

## **Lyonchhen Jigmi Y Thinley**

RM: I wonder if we might begin by looking at the roots of GNH and where the philosophy came from.

JYT: I was with His Majesty the King on the day of his coronation in 1974. He had ascended to the throne just two years earlier following a two year period of mourning for the previous king who passed away in 1972. Now I think that it was barely months thereafter that I heard him mention the term Gross National Happiness for the first time so, we are going back more than thirty years. The idea was picked up by the Financial Times of London under the headline ‘Gross National Happiness is More Important than Gross National Product’. This is what has always been at the back of our minds, that human happiness is more important than economic growth. So since that time, in all our development activities, whatever strategies we came up with, any kind of policy, any kind of development, there has always been the question of whether they would really promote the happiness of the people.. However, at the start, we did not have the benefit of critical analytical frameworks to assess whether the things we did actually increased happiness as we hoped and if they did, to what extent. We did not have the benefit of that and realising this we began to develop happiness metrics which would allow us to accurately evaluate our activities in terms of the happiness they generated.

Personally, I resisted the development of quantitative indicators and this whole approach until the philosophy of GNH crossed the borders of Bhutan for the first time in 1998 when Bhutan finally overcame its inhibition to speak about GNH abroad. It was at the Asia-Pacific Millennium meeting

sponsored by the UNDP in Seoul, South Korea. The UNDP had invited His Majesty, the King to speak on happiness, but his Majesty does not do lectures. As I was Prime Minister at the time, I was designated to go and speak on the subject and it was so very well received. I remember going to this ministerial meeting and being worried that GNH would not be taken seriously so I was really taken by surprise. The UNDP put the speech up on their website and it was accessed worldwide. It was thereafter that the world really started talking about it. In part, I think the timing was very good, being close to the beginning of a new millennium and with people thinking a bit more expansively and reflectively. We were in a more contemplative mood in the sense of reflecting on what humanity had really achieved over the last century and equally, on what we had lost. The feeling for many at the time was that we may have lost more than we have gained and certainly that we have suffered a significant spiritual impoverishment in the midst of all the amazing material wealth we have accumulated. We were also facing the serious realisation of what we are now leaving the next generation in terms of a deteriorating climate and structural injustices.

So, as GNH moved out of Bhutan, we found that having talked about following this path, we could not be resistant to the pressures for its quantification. And so the question of whether we should develop indicators and of what kind, became more and more relevant. In many of my initial statements, I spoke very strongly against it because developing indicators raises a whole lot of questions and the possibility of succumbing to a materialist view of what constitutes value. There are many difficult questions about what is really valuable and what you can actually measure. There is also the danger that only those which can be made measurable will be pursued while everything else will be rendered inconsequential. This is one way that material economy and its ideals can come to dominate our thinking. There has been a fear then that as we move towards measurement, we might end up measuring only those aspects of happiness that make themselves quantitatively available.

## *Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness*

There are, however, many other elements of happiness of which we are not so fully conscious. You can easily lose an awareness of the whole when you try to break it up into too many measurable components.

RM: What sort of elements are you thinking of?

JYT: Well, I won't really venture too far into those as that is to contradict the very point I am making. There is a feeling that we might develop a set of indicators measuring those things that we know lead to greater happiness but still leave out those that might be even more vital. That I think is the biggest danger as we can quickly reach a point of thinking people are not happy because there is too little on this or that measure and then our policies try to make people happy by giving them a little more of this and that.

RM: I agree entirely. It is interesting to hear you talk of the multi-dimensional aspects of happiness because when I think of the understanding of happiness, I have come to in the context of Bhutan. I am aware that it is much more involved and subtle than the more fleeting feel-good understanding of happiness in the West. Do you think that there is a danger that Gross National Happiness might be seen only superficially by those both outside and inside Bhutan who want to see happiness as representing just personal good feeling?

JYT: Yes there is a danger of that and this is why I think it is very important to have discourse, a demystifying discourse at the global level that can lead to a holistic and complete understanding of happiness and its spiritual, ethical and emotional aspects. And the good thing about the present globalised world is that it should be quite possible to challenge the spread of this narrow interpretation of happiness.

