

Keynote Address of

H. E. Jigmi Y. Thinley, Prime Minister of Bhutan,

at the 4th International GNH Conference,

“Practice and Measurement”

24-26 November, 2008, Thimphu

Distinguished participants, friends and colleagues,

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be with you this morning at the opening of the 4th GNH International Conference. From the philosophical domain of esoteric discourse on the purpose and meaning of life at the first conference, we have now come down to the world of reality where most things unquantifiable are not saleable or deemed to be worthy of pursuit.

Having fully convinced ourselves that in order to make GNH practicable, it must first become measurable, this conference I understand, will discuss how best to promote the ‘Practice and Measurement’ of GNH. (I am glad that we have long rejected the notion of measuring happiness through the breadth of smiles.) Likewise, the view that attempts to measure happiness will run the risk of promoting and pursuing only those elements that can be identified and measured has not found support.

It gives me and my colleagues in the government immense pleasure to note that so many distinguished persons from many countries have considered it worthwhile to attend the conference. 25 nationalities are represented here today.

To receive fellow pilgrims in the quest for a better world through GNH at this time of the year is of special significance to us for three reasons.

First, this year is of extraordinary importance in the history of our country. Our country became the youngest parliamentary democracy in the world after 257 years of theocratic rule, albeit as a dual system, and 100 years of a golden era under monarchy. It was probably the most peaceful transition to democracy. What is unique about the transition is that it did not come through the will of the people but by the will of a King whose selfless love for and trust in the people led him to convince them that the destiny of the country must lie in the hands of the people themselves and not depend on a single individual. Against strong resistance to change, the Bhutanese people finally accepted democracy not because of its inherent virtues but because they trusted their King.

A philosopher once said that trust is the basis of democracy and human rights rather than democracy and human rights being the basis of trust! I mention this point on trust as it is highly relevant to the vitality of institutions and communities, as well as to the way a democracy operates and affects our happiness. With such a sobering awareness, my government has begun our spirited journey of combining democracy and GNH. We have committed ourselves to ensuring that the trust of our Kings in the people and the people's trust in us, the elected, are not betrayed. We have pledged to consolidate and strengthen the conditions that will enable each citizen to find happiness. To this end, the most important goal of my government is to establish, in our society, a democratic culture of trust in the constitution and the capacity to inspire and hold its elected leaders responsible and accountable.

Second and most importantly, you have come here just after the Coronation of HM King Jigme Khesar as the Fifth Druk Gyalpo. The Coronation of His Majesty is of special significance for GNH for His Majesty and his reign

personify GNH. The King has emphasized promotion of GNH as His responsibility and priority as made clear in His Coronation Address,

“... whatever goals we have – and no matter how these may change in this changing world – ultimately without peace, security and happiness we have nothing. That is the essence of the philosophy of Gross National Happiness... I shall give you everything and keep nothing; I shall live such a life as a good human being that you may find it worthy to serve as an example for your children; ...I also pray that while I am but King of a small Himalayan nation, I may in my time be able to do much to promote the greater wellbeing and happiness of all people in this world – of all sentient beings.”

Bhutan has, yet again, been blessed with a great King who is compassionate and wise. His commitment to GNH is based on a deep understanding of the philosophy and the conviction that it is through this that his people can be best served. GNH could not find a greater advocate and patron and this conference could not have been better timed.

And third and lastly, you are here during the period of the celebrations for the centenary of our monarchy that will extend up to 17th December. This is the year when all Bhutanese are single minded in their reflections on the amazing journey of our beloved country under 100 years of monarchy. Each of our Kings served the nation under extraordinary circumstances and endowed the country with legacies that have made this kingdom what it is today. In this regard, I consider this conference to be a special celebration of the timeless gift of GNH by His Majesty the Fourth King not only to the Bhutanese people but to human society in general. Gross National Happiness as the goal and purpose of development is the fruit of his wisdom born out of his dedication to understand, articulate and fulfill the innermost desire of his subjects. It served as the main

motivator and basis of all his policies and actions during a glorious reign of 34 years. As the reality of our unsustainable, unfulfilling way of life becomes ominously and indeed, devastatingly clear in our troubled world, I believe GNH, seen as an alternative development paradigm, has become ever more relevant.

These events and the mood that pervades throughout this Himalayan kingdom offer an exceptionally expectant setting for the GNH conference which has returned to Bhutan after two highly productive sessions abroad. As a participant in all three international conferences in the past, I feel specially privileged to be able to welcome it back to Bhutan. In fact, the royal government considers this conference as one of the most important and meaningful activities of the Centenary celebrations.

This occasion evokes a sense of continuity, renewal of solidarity among fellow GNH pilgrims and creation of fresh bonds of partnership toward a worthy cause. In particular, we are very happy to have here with us, Dr Ron Colman, Director of GPI Atlantic who was the chief organizer of the landmark 2nd GNH conference in Halifax, Canada. That conference brought GNH to the broad-based attention of the people in North America. We are equally delighted to welcome Hans and Wallapa, the chief coordinators of the hugely successful 3rd International Conference in Nongkhai in Northern Thailand and in Bangkok. Through the Bangkok and Nongkhai conference, GNH was suffused, like the waters of Mother Mekong, through the Mekong Delta countries.

The breadth of participants in both these conferences were unprecedented, bringing in the Governor General of Canada, Prime Ministers of Thailand and Bhutan, politicians, corporate leaders, professionals, NGOs, youths, artistes, religious leaders and writers. The movement and practical actions the conferences generated are still rippling through places and societies in ways that

have humbled us. You will be pleased, as I am, to be informed that the venue and hosts for our next conference has already been chosen. Please welcome Dr Susan Andrews, from Brazil, who will be instrumental in holding the 5th International conference on GNH in Brazil. My only request is that we now become more focused on translating the concepts of GNH into clear policies. For the organization of all the GNH conferences from the Bhutanese side, the UNDP has been exceptionally generous and a reliable partner. I would like to thank Nicholas Rossellini, UNDP Resident Representative, for his unwavering support.

