

Prolegomena to Pursuing Gross National Happiness: -The Bhutanese Approach

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Introduction

The Royal Government of Bhutan has proclaimed Gross National Happiness (GNH) the Kingdom's vision of development. GNH rests on "four pillars," or objectives economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance. An important question is: "Can this vision sustain, or be operational without, religious values?" First, this paper argues that if the concept of GNH is to be sustained or become operational as a vision of practical development, we will need to consider religious values, because they can provide the inner strength and guiding principles for living and can motivate development activities. Second, the paper will highlight the values to that need to be cultivated, the defects that need to be avoided, and the methods that need to be used in pursuit of GNH.

Happiness and Gross National Happiness

Happiness is a primary concern in many philosophies both east and west. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle suggested that the focus of virtue is those characteristics that make a person "good" and lead to "the good life," that is, to happiness (Solomon, 1994 cited in McKenna, 1999). At the other end of the spectrum of chronology, the World Database for Happiness (2001) suggests that public policies aimed at creating greater happiness for the greater number of people should be endorsed. Although not everyone accepts the utilitarian philosophy of happiness as being the only definition of the concept, the desirability of the happiness of all is indisputable. Every society over time has promoted its own social, political and economic system as ideal, as capable of establishing order aimed, directly or indirectly, at happiness. Various modern socio-economic and political systems, such as capitalism, socialism, fascism or communism enable one to achieve progress, depending on the system and its definitions. All these systems, however, seem to ignore the importance of the emotional aspects of human development.

In Bhutan, His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, ever since he ascended the Golden Throne on June 2 1974, has advocated that the ultimate aim of the government is to promote the happiness of the people. His Majesty has always held that development has many more dimensions than those associated with Gross National Product (GNP) and that a nation's development should be understood as a process that ultimately seeks to promote the happiness of its citizens. His Majesty has repeatedly emphasized the importance of Gross National Happiness over Gross National Product other approaches to development have resulted in considerable damage to the environment, the culture, and to human and other sentient beings.

Since individuals have both material and emotional needs, development efforts should strive to achieve a balance between happiness and material prosperity, the former being more important than the latter. With this in mind, His Majesty has conferred "Gross National Happiness" upon the country as the central development philosophy.

Since the industrial revolution in the West, many approaches to development have concentrated only on the means for increasing material prosperity. Economists like Adam Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, management scientists like F. Taylor, sociologists like Max Weber, behavioral theorists like Abraham Maslow, Herzberg and others, all promoted the importance of, and the means for, enhancing material prosperity in the belief that material prosperity brings happiness. The industrial revolution taught mankind that prosperity can be improved by improving management that focused on efficiency, strict controls, rigid rules and procedures and mass production. As a result, exploitation and wealth creation emerged as the central pillars of capitalism (Mckenna, 1999). Adam Smith, with his concept of the invisible hand, had a profound influence on modern Western economic thought. His approach suggested

¹ This paper is a summary of an original paper by Khenpo Jangem Tashi. The original paper is the first long work to have been written in Dzongkha about GNH and will be published as a separate volume, along with an English translation.

that individuals could, and should, pursue their own interests. Smith's invisible hand of the market can guide the self-interest of individuals in a direction that is most agreeable to the whole society (cited in McKenna, 1999).