RM: When I look at the way happiness has been interpreted in the West, I notice a historical transformation away from moral principles and qualitative improvement.

JYT: This has long been the case in the West. The standard tends to be if something makes you happy, just do it. It has little to do with questions of whether your doing something will make other people around you happy or not. This is related to me often being asked why we adopted Gross National Happiness and not Gross National Contentment in a Buddhist sense. I have always said that contentment is too passive a state of being. You can be content with everything going badly around you and can come to accept it. You would then have no inclination to try and change conditions around you for the better. But happiness is proactive. It requires your active understanding that it cannot exist without being shared. Happiness is not a state of being that one can achieve privately or personally without others sharing it. When you are contributing to others happiness, you know that you are improving your own chances of happiness and to that extent you become socially responsible and valuable as a member of the community and society. Happiness in this context becomes much more constructive, creative and proactive. So, happiness is a compassionate state of being. It imposes upon you the responsibility to contribute to others wellbeing. I hope then that it will never, never be narrowed down to that level of interpretation.

RM: It's a tempting thing to do though in the culture of the West which is very much dominated by a competitive and individualistic worldview. As Minister of Culture in Bhutan, how do you view the role of Bhutanese culture in terms of its ability to protect that multifaceted view of GNH as it moves into the future? Is the Buddhist grounding of Bhutanese culture strong enough to withstand the dissolving tendencies of modern media and growing consumer appetites?

## *Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness*

JYT: Well, first of all, I have to say that there are of course good Buddhists and not so good Buddhists in Bhutan. As the Minister for Culture, I do worry increasingly over the influence of media although I would also like to think that we have the capacity to resist it. I worry that we all seem to be playing a lesser role - at the level of the state, the clergy and at the level of being elder siblings - in consciously transferring values into the hearts of our young people. Just to give you an example, I often go to primary schools and often ask children what they want to do when they grow up. They will answer 'I want to be a doctor, an engineer, a government worker' and so forth. But when you ask them why they want to become these things, they have trouble understanding and answering the question. I have to tell them that if we had been asked that same question when we were their age, I and my whole generation would have said we wanted, above all, to be able to repay our debts. This does not mean simply material debt, but much more - to repay our debts of gratitude to parents and family and to the land and so on. Every single one of us would have said that. That is the kind of value erosion that I see with my own eyes - the self has become more and more important. If you are able to become mature and think about serving your friends and repaying your parents, you become part of a family that genuinely cares about you and your happiness and they will help you find it. The same principle works also at the level of community and of society. If you are not engaged with those around you, you cannot become compassionate and you cannot be happy. So, I tell these children before I go that there is one thing I want them to do and that is to show their parents respect when they get back home. It does not matter if they are in the most menial of jobs, use honorific language and show them respect. When I am travelling, I always ask people to tell the old bedtime stories to their children because these continue to teach good Buddhist values. The new sets of values that we are learning through television are not Bhutanese, they are not Buddhist values, so it is worrying.

RM: When I listen to you speak of repaying debts and honouring parents it seems to represent a basic appreciation of the opportunities you have in life. I find it interesting because in English, the word appreciate has the same root origin as happiness, both coming from the Greek 'hap' meaning luck or good fortune. So, at its root happiness involves cultivating an appreciation of the world around us and a sense of being blessed. One of the worries that I have when I look at culture change around the world as traditional societies come in contact with consumerism, is the implantation of feelings of dissatisfaction and the cultivation of a feeling whereby we do not appreciate what we have or feel blessed. Rather, we become frustrated by unhappy longings and a sense of not having what it takes to be happy.

JYT: That's very true, how aptly you put it.

