

Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi

RM: I wonder if we could begin by looking at GNH in the context of Buddhism in Bhutan because happiness is a very slippery concept and it has different connotations and meanings for different people. As I look at a Western understanding of happiness, I sense that it has moved towards being a rather superficial and highly personalised emotion. But I do not get the impression that this is what happiness means in a Buddhist framework. So, I wonder if I might ask you what your understanding of happiness would be from a Buddhist perspective.

KP: From the Buddhist perspective, happiness has many causes and conditions and these have to be in place if happiness is to spring forth. Happiness comes from the mind and not from external conditions. Objective conditions change through time but the mind is the original cause and its influence is dominant in the creation of happiness. That is why in order to have happiness, one has to analyse and study the causes in one's own mind and look inward to see how happiness originates from the mind and not from outside of the mind. Every Buddhist would agree that happiness comes from spiritual enhancement as the cause. It does not come from money or material things but from the nature of the mind and its reactions. So, the mind is the source of everything and it can be refined through meditation and other mindful practices. To understand happiness, then, we need to recognise the internal dynamics and this may take many lifetimes which is why we believe in reincarnation.

We can say that there are two kinds of happiness, one that is called conventional happiness, or temporary happiness and

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

another which is continual happiness. When we talk about conventional happiness, there are also two kinds, individual happiness and collective happiness both of which are relative and temporary which is why they fall under the heading of conventional happiness. When we study the mind we find that there are many obstacles to finding happiness which is why we categorise negative mental states and positive mental states. Happiness is a positive mental state which can be nourished by removing the influence of negative thoughts. This can lead to an ultimate happiness or enlightenment which is the real happiness we seek. GNH is not about this ultimate happiness but it is a positive state that should be developed through developing right will, right thoughts and right actions. If we use wrong will, wrong thoughts and wrong speech, then our actions will be contrary to happiness. This is why we have to act consistently and in a right way instead of only desiring or wishing for our own happiness while ignoring the happiness of others.

RM: In this transformation from a more conventional happiness towards a deeper form and ultimately into a state of enlightenment, would I be right in saying that the key movement involves undoing the restricting forces of egotism and the greed, hatred and ignorance that cause unhappiness?

KP: Yes, exactly.

RM: Given that, when you look at the changes that are happening in Bhutan at the moment, do you see these as posing a serious challenge to the process of releasing oneself from negative and egotistical mental states?

KP: Yes, because society is seeking more happiness by changing external conditions. But the perceiver can change how they see these external conditions and how they respond to them. In Bhutan, these conditions are really changing very fast but at the same time, in our spiritual methods,

happiness still comes from the mind. In Buddhism, we call this the happy path to the happy land. Even if I have negative emotions, problems and so on, I can practice dharma and have full confidence that I can find happiness even if I am very poor individually. So, these are the types of things that we have to develop in Bhutan, in the hearts of each and every citizen. But now with globalisation effecting Bhutanese people, and particularly youngsters, it may become more difficult for us to put efforts into acknowledging this happiness and bringing it out because people are being swallowed completely by sophisticated advertising and temptations without knowing that these are only temporary illusions - only temporary and disappointing elements that will not produce genuine solutions. This type of wisdom and insight has to be developed in each individual. For centuries the Buddhist community has played a central role in developing this wisdom – monks, gomchen, lamas and so on were very helpful in this. But now their influence is becoming weaker and a farmer or an economist cannot give these teachings.

When we talk about the collective happiness of a country, it is important to see how this relates to conditions also. If there is an absence of disease, then there can be happiness. Where there is an absence of poverty there can be happiness and where there is an absence of war there can also be happiness. This is why we Buddhists pray that this society be free from illness, poverty and war. Some people would say that praying is just wishing and that we have to put the wish into action. But we must begin by asking the cause of disease. We can build more hospitals but this will not remove illness if the cause involves an imbalance of emotions and negative mental states. Removing the real cause of disease can only come from a deep awareness of the mind. If we are ignorant of this, disease will always be there and poverty and war will always be there. So, it is really very important to educate and sensitise and develop mindfulness if happiness is to be found.

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

The cause of poverty according to Buddhism is greed. As long as there is greed in the mind, poverty will always be there. Even if I live in a diamond house I will still feel poor. We really need to develop a content mind free of greed, hatred and ignorance. If there is no contentment in a house, the children will not be happy, the parents will not be happy and the atmosphere will be tense and uncomfortable. These things come not from outer objective conditions but from the nature of the mind. This is why we have to understand what Buddhism has established for so many centuries. Before, this understanding was mainly in the monasteries but now this spirit has to come out into society more. Through GNH, through schools and colleges we need to work to refine the mind so that we have a choice in how to meet the future. If we do not have a clear perspective on the root causes of poverty, the causes of war and the causes of disease, we will think wrongly and find only a false kind of temporary happiness. I may be wrong but this is how I see things from a spiritual perspective.

