

# **One Big Happy Family? Gross National Happiness and the Concept of Family in Bhutan**

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## **Introduction**

Bhutan is famous for the statement of His Majesty, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, that, for his people, he would rather have gross national happiness than gross national product. Far from being merely words or cliché, this feeling, entity, or political concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is palpable in Bhutan and maximizing Gross National Happiness has become a 'central development concept' of the government.

In this paper, I will focus attention on the Bhutanese family and propose that, as an institution, it forms the bedrock for GNH in Bhutan. I want to show how our attitudes about family are a primary source for happiness and are interwoven in the four platforms of GNH for of Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley: namely equitable economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance. I want to explore the concept of Gross National Happiness and what part the Bhutanese notion of the family plays in fostering happiness and well being in our country. I think our notion of family plays an enormous, pivotal role.

## **Happiness and the Family**

It is important to make a distinction here between the 'innate, natural' propensity for happiness of many Bhutanese people and Gross National Happiness, which is a deliberate governance policy.

Happiness in Bhutan, I will define as an ease of living and a feeling of security, autonomy and continuity, a life that is full of relative freedom of choice to do what we like. Added to this we have a sense of intransigence and status quo, a reasonable expectation that we will have enough of the essentials like food, healthcare and education for our children-and maybe even a new rice cooker or television. Further, an essential ingredient for happiness is hope for the future. In Bhutan, we still have the belief, as purported by late His Majesty the Third King of Bhutan, that our children will have better lives than we have.

We have many reasons to be happy in Bhutan. Our environment is pristine and we share our habitat with over 150 species of mammals, many of them endangered. Bhutan is one of the 10 global hotspots in the world and in 1995, the government passed the Land Act, which says that 60% of the country must remain forest.

Bhutan's rugged geography and isolated, land-locked status makes infrastructure difficult and costly. However, according to Vision 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness, Bhutan has, for the past 3

decades made tremendous strides in development. "A child born today can expect to live 20 years longer than someone born only a decade ago." It is true that before late His Majesty's reforms in 1961, the average Bhutanese lived a life that was, to quote Thomas Hobbes, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." But things have changed. Progress recorded in the past three decades is "unmatched by most developing countries." The people of Bhutan are able to enjoy an impressive prosperity.

Add to this the fact that we have free healthcare and education and the government spends roughly 20% of its budget on social services (the global average for countries to spend on social services is about three percent). Women fare well in Bhutan, especially compared to other countries in Asia, and there is equal opportunity. The inhabitants of many villages in the country have traditionally passed on property matrilineally, and girls make up 47% of children attending school.

From the aforementioned examples of happiness, it is clear that natural propensity for happiness in Bhutan is difficult to extract from GNH, the development concept. As to which came first, the chicken or the egg, it is perhaps the Bhutanese people's natural inclination to be happy. The family contributes to overall 'natural' happiness in Bhutan and the governments multi-dimensional approach to development, "aimed at spiritual and material balance and harmony" perpetuates and expands on our natural happiness.

GNH aside, happiness cannot be inflicted upon us. We must all seek happiness in our own minds. It is not spontaneous nor can it be bestowed. We are happy when we are secure. It is interesting to note that in Bhutan there is tremendous nationalism and a feeling of security newly refurbished after the military action in the south. Even though Bhutan is often characterized as a fragile, precarious nation geopolitically, environmentally and economically, the feeling of autonomy seems to override any trepidation about being a vulnerable country in the national psyche. To quote Vision 2020 again, "There was no 'mother country' that was ready to insist that it knew what was best for us or that was ready or even keen to absorb our most talented people. We realized and accepted early that, while others may have considered us poor and backwards, our future was firmly in our own hands, and that whatever future we built would be the result of our own efforts. This independence of spirit and mind contributed to the formation of our distinctive Bhutanese identity. It has given us dignity as a nation and helped to shape a common sense of purpose."

Bhutanese enjoy what Karma Ura calls an "assertive culture", having defeated the Tibetans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and escaped the British in the 19<sup>th</sup>. This helped shape the national character. This sense of nationhood, and this pride in independence so evident in Bhutan is echoed in the writings of the fathers of the American constitution.

The notion of choice is also an important element of the national psyche that tends to add to our sense of happiness. Bhutan has never worn the yoke of colonialism, and therefore, the Bhutanese have always had a choice in our own destiny. Further, the notion of choice is tied to the idea of karma, a basic tenant of Buddhism. If we can do good works, we can improve our karma and eventually break the cycle of rebirth. Also within Buddhism is the notion of following one's own path for salvation. Likewise, a policy of GNH, the ongoing decentralization of the government by His Majesty, is conducive to our happiness because it gives us more control of our destiny at a local level of government.

Finally, the ingredient that underpins our sense of well being and complements our happiness is our faith in the family and abiding closeness that knits our social structure together, what Lyonpo Jigmi has referred to as 'the rich bonding of individuals as members of extended families and communities'. The notion of the family -from the top down- that is to say from our 'benign patriarch' to the most unlauded street sweeper, cocoons us in Bhutan with a sense of security and well being and is a major factor in our enjoyment of happiness. Add to this our strong sense of history, culture and religion, which are all closely aligned to family and our way of thinking about family, and we have a 'happy nation'. Especially in times of uncertainty, we turn to our loved ones for solace and for reassurance. The structure of the family and our dependence on it is still intact in Bhutan. We have not yet gone the way of the nuclear family, and isolation and the family is thriving in Bhutan; it is the most important social structure that we have because it is tied to culture, governance and the environment.

