

Dasho Neten Zangmo

RM: I wonder if I could start by asking you how you think GNH is advancing in Bhutan at the moment.

DNZ: I am quite positive in the sense that GNH has been there since the 1970s. But through the 1980s, there were little talk of Gross National Happiness. Even in our five year plans and in our policy documents, there was no reflection of the philosophy at all. But in the late 80s, people gradually started talking about it more, in small groups and in public institutions and then in the 90s, it became known in international circles. Then, of course, everybody started talking about GNH and it has been a very positive trend but now we have to move away from this stage of talking. Whether it be in the schools, or offices or at home, we have done enough talking and now we have to start putting things into action. There are encouraging signs, like the renaming of the Planning Commission as the Gross National Happiness Commission which says a lot about the political will to really integrate the philosophy and principles of GNH into our development plans and policies. As the country that began talking of GNH, many people both here and in the world at large are now looking to Bhutan to lead the way. I think that all of these things are positive signs though we need to do more.

RM: Has the ideal of GNH been widely disseminated within the Bhutanese society? In the rural regions for example, are people generally aware of what GNH is and what it entails?

DNZ: People are generally aware of GNH and they hear about it in speeches and so on, but how they really conceptualise it,

I don't know. It gets mentioned loosely but whether people really ask 'What does it mean for me, for my community, for my family or for the country as a whole' I do not know. From my point of view, I think it may not be there. Even I talk about GNH but if you asked me what I mean by it, my answers may be too shallow and too simplistic.

RM: Do you think that the understanding of what GNH implies is deep enough at the government level in terms of the day-to-day operation of departments? Is it a philosophy that really drives government policy at this point?

DNZ: I don't think so but I would like to give full credit to the Honourable Prime Minister who has been the true advocate of GNH - although its author was, of course, the Fourth King. When he was Bhutan's foreign minister, he used GNH as a tool of foreign policy and this is how the GNH concept has been brought to the international stage. It has given the world the opportunity to re-think development. So, full credit goes to our Prime Minister. Because of him, we consciously talk about GNH in our speeches and in cabinet meetings so that more decisions can be made that really are GNH responsive. But I think that it needs to be more clearly reflected in our policy documents, in our strategic planning and in how we function in a day-to-day manner. There are simple things, like for me as a public servant, how do I best serve my clients? How do I serve my fellow citizens? These questions could be reflected more explicitly in our documents and policies and at the moment, I think there is not enough there though now efforts are being put in. I do not think that we can use the excuse that we do not understand GNH because although we may not understand the deeper philosophy of GNH, as public servants the question is simple – how can I make my clients happy? If I am a utility officer for example, working on electricity or water supply, the question is how best can I best serve the people? How can I be most helpful? At a simple and mundane level, these are the questions that will help us achieve GNH and so it is about being responsible

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

as public servants and it is also about being compassionate. As Buddhists, we should not have a problem with that because, as Buddhists, we know that the happiness of the world comes from making other people happy and not from focusing upon yourself. This consciousness needs to be reflected more clearly in how we function in a day-to-day manner, how we do our work and formulate our policies. This, I think, is the real challenge because it can often conflict with personal and political agendas.

RM: That makes it rather complex because it would suggest that when you look at the ideals of service and compassion that GNH involves fundamental issues of ethics in the sense that it represents in some ways a force for increasingly responsible forms of social development. Is that how you would characterise it?

DNZ: Yes, absolutely. Working for the Anti-Corruption Commission, how can I not focus upon ethics? The work that we do here is very much about contributing to Gross National Happiness. It is all about equity; it is all about justice, so ethics is very much a part of GNH. It is about sharing and compassion and being responsible. It is about empathy and about discipline, so yes, it is all about ethics and values.

RM: Does that suggest then that some of the work of the Anti-Corruption Commission is about trying to ensure that a sense of Buddhist ethics does not become corrupted by incoming waves of materialism and modernity?

DNZ: Yes. As you would have seen coming up the stairs, we have on the wall the Eightfold Path of Lord Buddha and it is not just about Buddhism as the themes apply to every society and every community. Right livelihood, right speech and right thought - these are the basis of our humanity. As Buddhists, we all know this but we need to really internalise and practice these values.

RM: Do you think that these values are holding up well in the Bhutanese society as a whole?