RM: I cannot see how that could possibly be wrong. In the body of what you have been saying though, there are a number of subtle and very profound difficulties involved in guiding a society away from the problematic inner processes that keep us from developing a deeper happiness. I wonder about GNH being presented as it is—it almost makes it a desirable thing to greedily seek and there is always the danger that we might become overly grasping in our attempts to secure it. Yet in traditional Buddhist frameworks, the emphasis is always more on undoing problems and barriers rather than on seeking compensating solutions as such. To undo ignorance and to undo greed and hatred requires a good deal of attention and an ability to reflect very deeply on our own consciousness. But globalisation brings much more frenetic and intense processes into play, whereby our attention is constantly being pulled outwards into a sensationalised external world of fast entertainment and disposable superficiality. I wonder how this drawing outward is likely to impact Bhutan's development.

KP: When His Majesty pronounced GNH, it was very visionary and very far-sighted because what he said at the time was that we have been enjoying a living harmony even though we were poor and that we had to be careful not to lose what we have. The King knew that globalisation would really effect Bhutan and that we would have to accept some of the changes. We are part of these changes and like the passengers on a bus, when the driver moves we all move together and it is hard to speed up or slow down as an individual. But we cannot lose our unique culture; we have to keep it so that we can develop positively. So, we have to accept globalisation but at the same time meet it with what we already have. Bhutan has a very good chance to do this well because of the cultural understandings we already have.

It is different in the West. You used a good metaphor before when you said that it was like a society that has been swept out into the ocean of materialism and that it will be very hard to swim back against the tide. Bhutan is still anchored and the question for us is how we can retain our balance and not be swept away. In understanding this, we have to think also of karma. If the collective karma of the Bhutanese people has not been created already, we will suffer anyhow. But karma is not fixed, it is not as if we can do nothing but we need to stop creating bad karma and bad conditions for the future. But this will not be enough, we really have to educate and enlighten our citizens so that they can make the right choices. To deliver this service is very important from a Buddhist point of view.

The Bhutanese people are mainly farmers and have been living this way for centuries and if they are not educated, if they are not enlightened, if they are not sensitised by the government, by monks and by teachers, the young people will come to think that sophisticated advertising and so on is real-life. This is a danger and they should be aware that this is an illusion and not be ignorant of the real need for mind purification and getting rid of ignorance, greed and anger. So,

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

people need to think on these things and ask what the impacts of negative emotions are. It is very important now that we act on this, ask questions, have western teachers come and talk about how society can lose happiness. If this understanding comes not only from monks but from a wide variety of sources, the Bhutanese can become very educated people. Then we could really share with the rest of the world. But if we do not put this into practice then after a few decades, we will not be able to go back. It will be too late.

RM: Well, it is certainly much harder to recreate than to maintain an already existing balance. One of the fascinating dynamics I find when looking at Bhutan and the outside, more consumerist world is that for people to follow a spiritual path and release themselves from the mental constraints that condemn them to a superficial and fragile happiness, there is the need for some kind of respected authority that can guide or pull one away from the tendency to remain in your own narrow mindedness. And one of the things that I think is dangerous about consumer society and is one of its greatest liabilities has been the idea that the individual is sovereign and that the individual's judgement of what is good for them is wholly their own decision and is always a valid one. So, if I crave a larger television thinking this will make me happy, there is little in consumer culture that can authoritatively convince me that this will not bring me real happiness because I do not realise the trap of material longing. So, I think it is a very important and fragile point in Bhutan's development in terms of retaining such a grounding authority.

KP: I always wish that this type of ethical education can create an active understanding for all Bhutanese people because I know that in Bhutan now, people are not accessing this. So to improve things we really have to give people education, not only the intellectual people because GNH does not belong to anybody, it belongs to everybody. Even if we do not call it the Buddha's teachings but only normal teaching,

we can see that nobody wants to be harmed by others. It is not because the Buddha says we should not cause harm to others but because it is a human thing. To cause harm to others is to harm oneself. If you want to have a bigger television or a bigger car to make you happy, then okay. But if others get these things instead of you, you must rejoice and be happy for them and say 'my friend has a good car, that is good' and not think that I must have one also, a better one at that. That is harmful thinking, harmful speech, and it leads to harmful action. If you do not go in this direction, you have more power and you can develop abilities and capabilities so that on top of not harming others, you can become active and positive. Those who do not develop these capabilities become de-activated. An active person can come out and help others if they have developed the capability and this is the real cause of happiness. This is the boddhicitta of mind enlightenment. It involves dedicating oneself to others' happiness and forgetting oneself and through this, one automatically becomes happier. So, not harming others first and then helping others really makes us happy. And then there is contentment. These three things, finding contentment, not harming others and helping through a sense of universal responsibility produce happiness and everyone should be aware of this. It is true that the ego is bad, anger is bad, desire is a problem, but these things can be difficult to understand. Speaking of being helpful to each other and to the community is easy to understand and so these things can be easily taught by gomchen and so on.

