

# **Taking Happiness Seriously**

**Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness**

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**The Centre for Bhutan Studies**

Taking Happiness Seriously: Eleven Dialogues on Gross  
National Happiness

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## **Introduction**

Gross National Happiness represents not just a new way of measuring our progress but a new ethic for human development. First formulated by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck the Fourth King of Bhutan, the ideal has been used for many years to guide domestic policy but has only more recently come to the broader world's attention. GNH enters into the global mindset at an opportune time as governments, cities and states begin the serious business of conceiving a new vision of what our post-GDP progress should ultimately aim to achieve.

As what the Bhutanese call 'GNH thinking' becomes known it meets several other influences that are similarly fertilising the global consciousness. Perhaps the most profound of these is the slow appreciation of the fact that our current levels of consumption are rapidly undermining the biosphere's regenerative capacities. The rate at which we are consuming the dwindling bounty of resources around us is staggering and wholly unsustainable. As reports mount and scientific evidence becomes ever more consensual one overwhelming conclusion is being drawn – that uncontrolled economic growth or 'business as usual' will be catastrophic for our future well-being. Tied to this dawning acknowledgement is a deeper conclusion that challenges the very foundations of an economic order. Since its inception, the priority of market economy has been justified by the claim that it is a self-correcting mechanism guided by a beneficent and God-like Invisible Hand. The dawning of the anthropocene - the current age of human and market driven mass extinction - tells us in the clearest of terms that this fanciful assumption is completely unfounded.

A second disturbing influence comes from our increasing appreciation of the stubborn problems of impoverishment in the modern world. For decades we have labored under the

belief that poverty will be solved by growing markets. Yet despite decades of global growth, today 1.4 billion people still live in extreme poverty and at least 800,000 are undernourished. In this arrangement markets embed extremes of excess and privation as much as they remove them. A gulf separates the powerful from the vulnerable but slowly we are becoming aware of some of the impacts excessive privilege has on others. We see the most spectacular sufferings and we get glimpses of the multitudes who sweat to produce our cornucopia in locked-down factories. We sense the future choices we will face between the bio-fuel needs of drivers and the food needs of the hungry. Decreasing food security, declining water resources, shifting climates, growing populations – these are the conditions that will throw millions more into future poverty and they will all be greatly exacerbated by more business as usual.

A further unsettling awareness comes in the form of the mounting empirical evidence that beyond a basic point, increasing economic growth loses the ability to lift happiness levels. A large body of robust research now clearly shows that happiness and economic growth are by no means synonymous and that once the essentials of life have been secured, further fulfillment comes from indulging not the material but the immaterial pleasures of life. Thus, friends, family, health and a sense of positive purpose become central to satisfying living. It is very likely that the uncoupling of economy and happiness comes from the increasing demands that a growth fetish places on society as both producers and consumers are pushed to pick up the pace. Growing economy demands that we work longer and harder and that we consume faster and more. The time and attention necessary to conform to these dictates completely deny us the opportunity of fulfillment in the immaterial dimensions of living. Thus, we work harder to consume more to less and less effect. The core model of the marketplace assumes that economic growth equals an increasing felicity but we now

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have plenty of evidence to know that this uncritical assumption is also false.

Taken together these and numerous other factors are making us realise that to cling to our core economic delusions – that market growth is self-correcting, inevitably inclusive and equal to happiness – bodes ill for our future. This shift is stimulating an interest in Gross National Happiness because it offers an adaptive alternative, one in which economy is balanced by other equally essential ends - sustainability, justice and genuine happiness in particular. A GNH approach offers us a way to see beyond our current myopia. Yet before we leap to embrace any alternative it is useful to ponder further the deeper roots of our current malaise. This is particularly so in the context of Bhutan where culturally all problems can only truly be resolved by undoing them at their point of origin.

The damage that unrestrained economy does to systems of ecology, justice and human development stems ultimately from the ordering requirements of its hegemonic ideology. In free market culture economic indicators come to represent the ends to which all other ends must be subjugated. Nature comes to be looked upon as a source of 'exploitable' materials and energy. Or at the other end of the dynamic, as a dumping ground for the constant waste and pollution we spew. The inherent value of the biosphere is necessarily disregarded and our interdependence with it denied. From a purely economic perspective, the ideal consumer is deeply disconnected from the rest of the living world and unable to appreciate it or bear responsibility for it.