DNZ: That is a difficult question. We certainly need to make them stronger if these values are to be maintained because they are permanent values. Whether we reach the development stage of the most economically developed countries in Europe or become poor like some African countries, these values need to remain to keep the society together - to maintain harmony and unity and to survive as a nation state. It is not just about being honest. It is a larger issue of survival because if there is no justice, no ethics and no equity, there will be disharmony in the family and disharmony in the community. So, I think we need to do more. Until now, we have held together as a society but we can see the erosion happening. Individual ministries need to do more in terms of the overall development of the individual and their character. It is very important in building a decent society and creating new leaders. In terms of our leaders, we have been so lucky and when you look at other countries, it is clear that often we do not appreciate what we have here. When I see what is happening in many of these countries, I thank God that I am Bhutanese and that we have had such strong leaders. But things are changing now with parliamentary democracy coming in and with leadership being handed over to the people and people having to be more responsible. As people realise their rights and their duties, we need the examples that people like our Kings have shown us because as a small country, we are vulnerable. We are very vulnerable.

RM: It is a very important point that to encourage the average individual to be responsible and to accept their duties, it really helps to have good role models and I agree that Bhutan has been very fortunate in having very talented and responsible leadership to this point. As Bhutan moves into a democratic period, what safeguards are in place to ensure

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

that future leaders maintain a high sense of ethical sensibility and do not become corrupted?

DNZ: His Majesty has always believed that to have a strong government, institutions and systems have to be created that ensure the rule of law. Institutions like the judiciary are so important to ensuring that the constitution is upheld. The people have to feel safe, so the judiciary and the Anti-Corruption Commission are very important and they have to be very strong and effective so that there can be real confidence in the government. In many parts of the world, people have very little confidence in their governments and we cannot allow this to happen in our country. We have always had confidence in the institution of the monarchy and now with democracy, there are other institutions to consider including civil society and the media. These are areas that are not fully mature yet and we need to build more capacity so that they can function positively and ethically. If these institutions are morally diseased, then there will obviously be problems.

RM: Indeed. In many democratic countries, there is a certain level of moral corruption and certainly a degree of cynicism amongst electorates as they begin to wonder whose interests their elected politicians are actually serving. You mentioned earlier the ideal of being of service to others and it seems to me that this is core to the philosophy that values democracy. Yet there is a very thin line between serving others and serving oneself as a politician and clearly a very slippery slope where the perks of office – the size of house, the salary, the car and so forth – can come to corrupt the ideal of genuine public service. Do you think that Bhutan is now seeing the thin end of that wedge and the possible movement away from a full commitment to serving others as the personal rewards of public office become more tempting in their own right?

DNZ: With democracy, we should become even more subservient to the people because this is what democracy

should be about—especially in a GNH state and in a Buddhist country. The principles of democracy can be upheld here and we can make it unique. In the rest of the world, there is a widespread mindset that politicians are corrupt but if we manage things well, we can show to the world that politics can be good and that politicians can be good human beings and that they are not all looking to siphon government funds or give kick-backs to their friends. We have that opportunity here in Bhutan. We have just begun and I hope and pray every day that we do not go the way many other countries have gone and can show that politics can be clean and that the values of democracy can be truly achieved in a GNH state. It is a wonderful opportunity. That is why the Honourable Prime Minister and the King are saying that the most important thing in the next five years is to create a really vibrant democracy. It is a very important responsibility and making it work involves everybody, not just the politicians but every citizen. We have to establish the foundations of this vibrant democracy - strong laws, strong institutions and most importantly, strong leaders to manage these institutions and systems.

RM: You mentioned that the next five years is critical. Do you see a possibility that if things are not consolidated through good, strong policies in this period, Bhutan might lose control of the development process?

DNZ: I fear that and I think that we are very vulnerable. What we do in the next few years is absolutely critical.

RM: Personally, I feel the same way and having experienced many of the dynamics of cultural change in the work I do, I think that the pace of change is often fundamentally disorienting for many societies as they are suddenly faced with major challenges through new media and alien ideals about what to aspire to in life. I am interested in this immediate period because I am beginning to wonder about a possible wavering of confidence in Bhutanese society

concerning the country's ability to be genuinely different. Do you see the clarifying influence of Buddhism as being an essential component in building the sort of responsible economy and democracy that is required to meet the goals of GNH?

DNZ: Well I am not an authority on Buddhism but when you look at the policies surrounding GNH, it is very much based on Buddhist values and you can see it even in simple things like communities not wishing to spoil their forests or mountains because they believe they are sacred. These are quite prominent beliefs but if we do not make conscious efforts to strengthen these beliefs, they can be easily eroded. For example, at one of our meetings someone talked about her experiences in Ethiopia before the interventions of NGOs and other institutions and spoke of how traditional communities that were strong and happy were completely broken by the introduction of foreign value systems. It produced disharmony and distrust and this distrust is the worst thing that can happen to a society, this spreading sense of distrust. So, I think we need to be aware of this potential and make conscious efforts to institutionalise and spread the positive values we have at all levels. If we do not do this, I don't think we will be able to achieve what we want to achieve with GNH. This is a real danger and so it is a critical area that we need to focus on in the next few years. We need to develop the wisdom to clearly see what our priorities are and to develop skilful methods that will allow us to pursue those. If we can do that, we should not have too many problems but it means that we need to spend time on these issues. It would be useful to have more roundtable meetings and in-depth discussions. In cabinet for example, we should invite people who are authorities on Buddhism and on GNH and others whose voices are important, to become more involved. If GNH is only understood in a shallow manner, then there is bound to be trouble.

