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RM: You are a very keen observer of the Bhutanese scene and someone whose opinion is widely regarded. I wonder if I could ask you about the major challenges Bhutan faces as a rapidly developing society. What are the most important challenges in your mind?

KD: Bhutan's major challenge, its major goal in one word, is survival. Bhutan is a small country of about half a million people stuck between India and China with over a billion each and this gives us a very strong sense of vulnerability. So, there is a perception that as a small country, we might disappear. This is at the back of the Bhutanese mind and this is why extreme caution has been followed in all areas of development. Of course, Bhutan's development has come in different stages. Infrastructure like roads, electricity and education have been improved, we have entered the information age and now have an expanding media which is a very important part of globalisation. These changes are happening so quickly that it is a challenge to respond fast enough.

RM: When you say that change raises issues of survival for Bhutan, do you mean by that survival of Bhutanese culture and its values or do you mean survival of the nation state as an independent entity?

KD: The survival of Bhutan as a country. In the past, the threat was military—take the case of Tibet to the north and Sikkim to the east—in this neighbourhood, small countries really are vulnerable. One of the realities that Bhutan has always accepted is that we will never be a major economic or

military force so we decided that our strength must lie in our identity, our cultural identity. We must be different from the other billions of people in the region or we will be swallowed up. Culture then is very important and with globalisation, the media in particular is a threat to this unique identity so that is one element. Then there is the demographic threat. With large movements of people around the Himalayan region, there is a chance that the Bhutanese identity could disappear. That is why there is such an emphasis on culture in GNH thinking, on dress, on architecture, on language, on values and other aspects of our identity. This is of course very closely linked to our spiritual heritage.

RM: In that sense then the development philosophy of GNH serves an important purpose in providing a rallying point around which people can gather to maintain a unique identity and choose a different direction from the one globalisation seems to be taking other societies in?

KD: Yes. GNH is not a sudden concept and it is not as if in the 1970s, the King suddenly had a brand new idea. It is really the expression of a Bhutanese system, of the values and social and economic arrangements we have had for centuries, it is just been given a new name—GNH. In a way, this is so that it can be more palatable to the next generation. Many young people reject the more austere sounding terms that say you must wear these clothes, learn this language, build your house this way and so on. GNH is more palatable because it goes deeper and is a nicer expression of the values that keep Bhutanese society together and strengthen our identity.

RM: To what extent then is GNH a direct continuation of Buddhist sensibilities in a new form?

KD: I think we have to be a little careful when we talk about Buddhist values and characteristics. I see that within GNH that Buddhism is more of a spiritual practice than a religion

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and uses the values that come out of Buddhism. For example, in GNH to find happiness you have to look inside yourself not outside. There is no external source of real happiness and therefore under GNH it is the government's responsibility to create the conditions within which the individual citizen can find happiness. It is then an expression of spirituality.

RM: Do you think that the articulation of GNH and its emphasis on the spiritual and non-material sources of satisfaction has been sufficiently robust – both in terms of its intellectual development and its translation into practice - to act as a practical force of resistance to the materialistic and consumerist shifts that globalisation normally demands?

KD: As a philosophy, yes. But to be honest, we have not achieved GNH yet, we are only just beginning. I think this is square one, almost. We are beginning to refine the academic discussions on the philosophy but the translation of the philosophy into policy has not even begun. If we believe we have achieved GNH and that this is a GNH society, we are wrong. It is just the beginning. I think the start is an inspiration but we need to build upon this. We can see now for example that there are some specific GNH surveys being done and we have some results coming out but these are in the very early stages. Even from a Buddhist point of view, we have accepted the essence of it but we have not really constructed it. If asked about GNH, many decision-makers in Bhutan would say it is something we have to attract wealthy foreign tourists, so there is a lot of scepticism even in Bhutan itself. That is why one of my concerns is that maybe we are trying too hard to export it, to sell it outside before we have developed it inside Bhutan itself. We are yet to really build up a GNH economy, a GNH society, a GNH culture.

RM: I wonder about the extent to which the scepticism that sees GNH as a selling point for the nation matches a certain misplaced romanticism on the part of those outside who wish to see Bhutan and GNH in overly simplistic terms. To what

extent do you think that this might feed into a dynamic in which Bhutan comes to play catch-up and implement policies in light of an easy to articulate abstraction that was perhaps ahead of its time and much more complex and difficult to achieve than many realise?

