

Dr Helena Norberg-Hodge

RM: Helena you are well known for your work in many areas including the nature of culture change and the effects of economic globalisation on people's wellbeing and their communities' dynamics. As you look at Gross National Happiness as Bhutan's orienting philosophy, its primary organising principle if you like, do you think that happiness is an appropriate goal for a society to direct itself towards?

HNH: I think that it is definitely appropriate as long as it is done with a very honest and clear analysis that recognises that human wellbeing is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of the biosphere. So, I like to think that happiness can link human wellbeing with real sustainability and human equality.

RM: So, in that interpretation, happiness has to come in combination with a variety of other human outcomes such as sustainability and social justice?

HNH: I think you can say outcomes but they are also pre-requisites. Without health you are not likely to be happy and from my point of view, pure physical health is very affected by the toxic effluents that threaten the biosphere. So, sustainability and justice are also pre-requisites for happiness.

RM: In your writings you have connected problems of degraded ecology and injustice to the spread of monoculture. What do you mean by monoculture's

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HNH: What I mean by this is that we have a fairly widespread recognition that in agriculture, large scale monoculture, meaning the planting of only one crop – sometimes over many thousands of hectares – is inherently unsustainable. It is against the laws of nature. Ecosystems that have survived for hundreds of thousands of years have great diversity and involve a complex interdependence between large numbers of species. We are threatening this diversity and our own survival by imposing an unnatural agricultural monoculture and there is a growing recognition that this is a problem.

But there is another big problem in that we are actually imposing a human monoculture at the same time, one in which the same global media impose an identity on young children that literally standardises and stereotypes identity. It creates an artificial situation where children start basing their sense of self on a completely unnatural attempt to measure themselves up to role models they can never compete with and never really emulate without a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction. This is a major problem and I think that I and my organisation have done work to counter this, that is important but I have been disappointed by how difficult it has been to convey, particularly in the West. My book *Ancient Futures* deals with this and many, many non-Western people resonate with it and say this is our experience too. But the Western world and particularly the Anglo world, seems quite impervious to understanding what it might mean to lose your own culture and language for example. There is a real dearth of understanding.

Structurally, monoculture not only imposes an alien identity, but an instant ideal that is impossible to emulate. What I think is really important is that we understand how closely linked this is to fuelling self-rejection and even self-hatred, and how these are the best states for promoting consumerism. The message driven by the ideal is that if you want to find the respect and happiness that every person longs for, that fundamental sense of love and connection,

then you must have this, this and this. So, you have to consume to get the approval you want. But instead of doing this, consumerism leads to envy and separation. Children as young as 2 and 3 are being set down a path that fuels itself and becomes self-sustaining - self-sustaining in the sense that the same system that creates self-hatred then thrives on these feelings of lack to push useless gadgets and constantly changing fashions on people. Some would argue, of course, that we are greedy by nature, but I have said for the last twenty years that this makes us approach a very dangerous position where we lose the ability to really know what is our true nature and what is structured by culture. When one global culture imposes a system that internalises greed and lack and we see this as being our nature, we really are in a very difficult situation.

RM: And, of course, lying at the heart of our consumer culture is this whole notion of individualised rational choice – that the person is somehow separable from the world around them. It seems to me somewhat paradoxical though in the sense that in these times of globalisation, our interdependencies becomes greater and greater involving wider and wider networks of people in producing and transporting our goods for us, yet we still resist appreciating just how interdependent we are.

HNH: I don't see this as paradoxical, I see precisely the opposite, that we are losing our direct interdependence on one another and being made dependent on vast, remote bureaucracies, funds and systems that we do not see and don't have any access to. So, we are actually becoming more and more isolated from each other. Its part of a whole system that begins with education segregating children from their culture and it imposes artificial separations and false psychological processes on everyone. Young students coming out of universities now have huge debts, a situation that is very different from what it was 20 years ago. People are entering into employment markets that are more intensely

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competitive and into jobs that are often so specialised they are wholly lacking in meaning. We become integrated into giant financial systems where we don't have the satisfaction of seeing the whole process or the end-product and probably if we did, we would not approve of it. So, we have become caught in this vast system, one that is highly specialised and highly competitive. People have to work longer and longer hours while food prices, house prices and debt are skyrocketing. In terms of happiness, the combination is just a dead-end. So although of course, in the real world there is an interdependence where we are all personally dependent upon each other, the feeling that is created in monoculture is that we are not really dependent upon each other but upon these vast impersonal structures.