The definition of family will be a broad characterization that takes in the concept of community, village and neighborhood and, in fact, the entire country. In Bhutan we are accustomed to relating to our friends and neighbors with care and interest and a family-like intimacy. This permeates every facet of Bhutanese society and is nowhere felt more strongly than with the Royal Family, an active working unit that reinforces the concept of family and is a major factor in the country's stability. Further, this notion of family in Bhutan is much more subtle than merely a family unit or nuclear family. It includes a spirit of helping, and the notion described in the west as extended family, that is to say our neighbours, community, even our fellow country men and women. In Bhutan, we have a single-minded national identity that is part of our sense of 'family' and this I will also include when discussing our notion of family.

The typical Bhutanese family is large and our social structure and religion deem that we take care of each other as if we were all related. How else could we in Bhutan survive the rugged terrain and isolation unless we look after each other? We all have rather large, interdependent extended families and even the names 'brother', 'father', 'auntie', 'uncle', 'little brother', 'elder sister' etc. extend to people who are not our blood relatives. Bhutanese

have a natural inclination to treat others with an intimacy and familiarity as if they were family. This inclination seems to be endemic in all of the ethnic groups within Bhutan: Sharchhopa, Khengpa, Lhotshampa, Layap, Ngalopa etc. Because Bhutan is still 80% agrarian, and agrarian societies have intergenerational, extended families, it would not be incorrect to say that at least 80 to 90% of families nationwide are extended. Of course, with rural to urban migration the families become nuclear, but the populations of the urban centres in Bhutan appear to be made up of many extended families and a few nuclear families.

### **Is Happiness Fleeting?**

Other countries have attempted to write happiness into their laws or make the pursuit of happiness a part of the national psyche. So although the concept of happiness written into the laws of a country is not new, certainly the Bhutanese slant on it is. For the United States, whose constitution provides the inalienable rights of "life liberty and the pursuit of happiness" the pursuit is inexorably linked with consumption, with the accumulation of material possessions and capitalism at all costs.

The Bhutanese notion of happiness, in theory, is not. There is concerted, even excruciating effort on the part of the Bhutanese government to balance economic growth and development with environmental protection, cultural preservation and enrichment and good governance. In fact, the government will often forego economic development if it hampers environmental or cultural concerns. As stated in Vision 2020, "The concept of Gross National Happiness was articulated by His Majesty to indicate that development has many more dimensions than those associated with Gross Domestic Product, and that development should be understood as a process that seeks to maximize happiness rather than economic growth. The concept places the individual at the center of all development efforts, and it recognizes that the individual has material, spiritual and emotional needs. It asserts that spiritual development cannot and should not be defined exclusively in material terms of the increased consumption of goods and services."

There is no better source for illuminating the various issues of GNH than our Prime Minister, His Excellency, Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley, one of the framers of this illustrious policy. Lyonpo writes in *Values and Development: Gross National Happiness*, that 'sharpening materialistic appetite, and pursuing economic prosperity has come to be the purpose of development planning everywhere.' This is as it should be, says Lyonpo, as material conveniences make our lives better. But beyond a certain level, when we have accrued a certain amount of things, material consumption "is not accompanied by a concomitant rise in happiness." Or to quote Henry David Thoreau, the American transcendentalist, "things are in the saddle and ride mankind."

What we want to do in Bhutan is to continue to do the things that make us happy, which means we want to try to identify them and make them part of the GNH development policy, and we want to avoid falling into the trap of equating happiness with wealth. No matter how much we see that money and material possessions do not instantly make us happy, there is this persistent notion, especially in the developed countries. 'How can a person be happy if he or she is poor?' Money doesn't buy happiness, but it helps. While material comfort is certainly linked to happiness and well being, it is a misstep to put all of our eggs in a capitalist basket, so to speak. For we have merely to look at the United States, my homeland, to see that while it is the richest country in the world, it also has one of the highest per capita consumption of anti depressant drugs in the world. According to a WHO report on the global burden of disease, in 1990 major depression was the fourth leading cause of disease in the developed world. The report predicted that by 2020 it would rise to second. This does not indicate happiness or well being.

Yet even if we who live here have grown to take our own happiness for granted, and continue collecting newly available commodities, we merely have to look at the world around us to see that our lives and our lots are still relatively simple and happy in Bhutan. By some accounts, we are marching toward rampant materialism. I do not think this is the case. There is contentment, and, at the time of this writing, peace. Perhaps with the GNH development policy we will be able to escape the same fate of developed countries that had, in a bygone era, what Bhutan now has. With inevitable further urbanization and modernization, a GNH development policy that helps protect and safeguard the family is perhaps our best hope.

My tendency in this paper is less toward quantitative analysis of happiness and the family and more toward qualitative analysis, which is very much in line with the government's development goals, as the government stresses culture, spiritual values and tradition, such things that resist being quantified.

For the past several months, I have been observing families here and exploring the notion of the family as the 'prime mover' for GNH. I will examine attitudes and incidents from oral histories to document my paper. Devotion to ancestry and respect for elders, the importance of Bhutanese history, patronage in the government, and of course Buddhism, are all peripheral factors I will examine.

