need for individually reported happiness levels (in our survey on a 1- 10 scale) to converge on the same meaning. All that is required is for you to be able to rate your happiness level sincerely on a 1 – 10 scale. What makes you happy at that particular moment is entirely up to you, there's no need to verify that further. If you are talking about subjective happiness in this manner, there is no need for us to converge on any definition in which we all agree.

Now, at a more conceptual level, the goal of GNH in terms of governance, as well as individual pursuit, is collective happiness, as opposed to individualistic or private happiness. The means of obtaining happiness will certainly differ according to tastes, age profile, capacities and other orientations of the individuals—there's enough room for you to enjoy liberty. But, from a GNH point of view, the most important thing is that the individual should not achieve his happiness at whatever cost to society—either human or other beings. Otherwise, if you achieve your happiness by passing your costs to others, by passing negative consequences on to others, collective happiness is not possible. In order to achieve our collective happiness, we can elevate our vision beyond irresponsible and egocentric happiness maximization. If people say that what makes me happy is my business, that is absolutely true—the only thing is that as we live in a society we ought to limit the externalities and the negative consequences of obtaining our own happiness, to a reasonable degree.

There is also some doubt on whether individual choice and decision can always, unmistakably, lead to their happiness. We all very well know that we choose wrong alternatives, such as the purchase of goods, for example, which we later on find out to be not that crucial for happiness. Our choice made at one moment may even lead to rethinking at a future moment, take marriages for example. Our judgment and our choices are not always correct. We can learn much more from happiness literature and studies how to improve our chances of obtaining happiness.

From a Buddhist point of view, we as people are prone to illusory focus, leading us to behaviors and judgment that make our life-courses deviate from happiness. The teachings enjoin us all the time to be aware of that fact. Once again, it brings us back to the point that the individuals may strive for happiness by their own effort...but the fact remains that if the government does not create macro-conditions and policies which are pro-happiness, then the individual's chances of succeeding are lower and narrower. Take the domains for example: environment, community relationships, good governance, health, education, etc.—all of these are very important areas that affect our satisfaction and happiness. These things are influenced by public policy. If public policy is wrong, then the chance for us to

realize our wellbeing or happiness through these areas is greatly decreased.

**BBS:** When we talk about GNH we talk about the four pillars. What is the actual significance behind them and how do they relate to the nine domains of GNH?

**KU:** The specifications of GNH in terms of the architecture of four pillars is quite popular. In fact, even without understanding GNH very well, people are able to enumerate four pillars. The four pillars evoke and capture the imagination more easily. At the same time, the metaphor of four pillars is restrictive as it is not all-embracing or encompassing as GNH itself.

What the four pillar framework succeeds in doing is drawing attention to the four policy-bundle priorities of economy, culture, environment and good governance as supportive of GNH. No doubt, these are vital as contributory policy areas for collective happiness. Now we need to enrich the framework of GNH, which requires drawing on all the relevant domains or factors which are vital to the concept and practice of GNH. That is why the concept and indicators of GNH now include other vital areas such as community vitality, time use, health, education and psychological wellbeing in addition to the four pillars as previously conceived. Now, the exact title of these domains does not really matter, the essential thing is that all we value and cherish as a society that contribute to our collective happiness must be reflected and must not be omitted.

**BBS:** What will be the result if GNH is fully integrated into the national planning and policymaking process?

**KU:** Your question is a little more futuristic in the sense that we have to wait to see the results, however, there are results we can readily see as a consequence of past GNH policies and laws. Though the laws and policies did not explicitly take into account GNH, the policymakers and lawmakers in those days intuitively tried to address GNH and incorporate it, although there were no systematic, explicit criteria of GNH which they applied to policies or draft laws and so forth. The right values in the heart of institutions, and in those people running institutions, ensured that policies were pro-GNH. People had the motivations to work towards the collective happiness of the people of Bhutan.

But now we must understand that development is a non-linear process—things can backfire. The situation is changing; the pace is rapid and the side effects of development are becoming more noticeable in social, cultural and ecological terms. In ecological terms we already get a sense of pollution in the air and on the horizon. In social terms, migration is posing problems on both sides: congestion

and urban lifestyles and, on the other side, empty villages, older people on their own. Equally on the cultural side you can see challenges to Bhutanese values and institutions. There are noticeable side effects and one aspect of GNH is to prevent these costs right at the conception of development.

