

Preface

His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan, first enunciated the principles of the philosophy of Gross National Happiness, using this specific terminology in the late 1980s; the concept itself, however, is very old in the local parlance. Under his leadership, and the leadership of his predecessors, Bhutan had embarked upon a process of change and modernization that was beginning to have both intended and unintended impact on the lives of the people of Bhutan and on their society and culture. Bhutan first opened itself to the outside world in the early 1960s, and the introduction of new ideas and institutions picked up pace in since the late 1970.

His Majesty, who came to the throne in 1974, enthusiastically supported the processes that had been set in motion by his father, the Third King. By the mid-1980s, however, it became obvious that some reflection, some reconsideration of objectives, was necessary as the process continued lest Bhutan and its system of values succumb completely to definitions by external factors. Consequently, he began to speak about a specific Bhutanese path to development in pursuit of values that were consonant with Bhutan's culture, institutions and spiritual values, rather than values that were defined by factors external to Bhutanese society and culture. This reflection was the genesis of the concept of Gross National Happiness.

His Majesty capsuled the idea of GNH in the expression "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product." This was a challenge to the discourse of orthodox developmental theory as it was formulated at any given moment, because it called for a shift of attention away from development in purely material terms to an emphasis on development in terms of an objective that material development served rather than serving as an end in itself. The increase of Gross National Product had become the purpose and the measure of economic development, His Majesty suggested, and the costs that achieving that objective might entail were not being taken into account in the formulation of real policy on the ground, so to speak. By positing Gross National Happiness as the objective of economic development, the processes of economic development would not be negated or deflected but, rather, would be refashioned in light of this making explicit of what was often an implicit, but forgotten, purpose.

Bhutanese government leaders discussed gross National Happiness in various contexts in the years after His Majesty first announced it. Such instances excited considerable international interest in the concept, and that itself was a challenge demanding further thought.

The philosophy of Gross National Happiness provided a framework within which to think about the Bhutanese national project of development, but with time it became obvious that the idea itself needed further

development in four directions. First, it required theoretical elaboration. What were the philosophical roots of Gross National Happiness in Buddhism? Is it a purely Buddhist concept, or is it reflected – perhaps a better word would be ‘refracted’ -- in other systems of thought as well? Does it have not only broad philosophical but also moral implications for cultures and societies outside of Bhutan? Second, it requires theoretical specification for application in various areas of collective human activity – economic, social, cultural, as well as spiritual. What does Gross National Happiness mean for these domains of human activity? How is our thinking about these fields to be refashioned in terms of the GNH idea? For example, how does a GNH economy differ from the theoretical formulation of other economic constructs? Third, how is GNH to be applied in terms of governance? How does GNH inform broad policy decisions, including not only the establishment of policy priorities but also the allocation of scarce resources to actualize those priorities? Fourth, how is GNH to be applied in action? How should specific policies be formulated, or changed, to reflect the objectives of Gross National Happiness? Education, the environment, town planning, land and water use, these are only examples of policy areas. How should, or does, GNH impact on civil society and its institutions? What are the implications of GNH for decentralization and devolution?

Gross National Happiness has been one of the Centre for Bhutan Studies’ themes for research. Already in July 1999 it published Gross National Happiness (Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 1999), a collection of essays by Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese authors issued in commemoration of the Silver Jubilee of the coronation of His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. These preliminary essays opened up the discussion of Gross National on a broader, more international, scale than had previously been possible.

In January 2001, the first international seminar on GNH was held in Zeist, The Netherlands. Organized around the theme “GNH – As Challenged by the Concept of Decent Society”, participants came from Bhutan, The Netherlands, Germany, the United States, and other countries.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies, in November 2002, proposed holding an international seminar on GNH in Bhutan itself. The Centre's Governing Council approved the proposal, and organization began in the Winter and Spring of 2003, with a call for papers. The seminar itself took place in Thimphu, Bhutan, from February 18 to February 20, 2004. It was the first such seminar ever held in the Kingdom.

The proposal for the seminar suggested three purposes or objectives:

1. To promote the concept of GNH abroad and to create an environment in which exchange of concepts and information about practice could take place.

2. To involve policy makers in the discussion of GNH, with special concern for the link between the concept of GNH and the development of actual policy.
3. To develop and explore mechanisms for the operationalisation of GNH and for practical indicators

There were 82 formally registered participants from eighteen different countries in Asia, Europe and North and South America (conditions beyond our control prevented participants from other areas from joining in our deliberations). About 400 people attended each daylong session. Not only officers of the government, scholars, and individuals drawn from various parts of Bhutanese society attended. Most significantly, many students also attended, suggesting the importance of this subject for the younger generation of Bhutanese.

