

Namgay Zam

RM: I am very interested in talking with you about the perspective of youth in Bhutan. You have been involved in canvassing youth opinion and have been a representative to a number of meetings and conferences on GNH. Many of the people that I speak to about the impacts of incoming modernisation have deep concerns about its effects on young people and I would like to explore some of these with you if I could. I wonder if I could start by asking what Gross National Happiness means to you as a young Bhutanese woman?

NZ: As a young, working Bhutanese woman, it is good to have GNH as the development philosophy of my country. GNH is needed especially for a small country like Bhutan where we can't have hardcore economic development at the expense of people's lives, especially rural folks' lives. The majority of the population of Bhutan is agrarian and it is valuable to have a national philosophy which puts the happiness of people above economic values so that all individuals have a stake in the development of the country. GNH is very important to me, it's very close to my heart.

RM: Do you see it then as being a philosophy that primarily drives the country towards more equitable development?

NZ: Yes, in some ways. Everybody is talking about GNH these days and I think that young people are looking towards how GNH is going to be implemented because it cannot just be about philosophy. When we put GNH in the category of philosophy, it excludes people who feel they are not intellectual enough to talk about it or implement it in their lives. So, we should allow multiple interpretations of GNH as

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long as the goal is the same, which is happiness for all. Putting it that way, it can be understood by all people. It will lead to more equitable development because wherever there is selflessness, there can be equity. So, I can see that as a potential but before that happens, it is essential that people understand more about how GNH can be brought into their lives.

RM: Is GNH well understood amongst young Bhutanese people? Do they have a good understanding of what the term means and how it can be integrated into their lives?

NZ: They are familiar with the basic definition, the Four Pillars you know? Everybody knows about these and that GNH is about national happiness. However, I think that is all that most young people know about the concept. They do not go much further than the Four Pillars. They know it concerns happiness but this is often interpreted as individual happiness and this might be the downfall of GNH in Bhutan.

RM: It sounds as if it is understood at a general sort of free-floating ideal level but, that, maybe there is not too much understanding of what it means in actual day-to-day practice. A number of people I have spoken to have suggested that GNH is the continuation of an essential Buddhist philosophy but where this is put in terms that are easier to digest and understand and this would imply a very close connection to what you were saying about selflessness. Many people have concerns over changing values and a fear that perhaps the Buddhist foundations of Bhutanese culture are being diluted and becoming weaker in terms of directing people's daily life. Do you get the sense that among younger people, the Buddhist values are becoming less cherished?

NZ: I would like to point out the difference between Bhutanese values and Buddhist values. I think, with the younger people, say from eighteen to twenty-eight years old, and even those who are confessed atheists or agnostics or

those who dabble in a bit of Christianity, all have the Middle Way at their core. They have the path of moderation etched in their psyche. Too much of anything is bad and that comes up in our daily conversation, whatever it is we are doing. So, don't work like a dog the whole day, it is not good for your health and don't indulge yourself too much either as too much of anything is not good for you. This is one of the core parts of GNH, the Middle Path and it means everything in moderation and you can see this search for balance in the lives of young adults. But when it comes to Bhutanese values, these are more socio-cultural, like living with your parents, looking after elders, the importance of living in extended families and so on. These things are changing a lot as youth become more independent and want to live more private lives with whoever they want to settle down with instead, of opening up to include their old parents. Some young people now look at this as an intrusion and a burden. Until now, it has been natural to look after your parents. They looked after you and so, you should repay this gratitude when they get old. So, in this sense, yes, the traditional Bhutanese values are definitely taking the back seat as western culture moves in. Media has had a huge hand in really changing a lot of values in the urban areas – in Thimphu, Phuentsholing, and Paro. In rural Bhutan, it's almost as it was before, although many people there have been exposed to media too. But these values are all about how you put them into practice. People in urban areas have the access and ability to open up to more modern culture and make it their own which is not the case for people in rural Bhutan.

RM: In the change towards a more individual outlook, is it likely that those commitments toward extended family and of being of service to others are going to be compromised by a rising individualism or can they both be brought into balance?