RM: And, of course, it is such a difficult dynamic to challenge. When we talk about the importance of parents and elders passing on values to the next generation and keeping cultural aspirations alive I am reminded that in much of today's so-called 'developed world', the major stories are the ones cultivated and portrayed through television and those stories have embedded messages. I was listening to a Thai story teller yesterday and she was talking about Thai children and the stories they know. These are now mainly imported ones - the Disney classics of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty and other Western stories that seem to have taken the place of the older, more grounding cultural tales that are so important in maintaining culture.

JYT: You know I was visiting Kuwait many years ago as the Foreign Minister and the Deputy Foreign Minister took care of me. He told me that even Kuwaiti children do not grow up to be Kuwaiti in the main but are becoming more like Sri Lankans and Filipinos and are taking on their stories and values. Many Kuwaitis do not have time for their families and so they are raised by the Filipino maids or the Sri Lankan

## *Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness*

nurses and their stories and recollections are all about those places. So, everywhere there seems to be this worry about what things might be like in the future as a result of changing cultural values.

RM: This would be particularly powerful in situations where children are made to feel that they are not a full and valued part of the family. But if there is one thing that really impressed me and stays with me from my visits to the more rural areas in Bhutan, it is the obvious valuing and respect for children. There is a sense of inclusion in both the family and the community that from a Western point of view is quite remarkable. But then at the same time, I see in the background, as I see in many cultures where I do my work, this slow erosion of the cultural fabric. When we lose it, we can appreciate it in others and see the fulfilment and happiness that comes from it. Yet it is almost as if we have to see the grass as being always greener on the other side. If we are in a moral community, closely involved in the life of a close-knit family, we long for independence. If we are independent we long for connection and inclusion in family and community. I think perhaps that we reach an important point where people have to decide to what extent they want to be part of continuing tradition or 'move on' to adopt new ways of thinking, valuing and inter-relating. Older people tend to be rather set in their ways and so shifting values usually come from young people abandoning traditional practices and aspirations. What their parents and elders represent becomes the past - something boring and old hat. If that is true, how can a government help guide people through these difficult personal challenges and towards developing a more inclusive and healthy identity rather than veering towards an unhealthy materially fixated one?

JYT: That too is something that I am concerned about. There are certain trends that beg for our intervention... These kinds of problems exist more in the urban setting and there seems to be a real need for education and orientation for the

parents. The urban parent does not know how to parent so well and is not so supported by the community. We need to retrain ourselves but I do not know how we go about this– we need help in this. It is quite possible though that we might be able to find the wisdom within our own society to come up with the best solution. When it comes to the schools, it should not be up to only one or two counsellors in the school but every teacher having that role, to impart decent values. There is a hidden curriculum in teaching, so a maths teacher is not just teaching maths but is passing on other embedded values. Positive values can be passed on in ways that are quite engaging for young people, ways that are exciting and interesting enough to be involving. And then there is the state, but state involvement should always be the last resort, I think, in any situation.

RM: That sounds very wise. One of the things I was struck by last time I was in Thimphu was spending a lot of time around young people and hearing them refer to GNH as Gross National Harassment, as if it were an unfair imposition on their freedom by the government.

JYT: Do you know where this came from? It was first raised by one of our former Prime Ministers. He wrote an article in the Bhutan Observer using that phrase. What represents order or what represents the system is what youth always wants to rebel against. So, there are certainly challenges of that kind.

RM: Related to this is what I see as a fairly tragic division of society in so-called developed countries into age cohorts where the elderly spend time primarily with the elderly, the middle-aged socialise mainly with the middle aged and youth spend time only with themselves. One of the pervasive aspects of imported culture is its fixation with youthfulness and its rejection of parental authority and older people in general. Every part of this social fracturing has been associated with significant unhappiness so I think support for

## *Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness*

family structures is enormously important. How much is this impacted by changes in Bhutan, by the movement of people from the country to the towns for instance?