Things like television, rural to urban migration, education and drugs are, of course, eroding this tight family structure. Likewise, it is difficult to sustain family commitments if we are driven by economic concerns. Work outside the home tends to destabilize family life. But these incursions also bring other factors to the mix. The much-maligned television, which has recently come full force into our homes, also brings us the means and ways to measure where we're going and where we've been. It brings better

communication and the natural forum of an open media, which is not all bad; it can be cautionary and instructive. The Bhutanese have always been adept at appropriating trends and adapting new ideas to meet their needs. We in Bhutan have a very long way to go before we reach the fractured state of the family in the West. Given our history and the "strong hearts and sound constitutions" of the Bhutanese that George Bogle wrote about, we have every reason to be optimistic.

## **Observations on the Family in Bhutan**

### ***Urban Families***

Because there is very little research about the family in Bhutan, I have embarked on my own abbreviated study. I will begin with a family I have had acquaintance with for over five years. I have observed them and have been a close friend of this family and have been a part of many of their daily activities. What I observe is an efficient, close knit, interdependent structure, which is in marked contrast to the families of my American upbringing. For example, the U.S. in the 60's and 70's the notion of the nuclear family was popular. That is to say, the family unit was defined as mother, father and progeny. The grandparents, if alive, kept their own households or went or were sent to nursing homes if they were not able to care for themselves. This was also true of aunts, uncles and various cousins, who tended to live far away in other cities. If we had contact with them, it was on vacations or during holidays. Because of the post war affluence of the country and the G.I. bill, the American style 'ranch house' was within almost everyone's grasp. And we were a nation on the move. We moved frequently for work or for better opportunities. Our ties, the primary reasons we moved residences and sought more and better jobs, were economic. This tendency toward movement and economic gain and away from family continues full force in the U.S. It would be very unusual in the U.S. for someone to relocate, leave a job and other ties, to be near their extended family.

Here in Bhutan things aren't delineated as such. The family is anything but nuclear. In fact, attitudes about the family and its interactions are the reverse of my upbringing. There are five siblings in the family to whom I am acquainted, four of whom are still living: two sisters who are elder and two younger brothers. All of the family migrated in stages to Thimphu about 20 years ago, after the death of the patriarch father, who was a tsip in Trongsa, and after the death of the eldest sister's husband. It is interesting to note that this is the first generation to move, en mass, from the village. In fact it is the first generation that anyone moved from the village, except in a few marriage cases. The eldest son became the patriarch or provider for his two sisters and younger brother, who were still in school. The eldest son once said to me that if his father and his brother-in-law hadn't died in rapid succession, the family would probably have stayed in their village in

Trongsa and continued their lives there. But they sold many of their possessions and property to pay for the cremations.

Now all of the immediate family lives in Thimphu, except for the youngest brother who works for the government in Mongar. The father who died on Trongsa had nine brothers, so the family is awash in cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, who live all over the country. The family seems to have covered all bases. I believe they are like many families in Bhutan, with extended family who are monks, lamas, gomchens, anims, bureaucrats, farmers and students. This family infrastructure provides a fairly complex give and take of goods and services. Relatives in the villages, either directly related or related by marriage, supply rice, potatoes, cheese and other staples and have a place to stay when they visit Thimphu as well as other resources of the family. There are cousins who are weavers, tailors, woodcarvers and painters. There are engineers, contactors, teachers and one branch of the family has a tour company. And although the trend is for people to specialize in a profession, there are enough members of the family who are generalists, that is to say who have useful skills in several areas of expertise, so the family is never lacking in help in any given area.

In addition, the family supports specific monasteries and shedras, and individual family members who are in the clergy with monetary offerings and donations and in kind subsidies such as oil, rice and labour. They give money and labour for maintenance and renovation of the family temple in the village. There are periodic pujas to placate local deities and help ensure the family remains safe and prosperous. This connection with families to local deities is ubiquitous in Bhutan and a contributes a great sense of well being and protection as well as a sense of improving the lot of the family. It is believed to secure a better future for each member of the family. These periodic pujas for health and well being are tremendously important to the average family in Bhutan and their importance can not be over stressed. They give individual families a sense that they are doing their utmost to protect their members. A specific families affiliation with a particular deity can go back for generations and the vitality and frequency of these rituals is a sign the culture is alive. Pujas carry on ancient family traditions, and underscore their connections to the village they came from. They are a visible signal of stability and well being for all the family members. Besides, the yearly puja for a family is a good way to get all of the family members together to celebrate and enjoy time together.

In this way, the family is a repository for the Bhutanese cultural identity. In the family of my acquaintance, there are many other small and subtle ways that the family carries the cultural tradition of Bhutan. The children speak Trongsap, the village language, in addition to English and Dzongkha at home. They are taught the habits, customs, songs, food, dress and manners that were handed down for generations in their community, as the family is extremely traditional, as well as being upwardly mobile. This

very elaborate adherence to customs and the mutually supporting family provides enormous physical and spiritual support to every member.

Within this family, there are good times and bad times: people die, children are born, people marry, they fight and come to agreements. Life continues much as it does for people all over the world. There are no real worries of not having enough food or not having shelter. There is an unspoken understanding that the family will provide. This amount of back up and support in one's life is formidable. It contributes greatly to an overall sense of well being and, dare I say, happiness.