Malthus and, later, Ricardo, suggested that economics developed as a closed system in which the main goal of "economic man" is to maximize individual utility without regard for the wider system. This concept suggests that prosperity can be improved by improving management practices. This gave rise to F. Taylor's approach to scientific management, where both employers and employees are seen as wanting maximum prosperity. Weber's ideal concept of bureaucracy also suggests that individuals are motivated by career advancement, receiving salary increments at each step up the organizational ladder. (cited in McKenna, 1999). The view that the only social responsibility of business is to maximize profits reached its highest expression in the 1970s (Freidman, 1970 in McKenna, 1999). The media reports about 1990s however, make clear that the greed that was celebrated in the 1980s and early 1990s as a virtue that made everyone better off, a feature of Western culture, was, in fact, a false virtue (Singer, 1993, p.83, in McKenna, 1999). This popular view of individual desire, individual greed, is not accepted in the practice of management but is replaced by personified organizations where "whatever is good for the individual can only come from the modern organization.... Therefore, all behavior must enhance the health of such organizations" (Scott & Hart, 1979, p.43, in McKenna, 1999). In this view, the individual is subordinate to the organization whose benefit will trickle down to him or her. This approach directly or indirectly considers profit maximization as the end objective, as an indicator of a healthy organization, but it ignores the need to consider other requirements of human beings, in particular mental development.

Further, since the Hawthorne experiment, various motivation theories have been developed to be used to improve material prosperity. The theories of needs developed by A. Maslow, Alderfer, McClelland and Herzberg all suggest that each of us have needs and goals which are shaped by beliefs and values. These motivational theories are used as a means to facilitate the needs of organizations and individuals, but they measure achievement only in terms of profit, which ignores the emotional or the mental development of individuals; they are incomplete.

Various organizational structures, job designs and strategies have been developed as a means for improving the prosperity of the stakeholders as an end objective. During the 1980s, in an effort to improve efficiency, the Australian government copied private sector management models for public sector administration; this was known as managerialism. Huges (in McKenna, 1999) claims that the aim of this "managerialism" was to use the private sector model as a means for improving efficiency in the public sector where performance is normally measured in terms of increase in GNP as an indicator of development. Increase in GNP, however, does not give rise to an increase in happiness, either at a personal level or for society as a whole. Were it the case, those living in the richest countries should be the happiest in the world. Contrary to this, cases of alcoholism, drug abuse, murders and suicide are reported to be the highest in countries that are materially the richest in the world. Singer, (1993) cited in (McKenna, 1999) suggests two reasons for such problems. First, the individual self-interest thesis leads to an increase in crime and homelessness in American cities and corruption in politics and business. Second, in the name of individual betterment we are depleting, damaging and destroying the resources of our planet. Singer further states that the Western economy is "simply not sustainable"; nor is its lifestyle satisfying for its participants: "The craving to win whether in politics, business or in the office or in the sports, defeats the principle of contentment and promotes greed and selfishness and ignores other dimensions of human development". Moreover, alienation, leading to despair, is one of the major causes of suicide in the West. Alienated people do not feel themselves a part of society and feel estranged. Industrialization, re-location and increasingly narrow specialization have made it more difficult for some to feel themselves a part of the whole. The idea of contributing to GNH emphasizes the opposite.

One might argue that economic growth is unimportant when pursuing GNH. On the contrary, economic growth enables individuals to increase their standard of living and enlarges the opportunities and choices of the people and, therefore, must be seen as the means for pursuing higher goals. This implies that while we must pursue economic growth, we must simultaneously seek to strike a balance between material and non-material components of work, thus influencing people's attitude towards work. This attitude and the motivation to work enable one to understand the purpose of development,

and it remains an inner value and a source of strength for striking a balance between material and emotional needs.

The concept of Gross National Happiness provides both hope and doubt. We may hope that we can work towards enhancing our current levels of happiness and make all kinds of plans to that end. We may plan to go to Bangkok and bring back consumer goods to sell in Thimphu, even go to go to the West to work, all in order to earn a lot of money. We may hope that more money will enable us to buy a piece of real estate and construct a house on it or buy the latest electro-mechanical domestic appliances or a car – and we would be much happier than we are now. Yet, if we look back, so many years in the past have been spent on efforts to enhance our happiness, and still we are not satisfied. Our wants have only increased with time, and we have not achieved what we hoped for. The things we wanted yesterday are not enough today, and we yearn for more. We may find that our minds are still wild, rigid, wanting and envious of our neighbors who are doing better than we are. We may become disillusioned with the world we live in, full of doubts and uncertainties and longing for freedom from this suffering we perceive as never ending. When such hopes and doubts torment us, Buddhism can help, provided we have enough knowledge about it.