NZ: They can be brought into balance but I see an immediate danger of the individual becoming most important and I think

this is rapidly increasing. I will give you a workplace example. There are some people who think of themselves before they think of their workplace and they wonder 'what can I get out of this? Can I get extra benefits? They don't think about how they can best benefit their organisation or the ministry they are working for or how they can be of service and real help to the people of Bhutan. That is very little now, maybe 5% think that way, the other 95% would wonder what they could get out of a job. Can I get training, can I get promoted, if not, why should I work hard? I see this everywhere and it is very disillusioning for me. I have always tried to put others before me, maybe because I was raised by my grandmother and she indoctrinated me into that system of trying to be selfless. But it is human nature to think in terms of the survival of the fittest and these days, it is in most people's minds to have the best that they think they deserve. But I think that growing up in Bhutan and being Bhutanese helps in seeing that your happiness and your wellbeing depends upon other people and external factors as well. So, if we think in terms like that, then what others get is really not that important after all. So, let them have it, let them be happy. The question for me is how can I make a difference but this really depends on the mindset and that depends on a lot of things including what media you are exposed to, what part of the country you grew up in, what kind of family you have and so on.

RM: Certainly, as I view the impacts of media as it moves into Bhutan, I see changes that are the common ones you see anywhere when globalisation arrives. The rise of self-concern, the increase in competitive attitudes and I am wondering about how in practical terms, GNH can be translated into policies and practices that would allow the worst excesses of these attitudes to be avoided.

NZ: A few of us used to meet regularly at the Centre for Bhutan Studies to talk about how GNH could be used in workplaces and how it can be implemented in general but it is hard to say how practical it could be in this day and age. One

of the first suggestions to come up was the promotion of selflessness. When a person is 5 or 6 years old and still growing then, at that stage, it is easy to change a person and there are ways and means of having them become more selfless. But when one is 18, 19 and working, you have a mind of your own and it is not easy to ask people to become selfless especially if they have a family to support or ambitions. You can't easily ask people to give up their dreams for the wellbeing of the nation or for GNH. So, I think that the goal of happiness for everyone has to be the same but the way we get there, the means, may have to change through time. So we are talking about an adaptive approach to GNH which is why it is important to have multiple interpretations of GNH and how to get there.

So, where I work at KUZU FM, we have to work for the happiness of others but in a way that does not totally negate the self so that you get nothing from it. I think that, in this day and age in Bhutan, GNH is all about striking a balance so that both society and the individual benefit from the work they do.

RM: It is interesting what you say about different means of achieving the goal of happiness because it seems to me that in many traditionally religious societies, much of the influence on young people and of shaping the next generation comes from a fairly authoritarian base. You are expected to behave in particular ways, expected to play a role in supporting the extended family, you should dress like this and not like that and so on. As everyone in society contacts a different interpretation of what is possible in life, freedom becomes a principal value and so it is perhaps inevitable that people begin to see much of tradition as overbearing and imposing. I would think then that much of the challenge for Bhutan is how to get people and especially young people to internalise those values out of free choice and not because it is forced upon them. But that would imply that there has to be some counterbalancing force to the materialism and

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competitiveness that are pushed through the media. Is there much in the formal education system in Bhutan that can act as such a meaningful counterforce?

NZ: In the present education system, I do not really see any. In our own Dzongkha language and in Bhutanese literature, I think that there are some good moral values that come across to students. It is very traditional and the stories have been passed down through the centuries and through the generations. There I see moral values but in the education system itself, not so much. Most of our textbooks come from India or outside the country. So, it is not very relevant to the local scene. There are some efforts now to localise education and put more Buddhist values into what children are learning at school. So, maybe there is more of a sense that students should be allowed more choice. From my perspective, you have the literature from outside Bhutan and the literature from inside and students should be allowed to talk about what values are there and which ones are best. I don't think it is useful to try and come out with in-your-face moral values. Some of the books that I have seen for younger students do not really have very explicit value judgements but are designed to make you think and wonder 'Is that guy really the good guy, and is that one really the bad guy?' It allows more questioning. If there is more of this, then Bhutanese students could have a greater ability to think about values and see the point of GNH. So, I feel there is a need to have GNH in the curriculum, not in the form of teaching about the Four Pillars and the nine domains but in the sense of more discussions of culture, tradition, Bhutanese values, etc. and through this, I can see the younger generation growing into very responsible people.

RM: In the realities of culture and culture change, many of these values are passed down through the family and I wonder about the integrity of the family unit, particularly given some of your earlier observations. Do you sense

increasing tensions between young people and their elders as expectations of life change?

