

## **1st Prize**

### **of the Essay Competition on Gross National Happiness and Human Rights**

Organized by the Centre for Bhutan Studies and the UN System in Bhutan to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

## **HOW CAN THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS CONTRIBUTE TO GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS?**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a fundamental corner-stone of international relationships while Gross National Happiness is the hallowed philosophy of governance of our nation alone. We are thus in a unique position of embracing both these ideals which consequently raises the question: How can the declaration contribute to achieving the goals of GNH? Personally, I believe this can only be answered when examined from the fundamental premises of the two ideals functioning in a symbiotic and inter-dependent unity of purpose rather than in strict functional isolation.

GNH as a philosophy of governance is stirring the consciousness of the thinking world. This is principally due to the veracity of the truth that this radical concept of governance upholds: that in the dynamic expanse of reality all things are interdependent. Take global warming as an example. The melting of the polar caps affects the world's ecology, which in turn influences international trade. Likewise, a political disturbance in one part of the globe adversely affects the world economy. All these major events directly affect the personal lives of countless individuals everywhere. Out of this realization was borne the broad-based philosophy of GNH in which "harmony" is the central guiding theme and emphasis is given to the mutually dependant basis of all conditioning factors.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was borne out of the basic aspiration of every individual to live in dignity and freedom. It grew out of the anguish of countless barbaric acts inflicted on millions of people whose individual rights were crushed in the overwhelming tide of situations, events and conditions of the times. With the adoption of this declaration, each human being gained fundamental safeguards of these basic rights.

Due to its compelling rationale and undeniable success in the nation of its application, GNH has been much lauded around the globe. Yet, the concept is not without its share of detractors as a subject of refined discussions. Perhaps foremost is the vagueness and ambiguity of the concept itself; as the popular saying states - “one man’s meat is another man’s poison”, Even the ideal of “happiness” itself is open to debate. One of the greatest challenges for instigating GNH has been to find the right balance between pursuing economic development and preserving the cultural and environmental integrity. There are no definitive values, and so achieving the correct tilt in the balance can only be subjective. Similarly “good governance” can descend to a totally abstract concept open to varied interpretations. For example, in some nations, stringent state control is advocated as good governance, while in others such interference is viewed as being tantamount to tyranny. In this regard, the declaration allays and clarifies the dangers of ambiguity by laying down the internationally adopted standards of rights and liberties in specific terms.

In the overall treatment of the GNH concept, the issue of equitable distribution of happiness among individuals and adequate protection of individual rights in the process of governance requires careful analysis. This is the sphere of concern where the declaration plays a very fundamental role – of the promotion, preservation and protection of individual rights and liberties. Whereas the noble vision of GNH aims to create happiness and its conditions for the nation as a whole, it is very plausible that in the expansive drive to achieve the collective objective, the rights and freedoms of individual entities can be sacrificed in the bargain.

Insofar as the efficacy of the declaration is concerned, with its central focus on the individual entity, it is an efficient but ineffective concept in isolation. Rather than viewing the individual as a part of a greater whole, instead the analysis erects boundaries that isolate and compartmentalize the components. Resultantly, the eternal

abiding truth about the interdependence of all things is overlooked. The fact that in order to secure individual liberty and happiness, crucial conditions of a collective ambit must all be emphatically factored in – such as clean environment, healthy culture, stable governance and so on.

So as the proverb states: “the roads to hell are paved with good intentions”. Without the declaration, the intentions of GNH could, in many cases, descend to just hollow rhetoric while also being deficient in the means and tools to manifest its ideals. In the most tragic and not entirely improbable scenarios, states could blatantly trample individual human rights in the name of the abstract collective. Conversely the intention to manifest the aspirations of the declaration on an individual level must be poised in perfect harmony with the aspirations of the collective, while instituting all the enabling conditions within the picture of totality. Lacking this sense of balance, individual freedoms and rights are incomplete, and in the worse scenario could be the cause of universal chaos. So all “intentions”, from the perspective of the individual or the state, must incorporate the dynamics of their real inter-dependency in order to attain their common objectives.

In the body of a just, humane and happy world, we need both the eyes of GNH and the limbs of the declaration. In unison, the two concepts can overcome our twin tendencies: the individualistic tendency to merely analyze and compartmentalize the components rather than to unify the whole and the collective tendency to disregard and overlook individual concerns in the charge to achieve the collective objectives.

Guru Padmasambhava proclaimed: “though your view may be as vast as the sky, your conduct should be as fine as a grain of sand”. In the sky-like vision of GNH, the ideals of the philosophy have to manifest in the individual grains of sand of the declaration. Though the ideals of these concepts need no validation, it is only in their unison that the essence of both find fulfillment. It is only on the artifact of their mutual interdependence that the two ideals can be sustained as a plausible model for realistically achieving global sanity and individual happiness. Thus, GNH and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are the two wings of a bird of all human aspirations.

**Phuntsok Rabten, Thimphu**