However, if we have neither listened to perfect religious teachings nor studied them, we will find it difficult to appreciate those perfect values and qualities as having the potential to sustain and strengthen the concept of GNH. On the other-hand, without internalizing these perfect values, GNH may remain only a cherished idea. On the usefulness of his teachings, Lord Buddha said:

The monks or the wise ones must,
Like testing the gold, by burning, cutting, sharpening,
Carefully analyze my words,
And not uphold them to show me respect.

Buddhists do not wish to convert people of other religions to Buddhism. Before adhering to Buddhism, one is asked to examine the value of the Buddha's teachings and to embrace them only if they are found useful. Similarly, the ways pursued by Buddhists for enhancing happiness may be analyzed before appreciating their usefulness. If we have never heard of Buddhist teachings, we cannot understand in our search for happiness the causes of happiness and so cannot achieve our objective. On this, Ashva Gosha said:

All being's sole eye that is stainless,
Which is the general lamp of the three worlds,
He who discards the precious teachings after obtaining,
Is the deed of the greatest fools.

To discard the valuable teachings that lead one to the path of lasting happiness would indeed be very naive on our part. This would be like one trying to find greener pasture on the other side of the mountain. A similar story of Socrates' "Exploring Plato's Cave" (cited in Morgan, 1986) narrates the story of a prisoner who escapes from a cave and who had never seen the outside world besides his own shadow on the four walls of the prison. If he were to return to the prison to share with his fellow prisoners, who are chained, his new found knowledge of the outside world, he would be ridiculed for his views and might be seen as a threat, because they have no knowledge of anything beyond the cave. On other hand, the person espousing the new knowledge would no longer be able to function in the old way. The story teaches us that the cave stands for the world of appearances and the journey outside stands for the ascent to knowledge. People in everyday life are trapped by illusions; hence, the way they understand reality is limited and flawed. By appreciating this and by making the effort, we have the ability to free ourselves from the imperfect ways of seeing. Similarly, perfect religion can help, provided we are prepared to make efforts to explore its values that help to sustain and nourish the concept of GNH.

That religion is indispensable to the long-term sustenance of GNH may be understood by examining the potential results of the fulfillment of the four components of GNH, especially in the context of

people's perceptions of GNH. Would achieving the goals of economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance, which in themselves are not easy tasks, lead to the sustained happiness of the people? Would the four components, without a concomitant emotional development, sustain the concept of GNH? This question becomes even more pertinent in the face of misunderstandings and misperceptions on the part of many people about the concept of GNH, which they perceive to result in the fulfillment of their every desire.

A country may enjoy a relatively strong pace of economic development with access to all the basic necessities for its people and be culturally and environmentally rich and governed efficiently and transparently. However, human nature is such that the more one has, the more one desires and, therefore, the greater is the likelihood of discontentment. And because every individual is unique, his or her desires and perceptions of what they think would make them happy are diverse. The different needs and desires of individuals cannot all be fulfilled, and this leads to discontentment and unhappiness. Ideologically, the achievement of the four components of GNH should lead to the happiness of the masses. However, in the context of people governed by diverse and increasing needs and by a longing for more and dissatisfaction with their present conditions, happiness achieved will not sustain them without the understanding of certain perfect values. Whatever happiness we have generated will be only temporary and will be dictated by the whims of our emotions, by how we perceive our situation and how satisfied we are with what we have. If we are to put an end to our dissatisfaction and suffering, we must entrust ourselves to the perfect all knowing physician, to the medicine of dharma and the sangha nurses for a complete cure. On this, Shantideva in "The Way of the Bodhisattva" said:

And if no other medicine to cure them
Is to be found elsewhere in the universe,
Then the intention not to act in accordance
With the advice of All-knowing Physician
That can uproot every misery
Is extremely bewildering and worthy of scorn.