In fact, the gomchen play an important and crucial role in the community. Monks usually stay in the monasteries and people have little contact with them but at the community level, the gomchen are there and play a very important part in community life and in achieving GNH. If there is conflict or if someone is dying, the gomchen can come and conduct prayers or offer advice and it makes people much happier. For these kinds of things, gomchen are very important. They are highly accomplished spiritually and they teach methods of non-violence in the community. People can easily listen to the

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

gomchen because they are right there and they have a lot of experience and knowledge of the community. Decision-makers and other authorities may come once a year but gomchen are always there and are very important to the happiness of the nation. But now with modernisation coming in, the people are becoming less interested and even the gomchen's influence is on the decline as our interest in becoming refined and enlightened become dominated by outer things.

RM: The movement towards not harming and being of benefit to others introduces an interesting relationship between happiness and ethics in the sense that perhaps happiness is not a thing to be sought directly but rather it is a by-product, or co-product of leading a responsible and considerate life. It seems then that GNH is a call to act responsibly and to think and act inclusively and compassionately.

KP: Exactly. That's why the Buddha said you don't have to worry about the result; the result will be like the rising sun. You cannot make the sun rise but still your practice should be perfect. If you practice right effort and right action, the result will be like the rising sun. In Bhutan, our goal is national happiness but it is not a goal that we can achieve easily in 20 years. We have to construct good strategies to achieve the goal and this means that every day, every individual must refrain from harming others and only then, can we live in true happiness. As long as there are conflicts in the community, there will be no full happiness. So, it is important to achieve harmony and this can only come from the mind. Anger, hatred and conflict are not constructive mental states. If someone gets angry because another encroaches on their land, they may say that this action makes them angry but this is only seeing the external elements and the anger really comes from the mind. So, he has to understand the nature of this anger and if he wants, he can avoid anger and maybe even come to help other people.

RM: Given the causal factors in the mind, this would suggest that the most important consideration is intention rather than outcomes alone. I wonder if there is a danger in the way GNH has been framed and how it is now being measured that we might come to focus too much on outcomes and forget the importance of purifying our intentions. It makes me really appreciate your point about the gomchen and their importance at the local level in keeping alive the movement towards purifying intentions and further, their potential for keeping the pulse of the country and how far it might be drifting away from the clarifying of consciousness. Is there much receptivity on the part of those in government and those designing GNH policies to these types of organic processes and how they might play a role in achieving GNH?

KP: Those who are designing GNH, the architects of GNH, have to understand that some things may not apply across the country in the same ways. What works in one area of Bhutan may not work the same way elsewhere – Paro in the west is different in many ways from Lhuentse in the east. Concerns may not be the same for different generations and so we have to design for that and think from many different angles not just from one simple and narrow viewpoint. The question is can all Bhutanese become enlightened, can all people be healthy or rich? This is not possible because of our karma and so we have to think of the long term and of how our actions will effect a new generation in, say 50 years' time. Everybody has some hatred and anger and only if we really go into the nature of the mind can we become free from their negative effects. Some people do not want to go into that and that is up to them. But we have to try because it can be done. All human beings have a potentiality; everyone has Buddha nature even if most do not recognise it. Many people are confused about their potential and so we must try and bring a better understanding to them. It can be done, so why not?

RM: Yes, and this confusion probably explains in part why there is such an interest in GNH from the outside world and I

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

think that perhaps Bhutan has been caught a little by surprise given the intensity of that interest. An increasing number of people are beginning to realise the essential shallowness that comes from seeking happiness only in external and material forms while ignoring the need for the internal work that actively releases a deeper happiness. So, I see the spread of GNH outwards as a very positive fertilising force for a global consciousness, particularly now as we face the karma, if you like, of our poor ethics in the form of ecological degradation and systemic conflict.

KP: Yes and this all come from anger. It does not come from a particular location or event or from money, it comes from the mind. We are not saying to the world that everybody should become enlightened monks but only that we really do need to try and understand the mind better and work to refine it.

RM: Are you optimistic about Bhutan's potential to maintain its clarity and stimulate positive change?

KP: I can not really make a judgement on all Bhutanese. If I was the Buddha, then maybe I could say how things will be in 20 years but I am not that. As a Buddhist monk, I think that we have to remain active and continue to work on these things. We now have many of the things that you have- television, internet, mobile phones and more; so we are building up more attachments and consequently, degenerating in a way. So, I do not know how it will be in the future. It may be better or it may be worse. The important thing is that we must keep trying to make it better.