The seminar opened on Wednesday, February 18, and Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, the Prime Minister of Bhutan, delivered the keynote address. The Prime Ministers address pointed the way for the discussions that would follow. The conference met for three full days. At the end of the third day, a report of the proceedings was delivered orally to His Royal Highness, Dasho Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the Crown Prince of Bhutan, and he gave the concluding address, in which he looked not only at the present but emphasized that much work had yet to be done in the future. Sessions were chaired by Bhutanese and foreign guests. Some of the most valuable discussions, however, took place outside of the formal sessions, in the halls, the garden of the Banquet Hall where the seminar was housed in Thimphu, in receptions and over meals. These discussions were not recorded, but they contributed in no small way to the success of the seminar and to the development of the on-going GNH inquiry.

Both the formal papers and the discussions that they initiated suggested that while everyone subscribed to the great principle of Gross National Happiness, the concept meant different things to different participants. Mainly this was a matter of emphasis. One group emphasized happiness itself as the objective of GNH. Another emphasized GNH as leading to the context in which happiness may develop but not explicitly to happiness itself. Some discussed happiness as a personal matter and defined it as such; some described happiness as a social condition that may be conducive to personal happiness but does not guarantee it. Finally, there were those who emphasized Buddhism as the underlying foundation of Gross National Happiness and those who considered Gross National Happiness to be consonant with Buddhism and inspired by, but not necessarily synonymous with, it. These, and even other perspectives too, can be found in the papers in these two volumes, which include almost all the papers from the conference. Regrettably, not all the papers presented could be published, and we trust their authors will understand the

constraints of space under which we are working. The fact that they could not be published does not in any way diminishes their importance or the contributions they and their authors have made to our thinking. These papers are available on the Internet at this address: www.BhutanStudies.org.bt.

The conference papers are being published in a single volume, divided into two parts. The first, Gross National Happiness: Social and Economic Development, contains papers that, by and large, concern issues of operationalisation of GNH, social and economic development, measurement, and related topics. The second part, Gross National Happiness: Buddhism and Human Development, includes papers that, very loosely, focus on the Buddhist philosophical sources of GNH and on cultural issues and manifestations associated with the concept. To no small extent this division into two parts is arbitrary; many of the papers discuss more than one aspect of GNH. It should also be pointed out that each author and, indeed, each participant who did not submit a paper, expressed his or her own point of view. The conference did not begin with any pre-set position on any question and did not end with any specific universally accepted conclusions. The entire purpose of the conference was to explore the content of the concept of GNH and the issues raised by it, both theoretically and operationally. The very variety of these papers represents that approach. Future conferences, for which this first seminar laid the groundwork, undoubtedly will approach more specific issues, and that is as it should be.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies would like to express its deepest appreciation for the aid and support given to the Conference on Gross National Happiness by The Royal Government of Bhutan; the Sustainable Development Secretariat of the Ministry of Finance, the Royal Government of Bhutan; the United Nations Development Program office in Thimphu; the Bhutan Program Office of the Save the Children Federation (US), Thimphu; the Nike Foundation, US; the French-American Charitable Trust (FACT), US. We particularly wish to thank Aum Renata Dessallien, the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Program, Thimphu; Aum Kunzang Wangmo, of the Save the Children Foundation (US), Thimphu; and Mr. and Mrs. Jean Timsit, of the French-American Charitable Trust, for the aid they gave the seminar and the publication of these volumes. We would also like to thank Mr. Sander Tideman of the Inner Asia Centre, the Netherlands for the cooperation he extended to us in organizing the conference. Space does not permit us to name all the individuals who played more than an institutional role in the preparations for the Conference, who participated so actively in it, and who contributed to our reflections on the future. We trust that they know who they are, and we look forward to working together with them in the years to come.

His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Bhutan, remarked in his address at the end of the conference,

I believe that while Gross National Happiness is inherently Bhutanese, its ideas may have a positive relevance to any nation, peoples or communities – wherever they may be. I also believe that there must be some convergence among nations on the idea of what the end objective of development and progress should be. There cannot be enduring peace, prosperity, equality and brotherhood in this world if our aims are so separate and divergent – if we do not accept that in the end we are people, all alike, sharing the earth among ourselves and also with other sentient beings, all of whom have an equal role and state of this planet and its players.

These words describe our commitment to participate in the next conference on Gross National Happiness, to be held in Nova Scotia, Canada, June 20-24, 2005. That conference will be hosted by, among others, the Genuine Progress Index (GPI) Atlantic and by Shambhala International. We look forward to continuing in Halifax the discussions we began in Thimphu.

May this volume of papers contribute to the happiness of all sentient beings.