But even to say this shows only part of it because underlying it all at a very fundamental level is speculative finance. The central banks like the Federal Reserve, regulate the economy and manage it in such a way that the sure-fire winnings of billions and billions of dollars can be made to the detriment of all these little people who lose their jobs and pension funds, their homes or this and that. What we have is a system in which the majority will always suffer and continue in poverty. So really, we had better start regulating and managing things in a much better way.

RM: It is interesting though, isn't it, because in those situations where money and power are concentrated, there is a necessary disempowerment of the average person in terms of their ability to see how the larger system works to corner benefits. And it seems to me that the classical political arguments between the right and left wing have often been arguments between simplicity and complexity. I mean this in the sense that market liberalism can present itself in a mystifying language of simplified tables and uni-dimensional measures of growth. But to see the larger interconnections and interdependencies require a more complex viewpoint, one that is difficult to get across in the competitive arena of

sound-bite media. I think a more conscious and interconnected understanding is always going to find it difficult to overcome the more narrow-minded and short-sighted individualism that drives contemporary consumer capitalism. Do you see the media having a role to play in creating a positive shift towards a more considerate, happy and wise view of the world?

HNH: Well, first of all, I have filmed a fair amount and I think that should be possible. We have been trying for twenty-something years to raise awareness of the madness of global trade and to show that at the level of say the EU, a package of policies, subsidies, taxes and regulations puts pressure on every business to become larger and more global. In the media, the talk of importing and exporting industrial commodities is not of a complexity that could not be explained in a very simple and direct way. So, why is that not being done? I think that there is a widespread intuitive recognition, by journalists, that such material is not going to be published so they don't even go there. They don't need to say to themselves that what I am doing or not doing is helping to destroy the world or that it is highly immoral, or that it is not such a big issue. When you really look at what we are talking about it involves the whole neo-liberal military-industrial complex with its emphasis on greater and greater production, consumption and so on. In our commercial media other priorities just do not stand a chance. However, I do agree that in a sound-bite culture it is much more difficult to communicate complex ideas but I don't think this is the major problem. The major problem is the funding. I am fascinated by how it all works to keep alternative ideas out.

RM: Particularly at the moment when we look at the need to grapple with our declining environmental situation and the growth in population. The planet just does not have the capacity to support the types of trends we are engaging right now. But still with serious warning signals being fired across our bows, we seem almost paralysed, unable to move beyond

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that ultimately simple mantra the far right used to use, that there is no alternative. I think that this is where in a very important way, the Bhutanese emphasis on Gross National Happiness is helpful, in pointing to the lie in the claim that only one material interpretation of human progress is possible.

HNH: It is very valuable, particularly at this time. We were talking earlier about Richard Layard's idea that maybe reducing misery is more important than increasing happiness but I really worry that this might get in the way of a real discussion. This is because there is an assumption that economic growth always benefits the South - and not only the South. It is a big part of the major media. Yesterday, I was reading in the paper about Christmas time in France and they were interviewing adults about what they wanted for Christmas. Most of them were saying that they would really like fewer working hours, more time with their family, a slightly higher pension, slightly lower taxes. Then they interviewed the children in front of this giant shop with Santa out front. Children were all wanting material things, more toys, clothes, another Barbie when they already have three and so on. The way the story was put together was to show that if the economy keeps growing, and consumption keeps growing, people will be able to buy more and have higher pensions and lower taxes and more time off. These will all be produced together. That is a lie, but these things are placed together to suggest to us not only that we had better consume more to get a better life but that if we do not, everything will collapse. So, I think there are some real breaks here, and they are not even just breaks in logic, but real breaks in seeing what this economy is about.

RM: And a break in relating to our deeper identity I think as well. Not only does a narrow modern economics alienate us from the natural world and from our communities but also from our own natures in the sense of narrowing our approaches to finding happiness to a single axis of material

purchases. It has to be constraining in that sense. And one thing I find particularly intriguing is the rapidity and ease with which that global monoculture manages to dissolve and undo the bonds of traditional communities and their values - almost upon contact. You have written very beautifully and powerfully about this in the context of Ladakh. As you look at Bhutan, a country still separated from the outside world to a degree and with the future still in its own hands, what do you think are the most important steps the country can take to avoid the moral and cultural dissembling that monoculture usually brings?