RM: In that context then, what do you think are the most critical and urgent things that need to be done now to allow GNH to move Bhutanese society in the right direction.

DNZ: I think that we need those people who command respect, like spiritual masters, His Majesty the King and others to talk more about GNH and the need to act on it and not simply philosophise. Core secretaries and officials need to be called upon to reflect deeply on it and bring it into the workplace – it will not just happen by itself. Of course, the GNH Commission has been established and the Centre for Bhutan Studies has developed some indicators, so let's start using these to develop a real consciousness in our plans and policies. Right now, and I don't want to generalise too much, but I feel that this consciousness is not there and that we do not even remember GNH in our day-to-day work. But it has to be there, particularly for the senior bureaucrats like department secretaries and ministers. They move the government machinery and we need to appoint strong leaders in those positions who believe in GNH and so again, it comes back to leadership. Then of course, at the level of the cabinet, there needs to be strong advocacy. On corruption, they have made very useful statements that there will be zero tolerance of corruption. So, for me the most important thing right now is to appoint the right people as secretaries and ministers.

Education is also very important and although it is a long-term thing, we need to start now. I used to be in the Education Ministry, I was a teacher and I taught at the Polytechnic. When I was there, I had the privilege of having an audience with the Fourth King and I remember even now that His Majesty said that we can make mistakes in all sectors but we cannot afford to make mistakes in the education sector. If we make mistakes in that sector, we will lose a whole generation and that is too big a stake. So, we need to work immediately in the Education Ministry to look at the curriculum, at the teacher-training programme, at the sorts of people we have as teachers, because they are the

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

builders of future citizens and future society. So, these are the main things for me - education, appointing sound leaders and using the information we already have. We now have a lot of information from surveys, for example the surveys that we have conducted on corruption, so there is enough data, ample data and we do not have to wait for more before we begin to act. All the more so because we are a small nation and especially now, as other countries are asking what are we doing to take GNH forward.

RM: Those all seem like very practical and important interventions, and almost everyone that I have spoken to in the course of these dialogues has mentioned education and the need for a good values education in particular as being critically important. Do you think that there is a possibility that the curriculum as it currently stands has been overly influenced by westernised standards and the encouragement to conform to values of individual achievement, competitiveness and abstract intellectualisation?

DNZ: Absolutely. There has been a new approach to primary education which we imported from England and many people say that has pulled down the quality of our education. But, of course, there are many other factors involved. The policy statements about providing wholesome education for our kids are there. If we are serious, lets do something about it. In terms of operational units and how they are working on this, it is not convincing. The policy statements are different to what is happening in the field – they do not match. Education is so important and, of course, it has been a focus for the government and I am glad that now the fifth King has created a Royal Education Commission which is seeking experiences from other countries where a real conscious effort is being made to address the overall development of the child. This might involve creative arts, dance, yoga, meditation and so on. Some of these programmes are wonderful.

RM: That is very interesting and one of the things that I have found as an educator working overseas is that once a society gets to the point of losing a clear articulation of its basic values, it becomes very difficult to introduce values education and it is often resisted quite vigorously. People feel it implies an illegitimate moralising and a compromising of the individuals' right to interpret the world as they freely choose to. But I do feel that it is very important to have a component of values education in the curriculum. Do you think that there would be widespread acceptance of moving the curriculum towards more of an integrated blend of western intellectual development and Buddhist moral development at the same time?

DNZ: There should be and there is a lot of pressure towards improving the quality of education. Currently it aims more in the direction of a utilitarian notion of achieving employment. This is important as people have to be able to survive economically but if we take care of value development and character development I believe that employment needs and other social needs will be taken care of. I don't know how exactly but this is my gut belief. It is not that we do not have value education. I remember that as a student we had moral education and for me I was taught by nuns, Jesuits who were very clear on issues of right and wrong. I always tell people that I am so grateful to my teachers for being so strong. My parents gave birth to me but I am so grateful for my teachers who really brought students up to be good human beings with a strong sense of morality. So, values education is a core part of some curricula and for us in this office, we are saying that as a long-term measure, corruption has to be addressed by talking about corruption and ethics and by going back to the kids with this as a subject and as a vehicle to convey an understanding of right and wrong. We have not been able to do so much because we are very small and don't have many officers - which I don't want to use as an excuse. It is encouraging to see that the Education Commission is there to look at education policies but again, there is the need to translate these into practical action and I don't think that this