KD: In many ways, it has all been a little accidental. Now I think GNH has really been picked up around the world not so much because of what Bhutan has to offer, but because societies outside are feeling a gap and a need for something more. Basically the world has found out that GNP is inadequate. Someone, it might have been you, referred to it as a broken promise. Because of that, I think people are looking at GNH and thinking that maybe this is the answer. Bhutan's Shangri-la image has definitely helped as people see a potential answer coming from the exotic Himalayas. This international excitement has put pressure on Bhutan to put its money where its mouth is.

But this can be very good because Bhutan needs GNH in a very real sense. We are a small country trying to survive and as such, we need the underlying strength that comes from a clear value system. I think that GNH is that value system and it has helped because, inadvertently, perhaps the message of GNH has gone out into the world as a reminder that material development alone will not bring happiness, only a Disney-type happiness, but not the real contentment that we really need to appreciate and value.

RM: It is a difficult time though, isn't it with the pace of change happening in Bhutan at the moment. Compared with when I first came here in 2003 for instance, the changes around Thimphu have been quite astonishing. With the slow development of GNH in terms of carefully consolidating its philosophy, gradually developing measures and ultimately putting these into policy, do you think that the process is proceeding fast enough to meet the pace of change that society is presently experiencing?

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KD: No, we are not able to keep up. The changes that globalisation is bringing are such a force that we cannot keep up. We have not developed the concept enough, we have not been able to intellectualise it, we don't have the institutions or enough educated professionals to deal with changes in areas like the media for example. We do not fully understand the impact that this is having on a new generation. So, we are definitely not moving fast enough. We are lucky though that we started so late and that there has not been time as yet to destroy some of the pillars of GNH – like the environment and the culture of Bhutan. In this sense, we have a real advantage. And we also have the advantage of seeing the destruction that has taken place in other countries, in our own neighbourhood. These are sharp reminders but it is nonetheless a very difficult race.

RM: Would that imply that alongside a more rapid development of GNH as policy, there also needs to be a companion set of measures in place that are essentially protectionist measures designed to slow down the pace of change within the country in order that it has time to adapt?

KD: Yes. We call this the middle path or the balance. In this sense, it means slowing down which is why the cautious approach to development is important. Rather than random mass tourism that is looked at only as a source of revenue, it is controlled. A very good example is mountaineering. Bhutan has 20 virgin peaks over 20,000 ft. Mountaineers are drooling to climb these and would pay anything. But GNH says no, these are sacred mountains important to the people here, so no. It is no to the power of the dollar because people's sentiments can be more important than money. We need to use this approach at all levels. We now have a discussion about the WTO and many politicians would like us to join. But GNH thinking can allow us to ask about the real advantages. What will we lose? Can we retain control over our own decisions? This is where GNH can be seen as a goal, as

an inspiration and as a constant guide to what is important as we make these critical decisions.

RM: Well certainly for many observers WTO membership represents a real loss of sovereignty and the ability to determine one's own path to a unique future. Given what you have said about the impact of foreign media on the core values that underlie GNH, how can a force like this be addressed and contained so that it does not create the individualism and competitiveness that it has spawned elsewhere in the world?

KD: I think that what the world has found out is that there is no stopping the media. When we did not have television, everyone told us that we were depriving our people of information and that everyone has the right to information. But they did not realise that many places in Bhutan did not even have electricity. We did not have schools or hospitals either but still they pressured us into introducing television. Now that we have it, everyone is saying why do you have television, don't you know it will have a bad effect on your children? But a small country like this has very little say. We are moved by bigger forces and there is no turning back now that television is here. From what I understand as a media person, the only answer is to have your own media and your own content to counter what is really an aerial invasion. This is what we are battling but we do not have sufficient resources. We are desperately trying to start some media literacy programmes to teach people about the impacts of media but it is a huge uphill battle. This is where again we need to draw on GNH as it basically emphasises public service. The media must serve the public interest and cater to what the people should have as opposed to what they think they want. What should our people know and what should they know about the media? These are the important questions and the right approach, but again this is easy to say but practicing it is another big challenge.