Having this close knit, interdependent, multigenerational family as we do in Bhutan, and here I am speaking generally about families and not about any particular family, is of course good and bad. And this is a small chink in my theory that the family is fundamental to our happiness in Bhutan. Because it is a universal truth that the thing that causes us the most happiness is also the thing that can cause the most grief. When a family is large and extended, as are most Bhutanese families, it is hard to make a move without causing a ripple effect. There can be, depending on the make up of the family and its temperament, a profusion of commentary or meddling in other family member's activities. There is also universal need in Bhutan, and family members are responsible for each other. This sense of entitlement can be difficult and can make us unhappy. However, in my own case as well as in the majority of families in Bhutan, I believe the perceived long term benefits and the perceived potential for happiness within the Bhutanese family, outweigh the perceived negatives. Moreover, compared to some other cultures in Southeast Asia the Bhutanese family is relatively undemanding of its members.

The center of activity for the family of my acquaintance in Thimphu is the second sister's house. It is a large, rambling traditional house where she lives with her husband, their six children and her mother. For about half a year the husband's father comes from his village to live with them, and there are other visitors both long and short term. Before the eldest sister lost her husband, they had two young children, a boy and girl. These children have been raised by various members of the immediate family, and have moved households at different times in their lives. The sister was living in the village when her husband died and was unable to care for her two small children. She made her living as a weaver and kept what she could of the family farm until she moved to Thimphu, where she lived with relatives, moving from house to house, while her children remained with her siblings. It was a symbiotic relationship: she wove for the relatives, cooked, cleaned and took care of their children, and they fed and housed her. Her daughter, who is now 13, visits her mother, but lives with the eldest son and his family. The eldest sister's son is living with her youngest brother, his uncle and family in Mongar. Although the eldest sister has recently remarried, the unspoken arrangement with her children and her relatives stays the same.

An element of the Bhutanese family that has virtually disappeared in the American family, if it ever was a feature, is the concept of one sibling or family member taking on another's to raise and I am making a special point of this case because I believe it is also rare in other developed countries for this informal arrangement to take place. In the U.S., parents will most often make provisions for their children in their wills, and designate a guardian, perhaps a family member, in the event they are unable to care for their children. But informally taking the children of relatives to raise is not the norm, at least not without some kind of legal agreement. In Bhutan, it is very common for people to take the responsibility of raising relatives' children for long or short periods, and they seem to do it with a certain amount of ease and *laissez faire*. The structure of the family is more fluid. Another important reason that relatives take other relative's children to raise is so that they can be closer to schools. For whatever reason, there is a great deal of 'sharing' among the families. This certainly takes the burden off those members of the family who are less able to care for their progeny, and redistributes it on those who are able. This makes us all happier.

Along similar lines, children seem to have a great deal of personal freedom here. When the eldest sister's daughter was ten, her mother remarried and took her to live with her and her new husband. But the girl said she wanted to remain with her uncle and his wife, and so she was allowed to return to their home. This is not anywhere near the norm in the United States. To give a ten year-old child such personal freedom is rare. For all the personal freedom we seem to have in the United States, the children have very little say in their own destinies. I find that in Bhutan the opposite is true. The amount of personal freedom for children within a family is greater here than in the West.

In 1995, I stayed a week with a family in Kanglung. There was a four year-old daughter in the family who stayed with the mother while the father taught every day at the college. One day I asked the mother where her daughter was. 'Oh,' she said, 'she wanted to visit the neighbors.' 'Did she go alone,' I asked? 'Yes,' the mother said. The neighbor lived down the hill, about half a kilometer away via the motor road. I was shocked that a tiny child would be allowed to go, unaccompanied to a neighbour's house so far away. But the child survived, even thrived, and lived to do it several more times in the week I was there with the family. Again, this amount of personal freedom for children is not the norm in the West and readers of this paper who are from western countries will share my surprise that the small child was allowed to move about the countryside with such autonomy. Bhutanese readers won't be surprised. In the West, we have many more issues with a child's safety, autonomy and mobility. More personal freedom at an early age is conducive to a child's sense of choice, ergo freedom and happiness. If the child grows up believing he or she has

choices and can make those choices in a safe and loving environment, then it helps to mold the child's character in a positive way.

These descriptions of the family of my acquaintance and Bhutanese families in general serve to point out several other very specific characteristics of the Bhutanese middle class family or semi urban family that I feel contribute to a sense of well being, happiness and stability for the family. Like most Bhutanese families, the family of my acquaintance is a fluid, intergenerational family. In the second sister's house, there are three generations living under one roof: the widowed grandmother, her daughter and her daughter's husband and their children. In the U.S., this is rare. Parents, when they become old and infirm are either left to fend for themselves with no close relative nearby, or perhaps they get some part time institutional support such as delivery of their meals by volunteers. If there is no close relative nearby they often go to old age homes. In Bhutan the interaction between grandparents and grandchildren is pivotal as the grandparent is able to be a part in the upbringing, discipline, feeding and enjoyment of his or her grandchildren. In this family, the grandmother can watch the baby when her daughter is otherwise occupied, help with the cooking and cleaning, comfort the small children and generally add to the sense of stability and security the children feel.

The grandmother goes every day to the Memorial Chorten to make perambulations around the chorten, do 108 prostrations and sit with other elderly friends and pray and spin the prayer wheels. She has a very strong sense of purpose and hardly misses a day. Although she has had a difficult life in the village, now her life is relatively easy (except for the prostrations) and she is 79 years old.