HNH: Well, I think that some of the things that are happening at these meetings are vital because the most strategic first step at every level is for people to link up with like-minded individuals and groups. It is critical and I hope that the Bhutanese allow more NGO transfer between Bhutanese groups and outside ones. And I also very much welcome the connections being made with Thailand and Laos and other countries in S.E. Asia. I worked in Bhutan in the 1980s when it was quite isolated but I don't think it is possible to isolate any group today. It is certainly not possible to impose an isolation, but I have seen an interesting pattern in my work in Ladakh and I am sure you would find the same in Bhutan. That is, it is the people in the villages who feel most disenfranchised and feel most inferior to the West - more than those who have experienced a bit of the modern lifestyle or had some contact with Westerners. So I have found that in a way the best antidote to what is ultimately an imposed sense of inferiority relative to a supposedly 'superior' Western consumer culture is some personal connection to, and/or experience of the Westernised lifestyle. In India for instance, you find many people who moved many hundreds of miles to cities like Mumbai, ending up hankering after the community and land they left behind. I think we all need to be more intelligent about how to make these linkages.

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My hope is that we can develop what I call a breakaway strategy where countries can link up to collaborate not in the way of the usual trade blocs, not to compete with the EU or the US, but to scale up in order to allow small local business to survive. I think it is a very important strategy and one that Bhutan could learn from at every level. I believe that at the grassroots level, all businesses flourish best by going in the direction of far more community and ecological sustainability. In England for instance, close to where I live in the Totnes area, local farmers began selling food through box schemes. It was all local organic food with minimum packaging. But their success has led to huge growth and so now they cover half of the UK. That means having to put in things like imported peppers from Spain and so on. I don't blame the farmers, I don't blame anyone, but what I would argue is that there is no understanding on the part of the consumer that they have to collaborate to keep local farms and to encourage the proliferation of being small. This is in relative terms of course. Years ago there was an idea that smaller is always better but that's not always true, it is a balance.

But right now, you see businesses like Celestial Seasonings being bought up by Cargill and Seeds for Change being bought up by Mars, you know Mars Bars?, and there are so many other examples. So, I think that at the grassroots level as well as at the government level, we need to understand how it is in all of our interests to keep business local and distance relatively small, but I recognise that there is no absolute in all of this.

RM: There are interesting shifts taking place in this direction, in transition towns like Totnes for example, where local sustainability applies to both the immediate food system but also to the health of the community itself. And in the background of what we have been talking about are phenomenal rates of depression. You mentioned that in the UK last year, there were 31 million prescriptions for anti-depressants. It is a trend that is observable across the so

called developed world, as people slip into really feeling inferior, of feeling that they are deeply unhappy with their lives.

HNH: Yes, I understand. Recently we were in California, in Point Rey which is a beautiful place but there were two suicides within a week and in both cases pure economic insecurity was part of it. In consumer culture the choice is often between doing intense, specialised work for 10 hours a day or having nothing.

RM: Part of that is of course that great ball and chain that is attached to people in the modern commercial culture in the form of debt. From the IMF and the World Bank's lending to create indebtedness to the mortgages of the high street banks and credit card companies, these sectors have been growing rapidly over recent years. But debt limits our ability to move freely and it significantly dis-empowers people in terms of their practical ability to live differently. We might want to make a shift to support things at a local level, spend more time with the kids, or take a year off to learn a new trade but we cannot because we have to work to pay off student debts, credit-card debts, mortgage debts, and so on. It is like being caught on a treadmill. I think it builds up a real insecurity and fear. The trouble with this is that fear often tends people towards immaturity and more dependence. As we face growing difficulties in the realms of peak oil, changing climate, exponential population growth and so on, I wonder if these created states of dependence and inferiority won't reduce our chances of intelligently seeing what needs to be changed in the larger, more complex system. Our ability to adapt maturely is likely to be sorely tested particularly in food production

HNH: I would definitely say that all of these things are linked but I really think we need to realise that food is the most important issue - there is nothing else we produce that everybody needs everyday. We really need to understand this

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but I am amazed by the number of intelligent people who will say never mind about food, what about fibre? But if for the rest of your life, you were never to get another article of clothing, you would probably be fine. But without food it would only be a matter of a few weeks before we found ourselves dying, literally dying without food. The difference is huge. How food is produced and how it is delivered is very important. If these systems become unhealthy, we will not be ok.

RM: I wonder if the failure to appreciate the centrality of food is part of our broader disconnection from the basic processes that drive the world. This is going to become an issue very soon, and I mean in very practical terms. With the melting of the major glaciers here in the Himalayas for example, which is well underway, the food security of millions of people is threatened. All of the major rivers in the region from the Ganges to the Indus to the Yangtze get their irrigating summer flow from snowmelt in the dry season. If the snows continue to recede, and they will, it is going to have massive geo-political implications that will return us to the fundamentals very quickly.