In a similar way our relationship with human society and the responsibilities inherent in this are also denied to serve economic ends. The massive consumption enjoyed by the biggest economies is built on the backs of masses of invisible producers but these direct inter-dependencies are denied in a disappearing act that rules out any sympathetic connection

between our worlds. Although it is true that there is a rising awareness of some of these linkages, the essence of economic expansion lies in denying us the ability to make any caring connection that might cause us to interrupt our consumption out of a concern for others. It is a cultivated moral blindness that occludes the raw power plays that dictate who gains, who loses and indeed who gets to define justice in a growing global economy.

Equally, the imperative of economic ordering also sacrifices genuine happiness to its ends so that we come to cut ourselves off not only from nature and from others but also from our own deeper selves. To maximize GDP people must be encouraged to live in a constant state of desire for more. Growth depends on relentlessly 'stimulating' demand and much of the commercial media works with exactly this goal in mind. We are endlessly enveloped in advertising whose sole intention is to increase consumption along with a gnawing desire for more. The search for happiness is thus diverted into the marketplace and away from the immaterial realms where it can more certainly be found

All of these disorders combine to force a collapse of the practical ethics that lie at the heart of any decent and sustainable society. The greedy, careless and self-absorbed type most functional for achieving market growth is in fact the opposite of that required for genuine development. The mounting environmental problems, the gross injustices and the failing felicity of the modern economic system are caused at base by our self-absorbed disregard for other ends of value. To paraphrase the well-known words of Robert Kennedy, in economic culture we have come to recognise the price of everything and the value of nothing. To transcend our current destructiveness we must work seriously to revitalize the values that extend respect to the natural world and compassion to our fellow inhabitants. Without doing this how can we possibly hope to build a happier and more secure world?

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This is the direct question that Bhutan sets before a now failing economic culture. In GNH thinking the natural, the social and the personal realms are deeply inter-woven and all need to be brought into harmony if happiness is to be found. Its foundational challenge lies in its utter denial that value and fulfillment can be found in an isolated state of constant desire. In a Buddhist way of seeing, craving, a disregard of others and disrespect for nature lead inevitably toward conflict and sorrow. Accordingly, the means to avoiding these conditions is to cultivate their ethical antidotes - care, compassion and self-restraint.

There is at the heart of Gross National Happiness an essential perception that sees deep ethics and deep happiness are co-existent states. In this, Bhutan retains a holism that is emphasized by all the world's major religious cultures and one dominant everywhere that market ideology has not yet prevailed. In the immature ethics of the modern marketplace considerate values and self-restraint confer weakness. Yet this separation of feeling good and doing good comes at a heavy price and the 'fun' we find tends often to be superficial and short-lived. In GNH thinking we live as beings with a profound potential for maturity. If conditions are right we can grow into a full humanness - and become wise, compassionate, appreciative and self-restrained. Or if conditions are not right we can find ourselves stuck in immature patterns of delusion, conflict and insatiable craving. It is the latter conditions that economic values drive us towards.

As a goal for social development GNH could be as easily dubbed Gross National Maturity or Gross National Responsibility as it is as much about these as it is about happiness per se. It holds considerable promise not least by holding economic growth to higher account. Thus, as long as markets work to facilitate a harmonious, just and sustainable world they add to a constructive progress. But where they tend us towards destruction, division or alienation they must

be re-directed by a larger and more adaptive set of values. As the Fourth King of Bhutan pointed out when he first mentioned GNH, happiness is more important than money and money can only ever be a means to an end and never the end in itself.

For GNH to succeed, the aggressive momentum of economic power has to be tamed and slowed in order that a genuine balance of other values can be achieved. In its classical formulation Gross National Happiness rests upon four inter-dependent pillars, the so-called Four Pillars of GNH. The first makes explicit that to achieve widespread happiness society must live in harmony with a thriving ecosystem that is valued in its own right. Secondly it must also cohere around a vibrant and grounding culture that conveys on-going wisdom and an ethical sensibility to the nation. Material economy is also an essential pillar of any happy society as it provides for basic necessities and eases burdens. The final pillar is good governance, a transparent and dedicated civil service that acts to harmonise all of these ends in the most practical way. The pillar of good governance is where the creative and active transformation of ideals into policy occurs and here that Bhutan really works at the forefront of a new mode of governance. As I write the country has good reason to be happy as the first democratic government of Bhutan, elected with over 90% of the vote in 2007 is headed by Lyonchhen Jigmi Y Thinley, a man long dedicated to making GNH a practical reality.