Bhutanese families tend to take the line of least resistance, and are very pragmatic in how they operate. If there is a need within the family, then it will be filled by someone in the family who has the means to fill it. If money is needed, someone with money will help or he or she will borrow money and give it to the needy relative. If a family member doesn't have enough to eat, then someone with an excess of rice will most often supply. If a family's house is too far from a school then its children will be absorbed into other households within the family that are closer to schools.

In the part of Thimphu where I live, one of our neighbors is a civil servant with a wife who also works in a private business. They have three children, ranging in ages from 18 to 10. The middle child lives with a sister in Wangdi and goes to school there. In addition to their two children, two cousin brothers from the village live with them and the wife's mother lives with them for part of the year. These cousins are out of school; two work, and one is looking for work. At any given time, there are three or four other relatives, either monks or lamas making a trip to Thimphu, or relatives from the village, who stay in the house. A woman friend from the village lives with the family as she is divorced and has no immediate family of her own.

The family has a very solid support system in that anyone making money contributes economic support; those not working outside the home take care of the children and cook and do the laundry. The monks and lamas who frequent the home provide spiritual support in the form of prayers and pujas. Perhaps what the family lacks in privacy is made up for sheer numbers of hands to pitch in. Day to day, it can be daunting to have so many bodies about in a very small house, but when there is need or crisis, family is welcome and necessary for well being.

Our friends Dorji and Tobgay, are a married couple living in Paro, and both have government jobs. They have two small children and Tobgay's mother and father live with them and take care of the children who are three years and one year old. In addition, their household is made up of the daughter of Tobgay's brother who is 10 and attends school. His brother lives in the village with his wife and other children. An aunt and uncle of Tobgay's are also living with the couple for an indefinite period. While it is a crowded house, the inconvenience of so many people is offset by the fact that there are so many helpers.

I describe these case studies to illustrate specifically the number of people living together and the lives of the children, how they are cocooned with responsible, caring adult family members in large, warm extended families. While the households are often crowded, in these informal, unspoken arrangements, there is always someone to tend to the children and keep the home fires burning. The grandparents have a very real and important function to cook, tend to children and literally keep the fires burning. This prolongs their lives because it prolongs their productivity. If nothing else, the very elderly and infirm are often able to simply sit and pray and spin prayer wheels. In this way, they continue to be 'productive' because they are praying for themselves and the well being of their families. It must be a great comfort psychologically for these old people, most of whom have spent their lives raising families and being sustenance farmers, to have an important and respected place in the bosom the family where they are and cared for and they can still contribute, if only marginally, to the family chores and the raising of their children's children.

Large, extended families were of course crucial for survival in the villages, because they made for a strong labor force. While living amongst lots and lots of family is not always conducive to harmony and happiness, there is at least something to be said for enough hands to cook, clean, farm, build houses, and tend to the children and animals. A large family makes for a safety net, and provides security and a sense of well-being to the people in it.

Another attribute of the family in Bhutan, and one I believe contributes greatly to happiness for all is that Bhutanese parents wield absolute authority over their children. Likewise, neighbors and extended family members feel it is their right and duty to tend to Bhutanese children who

are not their own. I observe neighbors, friends, and even complete strangers disciplining or instructing children who are not their own. In the West, we have given up this prerogative. In fact, it is socially unacceptable to do so. But in Bhutan there is a communal environment, and a sense that our children collectively belong to us, and we are still of the same mind about child rearing. And there is the sense in Bhutan that an adult knows best: respect of children towards their parents, grandparents and elders is very much instilled in them. It is, incidentally, gone in the West. A neighbour's interference or reprimand of an American child would perhaps engender a lawsuit. In any case, it would be a rare incidence if the reprimand were welcome. In the West, we have given up much of our authority over our children. Even touching our children has become an area of scrutiny. Corporal punishment is socially unacceptable. We still have it in Bhutan. It is not my intent to link beating one's children with Gross National Happiness. However, it is a popular notion that as a child grows he or she needs definite boundaries. It is important for children to know where they fit in the universe. A child who has clear delineations of his role in the family and in society is, in short, a happier child than one who does not have this identity. In Bhutan I see it clearly, still functioning within the family units. There is a code of conduct in Bhutan, part of the cultural tradition, called *drinlen*, which is a respect for elders, or a sense of duty to repay deeds, especially to elders such as parents, aunts, uncles, teachers and neighbors. It echoes, on a smaller scale, the notion of *driglam namcha*.

This notion of boundaries and clearly defined choices for Bhutanese children is a crucial element for of happiness on several levels. Jung said

The little world of childhood with its familiar surroundings is a model of the greater world. The more intensively the family has stamped its character upon the child, the more it will tend to feel and see its earlier miniature world again in the bigger world of adult life. Naturally, this is not a conscious, intellectual process.

Or to put it in less mythological terminology, "Where you can get to depends of where you're coming from."

I cannot image a culture where the family stamps its character upon a child more than in the Bhutanese culture. The family is the be all end all for the child. The minutia of daily living in Bhutan is so entirely focused on family life. As an example, I call attention to the way in which Bhutanese women carry their children. The Bhutanese joke that their children's feet don't touch the ground until they are perhaps two years old. We have all seen women in the villages sewing paddy with children on their backs. Their mothers or siblings carry the children; they are content. If the children cry, they are taken off the back and put on the breast and fed. Compare this to the Dr. Spock influenced generation of the United States, where children are put on a schedule to be fed, held and put to sleep. Common sense tells us that this is for the convenience of the parent. Here we still have time in

our lives to focus on the needs of our children, their well being and contentment.