Your participation in the past conferences has inspired, provoked and generated scientific inquiry and insights among ourselves and beyond. I have no doubt that the achievements of this conference will be no less. To you goes the credit for the widening interest in GNH and the growing conviction in the urgent need to search and find an alternative to our acquisitive, exploitative and insatiable way of life dictated by our faith in the infallibility of market forces which, in turn draw their power from the ambrosia of consumerism.

Over the years, due to the transmission of GNH by all of you, there have been attempts to practice and measure aspects of it in ways that have and should always take into account local specificities and relevance. It is most encouraging to observe how aspects of GNH are being implemented in bottom-up, non-centralized ways, in many local communities around the world. Big shifts from governments towards what is recognition of true progress and how it should be measured may indeed only come when citizens and organizations, dispersed as they are, act in unison and convergence spurred by a new consciousness. Such actions are being stimulated by the collaborative activities of vanguard research institutions around the world that are supported by enlightened people and leaders.

Present here in this conference are key researchers from many leading edge research institutions. They include the statistical office of the OECD based in Paris, New Economic Foundation from London, and the International Cooperation Centre based in Osaka, Japan. The OECD, whose membership includes all industrialized and donor countries, is to be congratulated for having conducted a series of regional conferences covering all the continents on fostering and measuring true human progress. These culminated in the world summit in Istanbul, Turkey last year. I myself had the pleasure of being invited to participate in the Asian regional conference in Seoul and the global summit. These and such other activities demonstrate very clearly the growing concert to find a development model inspired by GNH.

Without being complacent, it would be most beneficial to intensify international collaboration on practices and measurements, while emphasizing the need to maintain focus on formulation of practical applications in terms of projects and programmes being rooted in the local where the real people are, and where genuine meaningful grassroots changes must take place. In this regard, it appears that developing measurements or indicators of progress for GNH may actually be easier than applying them to reshape public policy and action. The point of all attempts to measure holistic development is to persuade reconfiguration of public policies, restructuring or reorientation of institutions and transformation of human behavior. To this end, we may even have to be bold enough to suggest alternatives to competitive politics whereby common purposes and visions are often defeated by conventional divisions of left versus right, pro-market versus socialism, electoral calculations versus long term interests. While everyone acknowledges globalization and the reality of the global village, politics at all levels need to transcend parochial, national or regional perspectives to respond to and act on global problems such as the depletion of shared resources and erosion of ethical and moral consciousness.

Even as we welcome democracies as part of the solution, we must be aware of what philosopher Onora O'Neill said: "Democracy can show us what is politically legitimate; it cannot show us what is ethically justified."

I dare say that contemporary vocabulary and architecture of governance are not in perfect harmony with governance for GNH. Practices based on GNH measurements will, I am certain, require changes in traditional government structures, objectives and administrative norms. To begin with, the tools and criteria for selecting projects and programmes need to be aligned with GNH. Then there are the criteria governing public budgetary allocation for realizing public goods. These are in need of revision just as the notion of what constitutes public good itself. For all I know, happiness, as a public good, does not feature as the intended outcome of most government expenditures. What will not change though is one challenge of public policy which is to enhance the well being of the individual without compromising the well being of the collective or vice versa. How does one achieve a judicious balance between the two? Is there a dichotomy?

As this august gathering discusses the subject of practice and measurement of GNH, I urge you to consider pondering the many questions that haunt me.

How does one create an enlightened society within which the citizenry knows that individual happiness is the fruit of collective action and happiness – that lasting happiness is conditioned by the happiness of surrounding individuals and that striving for others happiness is the most certain path to fulfilling experiences that bring true and lasting happiness? How does one go about persuading people to adopt a new ethical paradigm that rejects consumerism? How do we convince them that the dogma of limitless productivity and growth in a finite world is not only unsustainable and unfair to future generations but that it squeezes out social, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic pursuits?

Even the justification for economic growth for poverty alleviation seems very shaky, unless we radically improve redistribution. Shamefully, little goes to poverty alleviation from the enormous wealth generated in the aggregate global economy. The same is applicable to the argument that we need to grow so that there will be money to fix environmental problems. To believe this is to believe in killing the patient to cure the disease. Evidence that we need to grow economically to be collectively happier is of course even scarcer among the rich countries. Well then, how does one advocate a new concept – definition – of productivity, wealth, prosperity and fulfillment that has little to do with material accessories and edging out the weak as compared to having more to do with social, psychological and emotional well being?

Is it enough for us to know how to measure happiness and to hope that this will influence policy-making? Is making GNH policies and programmes enough? What of political will and capacity given the fact that these, in a democracy, are responses conditioned by popular demands and aspirations? So, if people do not understand and favour GNH based policies, will politicians dare? And if they do, would they succeed? How do we begin? How do we internalize, beyond intellectual enquiry and statements, the values that we speak of? How do we as academics, thinkers, scientists, leaders and concerned citizens change our own way of life and behavior?

I come now to the end of my humble address. Traditional wisdom tells us that new thoughts and ideas emerge from chaos and devastation. If GNH must be the new order, then the old certainly appears to be giving way as manifest in the multiple crises that are testing the relevance and sustainability of the prevailing order. The financial, energy, and food crises as well as the natural calamities of the magnitude and frequency never seen before are, I believe, alarm bells to warn us away from living the way we do (*I have spoken my mind on this subject*

at the United Nations General Assembly this year. It is with deep humility that I have distributed copies of my UN address together with copies of this statement)

Thank you for your patience.

Tashi Delek!