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I was first convinced that seeking happiness should really be taken seriously while listening to one of the Prime Minister's speeches. Over the years it has been he who has been the most visible advocate of GNH particularly on the international stage and among the many spin-offs of his remarkable energy and persuasion is this book which had its direct origins in a conversation we had in Istanbul in 2007. We met after he had

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left the stage of an OECD conference of economists, policy-makers and academics. As I had listened to his speech it seemed to me that a prevailing sense settled over the audience, that GNH was an appealing but unrealistically 'soft' measure of progress. In the end it seemed to float like an exotic curiosity above and beyond the pale of this particular convention. Lyonchhen and I spoke about this gap of understanding and I mentioned a vague intention to write a book that would help bridge the divide and build a more common understanding. His enthusiastic response immediately committed me to organizing a project that would deliver something of value.

From the outset I had no desire to attempt a sole-authored tome. Gross National Happiness is an integrative way of looking at our responsibilities in the world and it is one that has thus far avoided co-option by outside 'experts'. It is an unfolding dynamic seen differently from different perspectives and certainly in my explorations of GNH I have learned most from informal talks with a variety of thoughtful people. I began then to gravitate towards a project that would bring together a range of such conversations in one volume. If I could bring Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese perspectives to bear on common themes then maybe some clarifying common ground could be found. If done well it might help weave together a more a diverse conversation about GNH, and help others understand its origins, its intent and its practical prospects.

In working towards this end I had the great good fortune to be involved in a series of meetings at which Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese came together to deliberate GNH in practice. It is an approach that the government has used to great effect and in meetings around measuring GNH, managing media, educating for happiness and other themes a rich sharing of perspective has taken place. As I grew to appreciate this synergy I began to record dialogues with some of those who are well placed to shed light on various facets of GNH.

For a Bhutanese perspective I wanted to include a number of people beginning with the Prime Minister. As a person involved since the beginning, no volume would be complete without his input. I also wanted to talk with Dasho Kinley Dorji who was for many years the Editor-in-Chief of Kuensel which was until recently the only national newspaper in Bhutan. I recorded a dialogue with Dasho Karma Ura, President of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, where he works and writes on GNH and its measurement. I talked also with Dasho Neten Zangmo the marvelously energetic Anti-Corruption Minister of Bhutan who has been a strong advocate of greater ethics and good governance for many years. Siok Sian Pek is a media practitioner, educator and researcher and a keen-eyed observer of development in the country so I wanted her perspective. I wanted to include also the thoughts of Namgay Zam, an astute and articulate broadcaster and long time youth advocate. And finally, I wanted to explore a Buddhist perspective on GNH and so recorded a dialogue with Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi a respected Buddhist teacher and Director of the National Museum of Bhutan.

For voices from outside of Bhutan I talked with a range of people who have been closely involved in contributing to the development of GNH and to its measurement. Dr Ron Coleman of GPI Atlantic has been intimately involved in Bhutan for a number of years and is the leading practitioner in alternative post-GDP measures of social wellbeing. Nic Marks heads the London based New Economic Foundations Centre for Wellbeing and has a similarly strong connection to the country. He too is at the forefront of alternative measures and is chief author of the Happy Planet Index a widely reported measure of the responsible happiness of nations. I wanted to get the perspective of Prof. Ruut Veenhoven as one of the most well known academic researchers on happiness. He is the founder of the World Happiness Database and a global authority on the empirical approach to studying happiness. Helena Norberg-Hodge was another whose voice I wanted to include given her long experience of development,

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culture and environmental change in the Himalayan region. As founder and Director of the International Society for Ecology and Culture she has devoted her life to the finding ways to balance economy with cultural values and ecological health.

Brought together in these pages I hope that they add something of value and that they open new avenues of thinking about what our future could be like if we were to act with more mature priorities. I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to those who so kindly gave their time and permission to talk and be included here. Their patient ability to tolerate convoluted questions and articulate straight answers made my task a humbling pleasure. I learned a great deal and was much inspired by the positive energy they apply to making the world a better place. This book is dedicated to their spirit and to the happier ideals they recommend we seek.

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