And there are many contented children in Bhutan. They are free to play in along the streets of Thimphu and in their villages. Their lives, although perhaps short of material things, are abundant in love, caring and attention, not only by their parents but also by friends and neighbors.

A recent visitor to Bhutan from the U.S., who had been here five years ago, commented on how much the streets of Thimphu had changed in that time. I asked him to elaborate. He said things had become much more 'commercial' and materialistic. To prove his point he called my attention of the several toy stores on Norzim Lam. Obviously there are more goods available here than five years ago but to me the commercialization is secondary. What the profusion of toy stores on Norzim Lam means is that we dearly love our children.

If we grow up in happy, contented households and have happy childhoods, we tend to see the world as happy and non threatening. Our adjustment to the world and our responses to things are connected, loving and engaged. Like everywhere, divorce is an issue in Bhutan, but even if the parents of the child are divorced, he or she is more likely than, say, a child in a developed country, to live among other relatives, as often the wife and mother takes the children to live with relatives after a divorce. If they're not immediate relatives then there are friends and neighbours. Bhutanese children are rarely lacking in adult role models as are the American children of divorced parents.

This is not to say that all children in Bhutan are free from exploitation, abuse and other evils, but a loving, caring household is more norm than an abusive one.

### ***Village Life***

In his article in the *Journal of Democracy* and subsequent book called *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Putnam, a professor at Harvard University, influenced the American public in 1995 when he theorized that American society was breaking down because people had become more disconnected from their families, neighbors, communities and the republic itself. He borrows the term 'social capital' from Jane Jacobs in an attempt to define the intangible essence of what is valuable in society and what we get from our societal connections. Social capital is the premise that social networks have value. Here it is not so helpful to delve into Putnam's theories that American civil society is breaking down. Bhutanese society, like all societies have some of the same features, (i.e.; organizations, religion, government) or structures that keep the society together. But it is helpful to remember that the societal situation in Bhutan is very different because it is smaller, more homogeneous, Asian, Buddhist, agrarian, developing, it has a different history, and has other factors that make comparisons with the U.S. difficult

and that could possibly lead us down a path of erroneous conclusions or evaluations. What is helpful in our examination of Gross National Happiness and the family in Bhutan is Putnam's terminology. Thus, social capital in Bhutan means social networks, and I have already described the social networks within extended families (i.e.; religion, financial support)

The term social capital emphasizes not just warm and cuddly feelings, but a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks. Social capital creates value for the people who are connected and - at least sometimes - for bystanders as well.

Social capital is enhanced through information flows and the dissemination of information. It is characterized by norms of reciprocity or mutual aid-that is neighbours helping neighbours, collective action (i.e.; militia) and thinking of ourselves as members of a collective "we" where the individual will is subjugated to the good of the community. These areas of social capital that Putnam describes seem to be abundant qualities and readily apparent in village life in Bhutan.

Because the terrain is so rugged and harsh and life is isolated, the people living in the thousands of villages within Bhutan would literally not have survived throughout the centuries if they had not help their neighbors, fed them when they had no food, helped plant and harvest crops, lived reciprocally and acted in a generally familial way. They learned creative ways to diversify their farming and ranching techniques and they shared the information in a collective environment.

Within society or a village, the logical extension of family life is what Machiavelli calls *virtu civile* or civic virtue, an "ingrained tendency to form small scale associations that create a fertile ground for political and economic development". These associations can be institutional like the Boy Scouts, or they can be less structured as in volunteerism, say if a neighbour is in need of rice to feed his family, or he need help repairing his roof after monsoon season, or if there is a death in his or her family. In Bhutan, we have a strong, if not unshakable sense of civic virtue, especially within the villages. Even in my short stay in this country, I have been not only a source for documentation of civic virtue within Bhutanese villages, but I have also been a participant.

I regularly participate in the annual puja in my husband's village. There are 200 to 300 locals who descend on the village for three days of eating, drinking, dancing and prayer. Civic virtue is very noticeable as is social capital. To feed that many people and host them for three days requires a formidable amount of planning and team work. And this happens frequently in most every village in Bhutan.

Members of Bhutanese villages regularly participate in the building of their neighbours' houses, another good example of civic virtue. Early in 1998, I participated in a day-long house building, where members of a

village near Semtokha assembled the new house of a local teacher. Mud bricks were cut from the earth several weeks before and had been drying, in preparation for the day about 50 of us would come together and assemble the house. Women sang songs as they pounded the mud to strengthen walls. There was a large amount of food and drink involved, as usual. The atmosphere was festive, although everyone worked hard until after sundown. It was reminiscent of a 'barn raising' in the United States, where, in the early years of the country, families came together to build their neighbours' barns. Now helping neighbours build barns is part of the country's history. It is no longer done.

In any given village in Bhutan, there is a tremendous amount of interdependence. Milk is traded for rice, cheese is given for vegetables, and people help each other in hundreds of different ways.

Even the informal codes of law that make mediation the basis for settling disagreements, from divorces to property disputes, in Bhutanese villages, greatly adds to the notion of a family unit, or a people intimately connected to each other. In mediations, whole families are involved in the process.

As Karma Ura points out in *The Herdsman's Dilemma*, ancient grazing rights for cattle and yak are still in effect in the remote areas of Bhutan. This means that there is a consensus and unwritten code of how and when the numerous yak herders should graze their animals. There are elaborate management schemes for sharing pastures, rotating herds between different households and determining access to pastures, all prime examples of civic virtue and 'familial' behaviour.