NZ: Yes. Sometimes it seems like a relationship of tensions and again it is most obvious in urban Bhutan especially in Thimphu. Sometimes the parents benefit from this and sometimes the youth benefit from these cultural changes. One very disturbing phenomenon that I see is educated parents not opening up to the idea that their children might want to do something with their lives that will make them happy. I can understand the concerns because obviously parents always want security for their children but a lot of parents are not pro-media and so even if their children, as young adults, want to join the media, they are not allowed to and they end up agreeing to do something else just to make their parents happy. You see the tension. As young people are forced to do something they do not want, they cannot put in the requisite effort to succeed at the highest level. At the end of the day, I am not sure if this even helps the parents and ultimately it sets in motion a vicious cycle of frustration and tension in which there can be no winner. The divorce rate is increasing. Almost every other person I meet in my age group now has divorced parents or parents who have remarried. The sanctimony of marriage was there before but now if you do not like the person, then you can just get divorced and find someone else. This is where individualism really comes into play, where you put yourself and your own happiness first and are less concerned with the consequences - how will the children, or the husband or the wife be effected? In previous times the question was how can I make my family work, what can I do that would make my children or my husband or my wife really happy? You got married for life and if there were problems, you worked on them. Now the individual has assumed central stage, the 'I' has become very important and more and more individual decisions are being made that affect the community at large and which are often detrimental.

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RM: In the middle of all of these changing expectations amongst families and community members, there must be a lot of pressure on young people as they have to decide where their allegiances lie – to themselves, to their parents, to society as a whole? Do you get the sense that many young people are falling through the cracks and suffering as a result of these tensions and shifts in society?

NZ: The youth that stand out unfortunately in this sense are the ones that come from broken homes. They can be hurt a lot and are the ones most likely to turn to drugs and alcohol. They end up doing badly at school which of course only fuels the tension at home. Instead of them being supported or treated with understanding, they are criminalised. It is surprising because we are a Buddhist country and are meant to look at the root cause of any problem and not at the superficial level. However, almost everyone here seems to look at it superficially. The thinking is 'lets send them to some centre' and not that perhaps we should ask them why they are having these problems and how can we really help. I see a lot of youth not getting to where they would want to be in life because of negligent and selfish parents. A lot of people who fall through the cracks do so because of negligent parents, even if it is not in obvious ways like drug addiction or alcohol abuse but depression. There seems to be a lot of depressed young people in Bhutan which is surprising. I mean I can understand why many youth would be depressed in a big society like India where there is so much pressure to perform. But Bhutan is comparatively more laid-back. When young kids are pressurised into doing things that they do not want, it can lead to depression and even though suicide rates are not very high at the moment, it is depressing to think that people are contemplating it at all.

I think that before, when the focus was not so much on the individual, you did not have that sense of 'oh my God, I am such a worthless human being, what can I contribute?' Before, problems were shared with your family while now you

have to bear everything yourself. When problems were shared, the pain was tolerable. There were always people one could turn to. There are solutions but I think that parents need to understand these because many of the problems faced by youth come from the parents' selfishness.

RM: The sense of failure you mentioned must in part be compounded by comparisons with those who seem more successful and who have more. It is one of the problems of media that it is designed to keep us feeling dissatisfied with what we have so that we consume more in what is often a vain search for happiness. Are those ideals of achieving a sense of self-worth through what you consume rising visibly to you amongst Bhutanese youth in the sense that material things - the cell phone you use, or the clothes you wear - are becoming an important measure of success. Is that becoming a bigger part of Bhutanese society?

NZ: It is. How can it not be when we are being bombarded by the media, for up to eight hours a day with no control over it? Young people want good paying jobs that will allow them access to high tech phones, good vehicles, good clothes, and good places to live. So, I see that it has become very important to be a symbol of success and to have the symbols of success. Even rural Bhutan is affected by this - they are not untouched by it. People from the villages come to town to sell goods and they see the vehicles, the good clothes, shoes and so on. Even the most rural people like the Layaps say they are now dissatisfied with the traditional clothes they wear because they think they are very rustic and rough compared to the cotton kiras we wear in the town. It's really sad. Things are changing and I think this is where the implementation of GNH is very important but very difficult

I can count the youth I know for whom these things are not important on my fingers. The strange thing is that they are looked upon as eccentric and a little strange and not really

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part of the gang. For the rest, clothes, mobile phones and vehicles are very important.