HNH: Yes, but now we require an incredible amount of intelligence and care to ensure that we survive our future. And it is particularly important to act before fear engulfs us and before we blindly crash in the direction of mad solutions like ethanol, nuclear power and so on. It is essential that we understand the real problems - like the destructive idea of growth. Otherwise, fear mongering can be used to push us further in the wrong direction.

RM: Well, we love to clutch at dangled straws like bio-fuels even though these would be disastrous in terms of exacerbating the problems they are meant to be solving. It is almost as if in our vulnerability, if anybody offers us any solution then we grasp at it with great enthusiasm and I wonder if this is partly underlying the current enthusiasm for

happiness as an alternative social goal. I don't mean that in the Buddhist sense of happiness where happiness is never separable from certain moral qualities like compassion and other inextricable aspects of a generally well rounded development. Working in this area, I see people adopt happiness with great relish and almost a sense of relief – 'that's it, we'll seek happiness instead of wealth' and that will solve all of our problems. But in commercial culture, happiness has lost its necessary connection to morality and maturity and as a mere feeling seems prone to endless manipulation. This is particularly so in modern consumer culture where we are mediated by corporate influences that shape our identities and shape our ideas of how we might find ourselves satisfied. So, one of the things that does worry me in the current context of climate change and social polarisation, is that if we define happiness as a feeling alone – that I feel good, not that I am good – that potentially what we do is embed the problem of individualism and disconnection further. Seeking my own outcomes is reinforced by any doctrine that emphasises the importance of the right to personal happiness. So, if I am happy driving my 4x4 alone to work everyday and taking it on the smallest of errands, then nobody has the right to reduce that by imposing restrictions on me. My happiness becomes the sacrosanct principle that nobody can violate even in the name of sustainability or justice.

HNH: Well, my happiness at the expense of others is not useful and this is the challenge. But I don't think it should be too hard to outline paths to happiness that are not going to impinge negatively on others. Those paths that argue that one can be happy at the expense of others are definitely not acceptable.

RM: Yet in the spread of monoculture as you explain it, one of the critical disjunctions that occur is between my individual happiness and that of everybody else. In the current economic doctrine of course, if I seek my own individual

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happiness, oblivious to, or even opposed to others, I am actually serving everybody else's happiness anyway as impersonal markets spread their magical benefits under conditions of maximised individualism and competitiveness. The dangerous thing about that, I think, is that there is a certain gravitational force in human nature that can pull us down towards conditions of selfishness, separation, ignorance and a lack of compassion for others that can be countered effectively only by a healthy culture. I mean that in the sense of the moral content of culture which directs us towards connection, contribution, compassion and so forth. Certainly with the work I have done in the Pacific, I see culture work in a way that exerts a constant pressure on people to improve themselves and aspire to overcome their egotism and does so with certain authority. As that is dissolved, I wonder if we are not much more prone to the effects of media-based corporate messages that encourage us to indulge our immaturities. My most recent work in Bhutan has been around advertising and trying to persuade the Bhutanese to strictly limit it. This is basically from a Buddhist perspective given that in Buddhism, inflated desire is seen as being the great problem maker. If I become overly desirous of things and my appetites swell, then I start abusing and short-changing others, I fail to appreciate the world around me and so on. But this seems very difficult to get across, the idea that advertising because it creates feeling of lack and greed, is a fundamental social and psychological problem. Do you see these things in similar terms?

HNH: I do, but I was just thinking again that this involves everything. Whether we talk about higher education, whether we talk about advertising, whether we talk about food, they all sustain the system. I mean supermarkets in the UK now fly strawberries grown in Britain to South Africa just to be washed and then they are flown back to the UK to be sold. But you imagine, someone said to me recently that they were growing strawberries to sell locally and wanted people to know so they could come and buy them. If he wants to put up a sign, that should be fine. But we need to start making a

distinction here. Advertising in some circumstances, to allow small scale wealth accumulation, and even some money lending can be fine as long as it is on a scale where society shapes, restricts and rules the economy. I think we are not quite aware of how much we have been imperilled and damaged by global wealth accumulation. We can think of global corporations as empires essentially – conquering, enslaving, manipulating and robbing. I don't think we have a good analysis of what happened in the history of this system and how much it has in transformed and changed the world for the worse. We haven't even begun to understand this.