This familial attitude extends beyond relatives. On my first visit to Bhutan, on a trek, I and the other members of my party would pass villagers on the trail, going to or from their homes. Without fail, they would ask our guide or some Bhutanese member of our party *ca le om?* (Where are you coming from), or *ca te joni mo?* (Where are you going?) It is the Bhutanese way to keep track of fellow travelers. We never know when our help might be needed or if we will need help. In more developed cultures, and of course with larger populations, there is a fundamental distrust of strangers. We would never ask where someone was going, nor would we divulge much about where we were going or coming from. It is simply risky to do so.

There is an abundance of civic virtue in the villages of Bhutan and this creates a sense of belonging, well being and security. So what the inhabitants of Bhutanese villages lack in material comfort they make up for in being a part of a close knit tribe.

Moreover, these ancient ways of conduct within the village haven't changed markedly over the years. Nicolas Lemann in the *Atlantic Monthly* points out, "Once civic virtue is in place it is incredibly durable over the centuries." (Lemann) In the average village in Bhutan people routinely visit

each other, help each other, and have intimate knowledge of what's going on in their neighbours' lives. They are bound by traditions, histories, mythologies and family life and the interdependence of people is still the basis for their existence. Even as the Bhutanese move from extended to nuclear families and from rural to urban settings, they still have a sense of civic virtue, which creates good will, stability and happiness.

As mentioned earlier, a formidable example of civic virtue in Bhutan and one that creates a great deal of social currency is religion: Mahayana Buddhism. Most every village in Bhutan whether large or small, has some tangible form of Buddhist culture—whether it is a temple, monastery, chorten, shedra or prayer wall, tree, knoll or rock imbued with a spirit or local deity, somewhere nearby. Daily life and culture is permeated with this particular form of Buddhism. Religion shapes how we interact with each other and the environment, and how we run the government. And it is a big part of family life. A recent article in the *Kuensel* described the disappearance of the Mewang gup, who, according to his wife "was perfectly all right and he didn't have any enemies." What the family suspects as the cause of the gup's disappearance is the wrath of local deities, because the family had "ceased to practice an annual ritual about five years ago."

Incidents such as this indicate an enormous, ongoing tradition, constancy, stability, a way of belief and a culture that is the bedrock of the society. They create a sense of continuity and well being and provide the core of Gross National Happiness.

Going back and reviewing philosophy books and papers from college, I am struck by how much of what many western philosophers wrote is echoed in Bhutan. John Stuart Mill wrote in *Utilitarianism*, "The creed, which accepts as the foundation of morals Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." This could be the underlying, unspoken creed of any village in Bhutan.

Religion and the family, because in Bhutan we can't have one without the other, seem to be a factor in the preservation of the environment, as the ancient Bon religion, the precursor of Buddhism, held that nature is alive and must be respected and protected. Likewise being a good Buddhist means protecting the lives and habitats of all sentient beings.

### **The Monarchy**

It cannot be emphasized enough how important a role the Monarchy plays in Gross National Happiness and the unity and the sense of cohesion and consistency His Majesty's policies lend to the nation's psyche. He is the benign patriarch and "an active agency of development as well as tradition." As His Majesty frequently says, "the future of Bhutan is in the hands of its people." He most certainly understands that by giving the Bhutanese people

choice and autonomy he is continuing the legacy of happiness they enjoy. And his strong leadership brings us together as a family.

The King seems to hold to the principle that "the office of government is not to confer happiness, but to give men opportunity to work out happiness for themselves". The Royal Family looms large in the every day life of the average Bhutanese citizen. The adjective 'royal' in Bhutan does not exist without the noun 'family' after it. It is a rare evening on BBS news when we do not see one of the queens or another member of the Royal Family visiting schools or offices or promoting this or that cause, whether it is family reproductive health and HIV/AIDS or youth development.

The Royal Family is, like most families in Bhutan, an admirably tight knit unit. And unlike most royal families, they are not merely figureheads, but are working and active in the government. It would be difficult to identify a world leader who was more 'hands on' than His Majesty the King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck.

His Majesty, our 'benign patriarch', and the First Family of Bhutan set the tone for national unity and are a constant reminder to the people of Bhutan of the ties that bind us to each other. As I began to write this paper, His Majesty travelled to the south, to lead and command the Royal Bhutan Army, the Royal Body Guards, the Royal Police and 741 Militiamen and women, in the fight to rid the country of Indian militants.

We watched His Majesty's addresses on BBS on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of December, when he called the soldiers in Geleyphu and Deothang his sons. He referred to them as 'like family' and expressed his fear for their safety. It was extremely moving. His Majesty admonished all of us in Bhutan to work together as a family. And in this national emergency, it seemed we all did work as a family and continue to do so.

We in the West have become jaded to the notion of royalty, and I would go so far to say that westerners such as me are wary of royalty in general and have doubts about the efficacy of a government headed by a king. We have grown accustomed to the quasi-ceremonial roles of the European royals, not to mention their lavish but troubled personal lives. Moreover, during this epoch, which some have called the end of history, we like to think of governments marching (or goose stepping) to a more democratic beat. But even Thomas Jefferson was a "founding father". To have an intelligent, strong, competent, just, creative 'Father', a Jungian archetype if you will, as head of the government is extremely reassuring and conducive to happiness. To have a benign patriarch who is leading his subjects slowly and methodically towards democracy as they become educated, aware and discerning, is the optimal path for a developing country.