JYT: This is involved in the GNH policy. In many of my statements, I stress the importance of extended family networks and I will continue to work on this and do whatever I can to build on it. Urban drift is not a major problem in this sense although it is there. But you know everywhere I go, there are so many happy things that I see. If you go to any celebration or event, or to any community affair, what you will see is multi-generational integrity. You see great-grandmothers and grandfathers and parents and children all together. I get to see this all of the time and it makes me very happy to see that it is very much alive. It is alive to the extent that we do not have to spend time rebuilding this integrity of community and family. What we have to do is allow people and communities to work on it and make it sustainable. I would like, in fact, to start a Centre for Happiness in Bhutan. In that Centre, we will have children from high schools, grade 8, grade 10, grade 12. It should be about finding a frugal way of life that is secure and affordable.

Without that, we do have some urban drift and it is manifested in Thimphu where the population is growing every year by between 10 and 15 percent so it is there, but not as a major problem in the sense that there is no major slum development. In the meanwhile, our policy has always been to stem this tide in various ways and mainly by taking opportunities to the rural areas. One of the things that we want to do is to design interventions that really offer the same opportunities available to the average citizen in the towns to those in the rural provinces. The reason for this, and I do not know if you find it laughable, is that I am completely convinced that happiness can be more easily obtained in a rural setting. In fact, the loss of happiness has much to do with the separation from ones roots. Aside from the physical aspects of actually separating oneself from familiar

surroundings, family, friends and so on, there is also an intuitive insecurity in urban life. Even if one feels they are materially better off in an urban setting, there is often a deep sense of insecurity. One can fail to realise it but in the subconscious, it is there. It is there nagging all of the time. If your salary stops or you lose your job, you lose your security. Fail to pay the rent on your luxurious apartment and you are out on the street. In the rural areas you have your land and you have your home. You have the security of your community bonds. Human relationships are much stronger and much more meaningful in the rural context. Our interdependence is so pronounced there. When I speak to rural meetings, I sometimes tell them that in New York there are people living in the same building who do not know each other, and they do not believe it. And if I tell them there are people living on the same floor of that building who don't know each other, they laugh. But as I tell them, this is happening in Thimphu now. The entire nature of our economy, our commerce, our industries need to be structured in a unique way in order to allow and enable rural life to continue. Does that sound naive to you?

RM: Not at all, I can easily relate to what you say. When individuals move into a more commercialised reality and the family fragments as the father goes out to work leaving the mother at home while the children go to school it illustrates to me at least, a very thin line that exists between individual empowerment and vulnerability. I am struck by your noting that much of the cultural life of Bhutan is thriving and does not need to be remade. Do you think that as GNH spreads beyond the boundaries of Bhutan, others too will be encouraged to think of rebuilding more healthy relationships with family, community and nature and that these might be able to cohere around notions of collective happiness?

JYT: This is the aim of talking about Gross National Happiness. I really feel that it is a very important mission that I am involved in and that Bhutan is involved in for the

## *Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness*

betterment of human society on a global level. Human happiness is important to all societies - rich and poor.

RM: As you look at the global situation and at the situation that Bhutan now finds itself in, particularly given her geographical position between India and China - both rapidly expanding and rapidly growing countries - I wonder what you think the prospects of GNH are in terms of its ability to foster a change towards a more just and sustainable global order? Do you think of it in these terms, or do you see it as an approach that is worth pursuing regardless of what its chances are?

JYT: I am hopeful and have never really despaired since the first time I went abroad carrying this message. In fact, each gathering has given me more confidence in the feeling that we are going to succeed - even as you say, with the re-ordering of the world. This is not because there is inherently more wisdom in this philosophy than others, but because it is the truth, a truth that is so very obvious. More and more people are coming to grips with the fact that our current way of life does not fit. It is not sustainable, it is not right and it does not give happiness. It is the hollowness of materialistic living that is dawning on many of us. We can see it here in Thailand where there are whole sections of society rebelling against globalisation. They are redeeming the Thai way of life and some of the initiatives being taken at the local level by local communities are remarkable. There are lots of people including city dwellers, bankers, lawyers and business people who have moved away from material concerns to pursue what is really sustainable - a way of life that is based upon sufficiency, community and interdependence in living. These are positive trends and signs that GNH will continue to advance and not fall by the wayside.