I don't know if that answers your question but I certainly would say that modern day advertising is definitely very destructive. But I have also become aware that there are other things too. In Ladakh, even Hindi films had a very destructive effect. They in themselves were imitations of Western white culture with their materialism and their absolute fixation with romantic love. This too is very much a part of it. It is closely linked to the breakdown of community and a sense of wellbeing. It is also very much linked to a patriarchal, white world that encultures and polarises, breaks up families and dis-empowers the feminine in both men and women. I must say that Ladakh really was an incredible lesson in understanding the system. I could and should have written ten volumes on what happened and on all of these issues, but I do still feel that an overview was an important contribution to make. But it is not always counted as that and some say 'oh yes Ladakh, Ladakh that was an exception', but it is not. It is exactly what is happening everywhere in the global economy.

RM: One of the things that I have found in the work that we both do around cultural resistance to globalisation is that one of the weakest points in many cultures' ability to resist the dissolving effects of global monoculture are young men. In the teenage years, there seems to be a remarkable susceptibility to what you have described as a basically juvenile and

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masculine global media that is driven by male violence and views of appropriate sexual behaviour, competition, sport and so forth. I wonder if there are lessons for other cultures in this as they try and strive for happiness. I am wondering whether there ought to be very specific and targeted programmes to facilitate media awareness and demystification particularly among the young who are most aggressively targeted and the most susceptible given the uncertain nature of self-identity during this period.

HNH: Definitely. I think that this could be very valuable and would be one area to focus on in a very strategic way. You were saying earlier how quickly and easily such cultures can be changed and I don't think it is any wonder at all. If you look closely at what is happening in the real world, at how the system operates to break up relationships and re-form lives, it involves a multi-faceted and multi-pronged approach that squeezes people. The media is one of these facets. As I mentioned earlier, people are put in this position where they are not able to measure up to these false role models. So already, even in very young children there is this sense of inferiority and a lack of fundamental self-worth. Simultaneously, there is a breaking up of community relationships partly through schooling and its monoculture where the young are taught to experience themselves in a world of competition. At the same time the elderly are disempowered and left behind as disposable people.

RM: In light of all of this and given your extensive experience and thoughtfulness on these issues, I am wondering what your advice would be to the government and people of Bhutan. If they genuinely wish to maximise their collective happiness in culturally valued ways, how should they begin?

HNH: I believe that one step would be to actively pursue happiness education and I don't mean academic education. For the Bhutanese or any community, the most fundamental step is always a process of education. My message would be

that we are not aware of the extent to which we are being manipulated by a type of propaganda that is so endemic, so much a part of the system that even the people who force and promote it are not aware of what they are really doing. The assumptions being promoted, that growth is fine, are not questioned but taken as just being true. On one level, this links to the belief that we need more powerful cultural and spiritual values. In part, this is to counter those who would claim that we are greedy by nature and many believe that more Buddhism and more meditation are ways to counter that. I argue that we also need to look at how we understand structural violence and the way we create and promote individual greed and community breakdown. Conditions now are very different from the conditions the Buddha was talking about because these sorts of issues didn't exist in his time. It is critical that we understand more deeply the global system that is taking us in such a wrong direction.

At the most fundamental level, the problem is the economic system and how this system has shaped knowledge for generations and in a particular direction. We need to understand this in order to find our way forward to a more honest means of education. Finance, media, advertising and science are all part of what is preventing us from seeing some very obvious truths. Together they are preventing us from listening to our hearts and to our own experience of what makes us happy. We also need to have a deeper dialogue between North and South and be sure to include activists, workers, artists and ecologists in diverse contacts that can give everyone a bigger picture. Another theme that is closely related to this is what we said earlier – that as we pursue this enquiry, we should do so more honestly, more holistically and more globally than we have been doing. If we do so, we will quickly appreciate that the ecological wellbeing of the globe is fundamentally linked to every other kind of wellbeing. Another way of putting what I am saying is that we all need more big-picture education and by this I don't mean schooling.

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We have a few years, I don't know how many, to try and help make a shift and begin to move in another direction. I would love Bhutan to play a leading role in this because it really has a unique potential globally. I find it fascinating because Bhutan is described as being a Least Developed Country and so I think it would be a beautiful symmetry for an LDC country to lead change. Maybe GNH can be seen in too limiting a way but I would like to see it as bridging a path in the direction of ensuring a genuine ecological wellbeing and a lasting society. It is about really understanding that there is a path that could make us all richer and more secure. So yes, I find what is happening in Bhutan incredibly exciting and inviting.