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Before television came in, if you asked any Bhutanese child 'who is your idol or who is your hero,' he or she would say 'my King'. Within weeks of television's arrival, this changed. First it was people like David Beckham because the world cup was going on, then all of the Bollywood stars and the World Wrestling Federation. When my son was three, he suddenly decided that his hero was Rock, the wrestler and now it is people like 50 Cent, the rap artist. From the King to 50 Cent in a very short time – so, this is what is happening.

RM: What do you think the impacts of this are on society as a whole as people shift their values and their ideals of what is heroic and desirable?

KD: If we do not watch it, we are going to lose the Bhutanese identity and we are going to become just another struggling developing country that is no different from any other 'third world' society. In other words, we will have lost GNH. So, what can we look to to counter this? GNH is vital in this regard and we have to construct it in understandable terminology and from there into policy, so, that Bhutanese society is able to deal with change.

RM: Do you think that putting things in terms of happiness provides a strong enough focus to prevent dissolution in a number of other realms such as an appreciation of justice and sustainability for example? It does seem to me that it would be very easy for a young person who gets into a rap artist like 50 Cent to say 'this is what makes me happy and so if I am making decisions on what makes me happy, I choose to value this.' So, I wonder if happiness is a strong enough focus to prevent a deeper compromising of the country's culture.

KD: I think that is an important point and it is actually part of the misunderstanding and scepticism about GNH. GNH is not about happiness. Happiness is an individual pursuit. Philosophers have been trying to define happiness for

centuries and no one really has successfully. GNH is about responsibility, not only happiness. It is about the responsibility of the state to make sure that the conditions that make it possible for the individual to find happiness are in place. We cannot confuse the two. GNH then is a very serious business as the Prime Minister says and as a serious issue, we need to translate it into good policies and GNH regulations. It is then not so much about transforming the individual but about transforming society. We need a GNH society and a GNH economy where you do not sell your natural resources but find a balance where you can sacrifice income for what must be preserved—like ecology and natural resources.

RM: That would imply wouldn't it, that there will need to be a good degree of regulation involved in policy making and I wonder how this fits with an emerging democratic focus and the ideal that is always embedded in modern commercial culture, that the individual should be maximally free. Do you see potential tensions in the future between the need to enforce some degree of responsibility and individuals' desire to flee from that responsibility?

KD: I have just started thinking about this and I don't have an answer. When I look at the process of democratisation taking place in Bhutan and started by the King, I see a very clear picture. Many developing countries in Asia, Africa and South America believe that democracy is a goal and so once they have had elections, they think that they have democracy. GNH tells us that this is just the beginning. Democracy is not a goal and an election is not democracy. In fact, democracy is just a strategy to ensure good governance, good governance meaning to serve the people. This is one of the pillars of GNH so what GNH has given us as we undergo the process of democratisation is the ability to see that it is just one aspect of a broader goal. It is a political change that will help us achieve GNH.

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In this perspective, GNH and democracy resonate well because both require the empowerment of the individual. So that element is very clear to me but as we try and introduce democracy and with it the rights of the individual, there is a tension. We are at a very early stage but if I were to explain it at a superficial level, I would say that now more than ever, the responsibility again comes on the decision-makers. Our leaders need wisdom, they need true wisdom and GNH should give them the strength and the justification to make tough decisions. Take for example an area in which I think government today is failing – the number of cars. In Bhutan we don't have a Dzongkha word for 'traffic jam' but everyone wants to buy a car. They are coming in through India very cheap and soon our roads are going to be clogged up and we will have pollution, accidents and so on. It is time to make decisions now and say sorry but we have more cars than roads so there must be heavy taxes to control their numbers. The government attempted this, people protested and the government withdrew. Now GNH means that officials must have the courage to make these decisions – for the good of the whole and for the good of the community and this must be more important than the vote. Our politicians and our leaders must have the guts to make tough decisions and that is where I think more than democracy, we have to fall back on GNH to see the priority of the environment and pollution-free air. This is the perspective that we must adopt.

RM: That is interesting because one of the areas I work in is concerned with indigenous responses to the forces of globalisation and I often find that when cultures reach that point of conflict between traditional, deeply-held values and the more superficial processes of change they confront, there is often a crisis of confidence vis-à-vis the right to impose traditional values. Traditional systems tend to work on the basis of authority and there are established positions of power that have the right to guide peoples' behaviour by virtue of the fact that they represent wisdom and sound judgement. It makes me wonder whether Bhutan is suffering a slight crisis of confidence at the moment in terms of

knowing exactly how to translate these traditional values into concrete policies that are relevant to a shifting scene.