We need to think, and have methodologies of thinking, in order to conduct socioeconomic development far more integratively and far less sectorally. To continuing working holistically towards GNH, we should see reality as one, not as fragmented sectors like health, education, environment, culture, roads, economy and so forth. That sectoral drive may deliver success in that one sector, but it also makes costs emerge in another sector. For example, the success in enrollment as emerged as a challenge in employment. Success in urbanization and industrialization can emerge as costs in the environmental sector. Success in the physical or material realm may reappear as costs in social or emotional terms—people becoming richer, but also not happier; places with high living standards may have very low wellbeing standards. That type of integrated thinking has to occur at the high level of planning—not at a professional or technical level where specialization leads to a narrow conception and delivery of services.

Our five year plan is an aggregations of numerous, perhaps 500 or so, projects. It is difficult to see the fine interconnection between each of these projects acting as a component of social and economic change and the sum total of their effects on the each of the various dimensions of GNH. Nevertheless, that is what holistic planning requires; you must be able to see the effects and side-effects of each project on the other, as well as the sum total effect on the society. You asked what will be the result if we apply GNH into the planning process. While the 10<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan has already been molded to some extent, some effort has to be made to alter projects, where necessary, from the GNH point of view. Perhaps, discussions on GNH policy and project criteria will assist in generating an additional series of projects that directly embody GNH concerns.

**BBS:** If you talk to a group of lay people or young students how will you make them understand what GNH intrinsically means?

**KU:** I think conveying GNH to lay people and students will involve quite different methods and substance. Take the case of students, first. They are largely young, below 15, and full of hopes and idealism—that may be largely met because of the highly progressive nature of society. But as it is with life, a good proportion of them will also find that their aspirations can't be met—they have to reconcile with something else. Most of these young people, 92% or so thanks to the massive education movement of our government, are enrolled in our schools. The education sector is confronted with the choice of

emphasizing literacy skills, employment skills, or values. Whatever emphasis they choose, young people need to have an intellectual standpoint for life as a whole so that the disruptive and dislocating experience of adolescence can be enclosed within a larger context. I think that can be affected by a simplified version of GNH.

For the youth as a whole, I would suggest a greater understanding of emotions and values. In particular, finding emotional balance between negative and positive emotions is critical for the youth in moderating the vulnerability and disruption experienced in the process of maturation. In GNH, the aspects of emotional balance and values in the domain of psychological wellbeing is very well detailed, so they can explore this domain and get something out of it—not everything in GNH is going to be useful at that stage in life. This is a more special thrust applicable to the challenges of youth.

Now for the second group, lay people, who are mostly village-farmers and householders, I would suggest, among other aspects, community relationships for particular attention. The bonds between the members of a community feed and thrive on trust, volunteerism, reciprocity and cooperation, because they are bounded geographically and socially, and they have to work out a way of living harmoniously. Conflicts and litigations, divorces and factionalism signal the breakdown of this social bond and the collapse of peace and harmony in the community. Underlying all of this is the breakdown of relationships. Community at the end is sustained by good, positive relationships among its members.

Relationships, or shared situations, are where happiness spontaneously arises—you are not looking for happiness, but it comes out when relationships improve. Relationships are fundamental to happiness. When the quality and the direction of relationships improve you feel happier. We can have better relations, not necessarily when we have more money, more goods or better houses, but especially when we have better motivations and intentions—that heals you. In this respect, if we cannot maintain healthy relationships in family and community, they will arise as costs to the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, for whose service we have to pay through taxes and other revenues. In themselves, good relationship, community vitality, sense of trust, reciprocity, volunteerism, etc., are important, but if these breakdown it also saps the resources of the country. You have to invest more money in the judiciary to solve divorces and conflict litigation. You have to spend more money on policing and security apparatus. In some sense, happiness is really a by-product of improving relationships; it is wrong to focus all the time on objective conditions as giving you happiness. It can come from these kind of processes and relationships. You can also understand development ultimately as improvement in the relational capacity of people.