Parents are involved in this too, of course. And then you can see sibling rivalry rising. If a sibling is in the civil service, then they are often highly respected because they have a secure job and often have more perks than someone working for a private company. Let me give you a very cultural example. Every Bhutanese household has the *lochoe* or *choko* which is a very traditional festival where every year, we go to our home region and perform a ritual. Now, there is the pressure to see who can contribute most to this event. Parents think that if you earn more you can contribute more. It is subtle right now but you can see it affecting people as they think 'how can I get a job that pays more so that I contribute more to this *loche*?' It's amazing how much money people give and it is funny because it is meant to be for spiritual benefit but then you have the economy involved. So, if it can happen at that level, just imagine how much more it is happening at all other levels.

RM: That is a fascinating example of a sort of balancing act between getting more and giving more. I am interested in what you were saying about the impacts of change on rural people because I have heard it said that many who exist outside of the bright lights feel a strong draw towards being a part of the modern action. In your work, have you found that this is creating problems back in the villages in terms of a lack of commitment to village life and a desire to separate from it as soon as possible?

NZ: Yes we have a lot of youth opting for urban life. It has to do with the education system and I would blame that system entirely. The education system does not promote youth to become agricultural farmers, it educates them to become civil servants. I think this is where the problem lies. It is not a system that encourages young adults to work in different fields. It doesn't make you proud to be a farmer and to find

success at that. The system does make it seem valid – it is a rustic lifestyle, you can only make so much money, you can only do so much, full stop. So if we open up avenues and promote an agrarian lifestyle it would be helpful. I mean who are we fooling? Bhutanese society is over 70% agrarian. A lot of the money we make is based on agriculture and if everyone is encouraged to abandon farming and lead an urban lifestyle, who is going to feed us? It is very important to have educated farmers as you have all over the world. You can make money in agriculture and this is another area where I think we could really implement GNH so that we can support and enable our farmers and our villages to become successful and prosperous. Then it can become an option for young people who are graduating. That way we can have a back-flow of educated people into the rural system that could benefit the whole country. It could be a very practical application. But because that option is not available at the moment, a lot of young people come here after class twelve. We have this problem because a lot of the families in Bhutan cannot afford to send their kids out of the country to finish college. We only have two universities here but the competition is really high and rural youth are disadvantaged. We should think about those who do not get through. These people still want good jobs but there are not enough of these and the ones that are available, often, undermine their self-respect. Then you have alcohol problems and other health issues that become a burden to the health ministry and, in turn, to the government of Bhutan. And of course there are the women and the parents who are left behind in the villages as the men from there come looking for work. It is really quite sad as some cannot find any work that pays well. That ultimately increases criminal activities. This is not so bad as to involve murder and looting, but not paying the landlord or employees are also just as bad. Many of these people can not really go back to the villages because they came here to make money and when they can not, it leads to depression, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidal thoughts.

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RM: What you have just been saying reinforces the importance of what has been proposed in terms of moving as much development out to the villages as possible to try and stem the flow of young people into urban areas. Transport and electricity infrastructure has of course been a part of this but it seems that Bhutan is presently at a very delicate point of development and that perhaps the next five to ten years represent a critical window for GNH to become properly operationalised if the changes are not to become so profound that it will be difficult to avoid the development path that most disadvantaged countries find themselves on. As a young person looking towards the future and thinking of how Bhutan might be, are you optimistic that GNH will reach a point where it can create a real resilience within the population that will allow a good balance of collective happiness with individual satisfaction?

NZ: The more I discover about my country, the less optimistic I become but not to the point that I have become a pessimist. I think that I am more of a realist now. It all depends on how successfully we can operationalise and implement GNH and how successfully we can bring the growing youth population of Bhutan into the system of GNH. If we fail there, I see a very bleak future for Bhutan. We will not get anywhere economically and we will not get anywhere environmentally. We will end up becoming a poverty-stricken and unhappy people. We will become a corrupted society. I think that with the coming in of democracy, you have the promotion of the individual and if we look around the world, we can see that it has not really been so successful. Along with the right to vote for the government, people often feel that they have the right to demand. Because of that, I think, a lot of youth in my age group see that something could go wrong down the line. But we have GNH, and thank goodness for that. It is now all about how GNH is taught to the youth of Bhutan and if it can be made loveable to all instead of just being this intellectual philosophy that you need to respect and revere, it can be celebrated and implemented. Without this, Bhutan is not going to get anywhere.