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

will be resisted. Every parent would like their child to get the best education in terms of their overall development. That is why so many people are taking their kids outside the country and it means that we are losing a lot of resources. So, many people agree that we should not be looking towards developing dirty industries like mining and manufacturing but clean industries like education. We have just the right environment to make education a business sector. In fact, if we have an excellent education sector, people will want to send their children here from India and other countries. It is so peaceful here; there are no bomb blasts or terrorist activities here. Knowledge based industry is so wonderful - particularly in terms of building human resource capacity and a genuinely thriving nation.

RM: That would suggest that with GNH in place as a remarkable development goal, every sector that contributes to it from government to education to business has to be equally unique and remarkable to reach that goal.

DNZ: Yes, and you will be sensing that I can get quite impatient about this. We have exactly the right environment as you know, just the right conditions. We have been commended for being environmentally pristine but we can also be morally pristine. When you look at the global corruption tables, you find that Bhutan is about forty-fifth or forty-sixth in terms of level of corruption but we have all the right conditions to be the cleanest in the world. We can beat Finland, Denmark and Norway and be the best. From the statements of our politicians and from His Majesty, we know that the political will is there and in a small country like ours, we can achieve things very quickly. It is not like Bangladesh or India where the mere thought of achieving such a goal is so intimidating. Here in Bhutan, government is small scale, the private sector is small and we are talking of a population of only a few hundred thousand.

RM: It is refreshing to hear you talk in that way because for most nation states, as they look to compare themselves with other nations, they think only in terms of beating them economically and so, to aspire to be the least corrupted nation is really inspiring.

DNZ: Yes and although we can always compare ourselves with say Bangladesh or Nepal, I always say no, that we cannot feel good about comparing ourselves with the worst criminals. We need to compare ourselves with the most non-corrupt nations and take pride in equalling them. So let's look to more challenging targets than the worst performers because we can always beat them. We can find happiness in a high degree of non-corruption. Our environment can be protected and the nation's fate will not be in the hands of a few people. We cannot have happiness without justice and harmony. We did a survey and in peoples' perception, the biggest form of corruption was nepotism which is not surprising in a small society and here people often try to seek refuge in the grey area between culture and corruption. If you do not help your nephew or your relatives, you will be ostracised by your family and so on. You will be seen as useless or hopeless. So some have been doing these things thinking that it is acceptable to help relatives get a position at the cost of someone else—but it is often a poor family's child at whose cost you are placing your relative. So, nepotism is a problem. But for me working in the Anti-Corruption Commission, there are not many grey areas. I may be speaking very simplistically but for me, it is very clear – I cannot help my nephew, so let my parents curse me. It is wrong ethically. So, I keep saying that we constantly have to ask ourselves consciously what is right and wrong and that we cannot hide in some false grey area between culture and corruption.

RM: That again emphasises the importance of personal responsibility in achieving GNH. As you look towards the

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

future, are you confident about the prospects of GNH delivering a more sustainable, just and responsible society?

DNZ: Yes. As a proud Bhutanese I cannot say that I am not confident, I have to be hopeful. I am a very sceptical person but still, I am optimistic because I feel that we have all the right conditions. We just need a few people that matter to really push us forward and we can show to the world how we can achieve Gross National Happiness in its true sense and that we are not just philosophising but actually practising happiness. At the personal level, I am very happy and at that level, GNH is with me every day. In fact, earlier today I was sitting with two of my colleagues and we were looking at targets for the next year and I was saying to them that for me, targets are not so important but what is more important is our work ethic and our disposition towards our visitors, simple things like that. For me, these are far more important. And it is human nature again, if you can make someone feel valued, it is nice, you know. I don't mean in terms of ego and so on, but if someone has come from a far away village who is absolutely lost, having come to Thimphu for the first time, we must find it in ourselves to help them. For me, these people are very important and these are the ones who need our attention. And it makes me so happy being able to help. To give someone a cup of tea and ask if they are ok-what does that cost you? For me, this is happiness. Even in the workplace you can make a difference. If you have strong convictions about GNH, you can help improve your colleagues. I think that we should see our workplaces as training grounds for increasing consciousness about GNH and about what is right and wrong. In this way, people can then really become role models for change in other organisations and in society as a whole. Then I think, in our own small ways, in our own humble ways, we can do a lot. At my own personal level, I am confident and convinced that I am practicing and contributing to Gross National Happiness.