In Bhutan we are not always looking over our shoulder to see if the government is still in place. There is no threat of civil war because of a corrupt government. There are no serious calls for changing the

government. We trust the leaders because they do what they say they will and because they seem to have our best interest at heart. This is immensely reassuring, like being part of a large happy family.

His Majesty, the author of Gross National Happiness, sets the tone for all we know or think about family in Bhutan. He is so all pervasive and his 'parental' love for the Bhutanese is perfectly and clearly felt by each Bhutanese. It is no wonder we are happy.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that I greatly admire the Bhutanese way of life and how the Bhutanese have been able to prosper and thrive in this inhospitable and fragile, albeit beautiful environment. Likewise, I am a great admirer of the monarchy here and the government in general. Bhutan is one of the fractional percentages of countries on earth that has free health care and free education. This obvious but often overlooked factor contributes greatly to our sense of well being in Bhutan.

The people who inhabit Bhutan: Lopshang, Sharchop, Ngalong, Lhotshampa, etc., have all learned to adapt to their environment and this is their saving grace. Their adaptability is a strong factor in the peoples' happiness and sense of well being as are their attitudes and feelings for their families. The government is equally adaptable.

Much of my paper has described 'happiness' and the family in Bhutan as opposed to GNH as a deliberate governing policy. But we have reached a point in the nation's history where there can't be one without the other. We hope that the government will continue to make wise choices and retain the protection of the deities, and that the development policy of Bhutan will be sufficiently diverse and can continue to steer the country toward preservation of the environment, cultural promotion and good governance as well as equitable economic development.

As Bhutan develops, can it escape the fate of the more developed countries of having their lives ruled by more, bigger and better things? As the American family historian Stephanie Coontz points out, "there is something empty in a world that is ruled by consumer values." The answer to the question is yes, if GNH continues to guide the country and keep this precarious balance between materialism and spiritualism.

No doubt things will change in Bhutan as it is the nature of things to be dynamic. It is my greatest wish that we are never in a position to be looking back on our lives and our pasts and say 'we were happy then.' I hope that the Bhutanese will continue to love their children and to provide for them. As more people move to the towns, childcare will be increasingly an issue that could help to erode the family unit in Bhutan. Because of the higher cost of living, high rents and the availability of more goods and services both the husband and wife of the family more often have jobs that take them

outside the home. It is difficult to sustain family commitments if you are economically driven.

It seems to be the obvious trend that, as people migrate from their villages to Thimphu and other towns in Bhutan, the size of their households is reduced to mother, father and unmarried children, and perhaps a grandparent or two. If there is another family member who can stay home to help the children get ready for school, prepare their pack lunches, and receive them when they finish school, then the family unit is not so destabilized. Children with working mothers are not so affected by the absence of their mothers if a grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, cousin or some member of the extended family is there to fill the gap. Thankfully, we still have this network in Bhutan. But in some cases in Thimphu, perhaps because there are no relatives to take care of children with working mothers, there are child baby sitters taking care of children. This is where the system is beginning to break down. If the baby sitters are not children and they are older, then who is taking care of their children?

By breaking this cycle of what American sociologists call 'the nanny chain' we can forestall, or even escape the fate of families in some developed countries. The leaders of Bhutan have their eyes firmly on issues such as this one and other problems faced by families as we urbanise and modernise. As Lyonpo Jigmi said, "We wish to preserve social structures in which every one, whether children or elderly, are honoured and respected...The breadth and quality of social relations lie also at the root of happiness of a person throughout his or her life cycle: from childhood to old age."

Currently in Thimphu, there are about 8 facilities for child daycare-schools and other institutions either operating or planned for the near future. Daycare in the workplace would be optimal.

Like almost everything else in Bhutan, the state of the family is fragile and precarious. But in the country's history, the Bhutanese seem to have been able to maintain equilibrium and take the 'middle path' in most everything, from development to child rearing. Coontz says, as we develop faster and faster...[we] have to have the chance to use our work to make better lives-- not just buy more appliances".

I want to end this paper with a general observation about happiness in Bhutan. I did an informal survey in Thimphu during the months of December 2003 and January 2004, and asked 66 friends, relatives and strangers if they were happy. The results were inconclusive, as most people- over 40 of the respondents, just laughed and didn't answer the question. The rest of them nodded their heads or gave nebulous answers. ('What is happiness?' 'What do you mean?' 'Did someone say I'm not happy?') Some might say that the survey was not successful, but from it an idea can be extrapolated, which I have paraphrased from Gertrude Stein: "Happiness should not mean, but be."

If you are lucky enough to be in Bhutan, driving along the lateral road, say between Mongar and Trashigang, and it doesn't look like there will be another village for hours and hours, and although you are concentrating on the road as it winds before you, you can take in the magnificent mountain scenery and the way the landscape becomes a narrative of nature, lyrical yet surprising. You see someone in the distance sitting by the side of the road. When you get closer, you can see it is an old man. He's wearing a ragged, faded gho and no shoes. You don't see a house or a shop or anything else around, and that old man, who is perhaps sitting on a rock or a tree stump is just staring of into space. Who knows how long he has been there: hours, days, maybe even longer. Perhaps he barely notices you, or doesn't even register that he acknowledges you as you drive by in your car. I want to leave you with this image because I am certain that this old man is happy and is genuinely free. But it is for another paper to tell you why.

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