This refers to the mental disease from which all of us suffer. The power of the mental diseases that arise from emotions of anger, attachment, jealousy, pride, ignorance and the like, are so strong that no ordinary doctor or modern psychotherapist will be able to cure them. Only the great physician, the Buddha, and his medicine of dharma, can overcome these diseases. If we do not take the remedy offered to us, relief cannot be found elsewhere in the universe. It would be extremely foolish and ignorant on our part to wish to be rid of our suffering and to ignore the ways pursued by Buddhists for gaining the desired goal of happiness. Because our desires are dictated by our emotions and our mind, the only way to overcome our lack of happiness would be to divert our effort towards the ways that can generate happiness. Buddhism tells us that we, our mind and Karma (the consequence of our actions) end up becoming a reality at the conventional level. It follows from this that it must be we who make up the economy and other components, since without us, the four components cannot function separately from our decisions. Therefore, if we decide that development should serve as a means for enhancing happiness, then, we should develop, accordingly, a system with inputs that ensure success in the four components for enhancing happiness. The opportunities made available by advancements in science, in social, psychological, and management studies, integrated with the mental studies offered by Buddhism, can enable us to achieve the desired level of happiness. Out of all these, mental development is the key, as happiness in the end would be determined by our state of mind.

Our mental state, as the prime factor in achieving happiness, recognizes that our basic needs for food, clothing, shelter and access to basic necessities are met. Once the basic needs are met, the religious values will enable us to use additional material possessions, money, success, fame, glory, ideas and other resources for obtaining higher goals of happiness. Without reflecting on the correct values, though we be rich materially we may still be dissatisfied and unhappy. We therefore need to reflect on religious values and discipline our minds through mind training.

The first step for pursuing happiness is to listen to teachings or study those qualities that have the potential to transform our minds. The very few who have listened to teachings or studied them have had a rare opportunity, often by chance or through a friend. In Buddhism, such turning points for the few fortunate people are considered very rare and are regarded as meaningful and very precious. On this, Shantideva in “The Ways of the Bodhisattva” said:

My faith will thus be strengthened for a little while,
That I might grow accustomed to this virtuous way.
But others who now chance upon my words,
May profit also, equal to myself in fortune.

As Shantideva suggests, those pursuing happiness may find the approaches presented here to be meaningful, forming the basis for one’s inner strength, serving as a guiding principle for one’s life and a motivator of development. This may enable the concept of GNH to grow, and in the end, GNH can be the vision of development. This approach requires the study of Buddhist values. As it is very difficult to study all of the Buddha’s 84,000 different teachings and also to reflect on all of them, one may consider cultivating in one’s mind at least one of the nine values, such as patience, and avoid the seven negative defects, such as greed. Further, we must be aware of, and use, at least one of the six methods as the path for pursuing GNH. The nine values will include: the three distinct values, the form of GNH, the four great pillars, the sixteen pure human dharmas, the ten virtues, the seven riches of sublime beings, the confronting of four extremes, the four ways of reversing the mind, and the two safeguards.

The seven negative defects that must be avoided are: the six destructive forces, the three poisonous rusts, harsh behavior, reckless behavior, the eight worldly reactions, the five perverted livelihoods, and the four causes exhausting merit.

The six different methods to be used as the path for pursuing GNH include: the four mindfulnesses, the four excellent transformations, the five perfect livelihoods, the four flourishing friendships, the six sources generating happiness, and the eight peaceful paths. The nine values to be cultivated, seven defects to be avoided and six methods to be used as the path are the main focus of the work by Khenpo Jangem Tashi, [Pursuing Gross National Happiness: -The Bhutanese Approach](#), that is being published as a separate volume, in both Dzongkha and English, by the Centre for Bhutan Studies.