KD: It is not a crisis yet, but it could be and in fact it will be. We have a democratically elected government and some politicians have made their promises to their constituents who are demanding to know where their schools and roads are – where is what you promised? I guess all politicians want to be re-elected and if in a particular community, they feel that logging and woodcraft industries could bring in money, they will want to start cutting down forest. Will the politicians have the courage to say no, the environment is more important? That is why there is such a powerful need for our small academia to develop indicators that will be able to explain and give politicians the strength and the justification to make these decisions. At the same time, we need to be able to educate the people, to say, look, how good it is to live in a forested village. If you move to the city it will not be so good. In fact, the initial findings from the CBS surveys have already proved that. If you go by the GNH indicators, then, people in rural areas are better off. They have greater community vitality, they have a healthier culture and environment, and everything is less diluted. Thimphu is the opposite. It is as if we are trying to be a little Bangkok. So, GNH would say that the rural place is much better off. But if you ask the people there you will find that every farmer will want to come and live in town and have the bright lights. So, we are already losing GNH from that point of view and this is going to go on.

RM: It makes you wonder if people have to experience the problems associated with dislocation personally before it actually sinks in as a problematic reality. After all, there is more than enough evidence to show that it happens elsewhere.

KD: This has been my fear for a long time now - that human beings go through this cycle where we have to lose it before

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we appreciate it. Then it is too late. You cut down all of your forests and only then do you realise what you have lost.

RM: So, do you feel confident about the ability of GNH to become strong enough to help avoid this common pattern?

KD: At this stage, I would say that I really feel the urgency and the concern more than confidence. Yes we are a Shangri-la. Yes we are unique Bhutanese. Yes we are a relatively enlightened Buddhist population in the exotic Himalayas but actually, we are human and we are prone to the same temptations that everyone else is. That is why I have such a strong concern.

RM: It may be a very powerful notion though in the sense that if outsiders begin to see GNH and what it stands for as a positive aspect of Bhutanese identity, it might become something that is adopted more rigorously in response to that outside validation.

KD: That is a very real dynamic. I believe that we have had enlightened leadership and that we have the advantage of seeing the mistakes made elsewhere but it is the feedback that is critical. Why is Bhutan 72% forest? It is feedback. The control of tourism has also helped in this regard. I am a backpacker at heart but I realise that by keeping mass tourism out we tend to get a certain age of tourist, a certain section of the world society who appreciate the environment and the culture and who say 'this is beautiful, it is wonderful, do not lose these good things like we have lost ours'. So that has been a very good feedback. In many places, if you talk about indigenous culture, it is in a museum somewhere but in Bhutan it is a living culture. When someone like yourself comes and tells us this is fantastic, it helps us appreciate what we have. I believe that this kind of appreciation is intuitive in a way but you need that encouragement and feedback to really appreciate what you have. I was at the Smithsonian festival in July and to be walking down a

Washington street in a gho brings a lot of attention. People are interested and want to know where you are from. So, I think that good feedback for being ourselves has really helped Bhutan preserve its culture. Bhutan understands that it is special in part because the world has told us we are special.

RM: And on the other side of that dynamic, of course, is not only what comes into the country in terms of encouragement and feedback but what goes out of Bhutan in terms of a developmental philosophy that could be very influential elsewhere. I was talking to someone recently who said to me that it might be debatable as to whether Bhutan would be able to maintain its steady course but that the wonderful thing about it was that GNH would spread outwards regardless to fertilise the rest of the world's thinking and it really seems to be doing this. The parallel that was suggested was with Mahayana Buddhism's spread out of Tibet after it was invaded. As it was erased as the dominant functioning culture of Tibet, it fertilised the rest of the world's consciousness to a quite remarkable degree. Do you see the spread of GNH being a similarly on-going and important influence on global consciousness?

KD: Yes in the sense that it is already a reminder to the world that material development is not enough. That is inadequate from a happiness perspective. Bhutan is not in a position to teach the world values. I think the best solution would be to make the GNH approach work here. All of the attention that is coming from outside makes us realise that it must work here. If GNH can be made to work in Bhutanese society, the rest of the world will automatically learn from it. It is not that we are going out there to preach – that would be completely the wrong approach. We cannot do that but it is very, very important to make it work here.