

Prioritizing National Happiness

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In 1972 Bhutan, one of the materially poorest nations in the world, initiated a new leader, King Jime Singye Wanachuck. The new King, now 50 years old, had observed that new nation-states in the “developing world” were all focused on economic growth and trade, that is, gross domestic product (GDP). Bhutan’s King, analyzing the country’s unique culture founded in Buddhist spiritual values, decided to focus his nation’s priority not on its GDP but GNH, or gross national happiness.

While not making a virtue out of poverty, the King’s conviction was that the ultimate purpose of government is to promote the happiness of the citizenry. The four pillars of GNH are:

- The promotion of equitable and sustainable socio-economic development
- The preservation and promotion of cultural values
- The conservation of the natural environment
- The establishment of good governance

It should be obvious to all that human happiness is created by many things that are not easily measured in purely economic terms. In the United States the most dominant values are individualism

and consumerism. The phrase that best captures this reality is: In the United States “to have is to be” and “to be is to have”. This is not a prescription for happiness. Poor nations focusing on economic growth are bound to be disappointed as political leaders will be confronted with economic disparity, social unrest and conflict.

As Florida State University Professor of History, Darrin McMahon writes, in virtually every Indo-European language the modern word for happiness is cognate with luck, fortune or fate. “Happ” was the Middle English word for chance or fortune. Ancient Greek has a phrase that states “Call no man happy until he is dead”¹. It is, therefore, no surprise that a present-day movement to promote gross national happiness began in a non-Western Buddhist country and culture.

Conservatives in the United States always say that we need to return to the writings of our Founding Fathers. Since conservatives strike me as a generally unhappy group, I would urge them to return to the writings of Thomas Jefferson in July 1776. Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, claimed the “pursuit of happiness” as a basic human right, the only time in US history



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that happiness was officially proposed as a national objective.

In February 2004, an initial conference on gross national happiness was held in Bhutan. This was followed by a conference in Nova Scotia, Canada in June 2005. Participants at the conferences examined successful initiatives worldwide that attempt to integrate sustainable and equitable economic development with environmental conservation, social and cultural cohesion and good governance.

Ross McDonald, a professor at the University of Auckland, New Zealand rightly points out that the gross national happiness movement would make a serious error to believe that national happiness constitutes a new goal. It has been a goal of all major religions and philosophies for centuries. As McDonald states, even those forms of social governance which have produced massive suffering (from religious crusades to Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and countless others) sought happiness.

Market fundamentalists promote wealth as the path to happiness. To seek happiness is nothing new but in postmodern societies where image trumps substance, the tendency is to confuse the means to happiness with the end itself. The move to promote gross national happiness is only possible in a country that places priority in cultivating moral maturity. In this respect, philosophy and religion can serve as a foundation.

Aristotle argued that progress towards happiness, which he believed constituted the ultimate goal of human existence, was only possible by cultivating moral virtue.

In Confucianism the state of wu-wei is characterized by respect, sympathy, service and generosity, which are

attitudes inseparable from happiness. In Hinduism, the cultivation of upeksha, mudita, maitri and brahmacarya represent the flowering of the human potential for joy and happiness. The same is true for Judaism, Jainism and Sufism. For Muslims, the Five Pillars of Islam aim to inculcate a happy morality in which charity, peacefulness, fellow feeling and the control of selfishness are the highest and most adaptive virtues.

As Bhutan is a Buddhist culture, the development strategy for GNH aims to inculcate mature, non-exploitative and unselfish attitudes upon which healthy and happy relationships can be created and maintained within Bhutan as well as those with surrounding countries. Along with traditional Buddhism, Bhutan should promote the fourteen precepts of socially engaged Buddhism as outlined by Trich Nhat Hahn. The fourteen precepts are:

1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.
2. Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge.
3. Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help

others renounce fanaticism and narrow-mindedness.

4. Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

5. Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.

6. Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still seeds in your consciousness.

7. Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Be in touch with what is wondrous, refreshing, and healing both inside and around you. Plant seeds of joy, peace, and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.

8. Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

9. Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do

not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.

10. Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

11. Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.

12. Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

13. Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

14. Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others.

In Christianity, Catholic Social Teaching has evolved (since Pope Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891) into ten principles that could form the foundation for GNH. The ten principles are:

1. The Dignity of the Human Person

Human beings are created in the image of God and, therefore, are endowed with dignity. This inherent dignity carries with it certain basic rights and responsibilities which are exercised within a social framework.

2. The Common Good

While the dignity of the human person is affirmed, individuals live in common with others and the rights of individuals must be balanced with the wider common good of all. The rights and needs of others must be always respected.

3. Solidarity

Human beings are social by nature and do not exist merely as individuals. When considering the human community it must be remembered that it consists of individual and social elements.

4. Subsidiarity

This principle recognises that society is based on organisations or communities of people ranging from small groups or families right through to national and international institutions. As a rule of social organisation, subsidiarity affirms the right of individuals and social groups to make their own decisions and accomplish what they can by their own initiative and industry. A higher level community should not interfere in the life of a community at a lower level of social organisation unless it is to support and enable.

5. The Purpose of the Social Order

The social order must uphold the dignity of the human person.

6. The Purpose of Government

The purpose of government is the promotion of the common good. Governments are required to actively

participate in society to promote and ensure social justice and equity.

7. Participation

Individuals and groups must be enabled to participate in society.

8. The Universal Purpose of Goods

The world's goods are meant for all. Although the Church upholds the right to private property this is subordinate to the right to common use and the overall common good. There is a social mortgage on private property.

9. The Option for the Poor

This refers to seeing the world through the eyes of the poor and standing with the poor in solidarity. This should lead to action for justice with and on behalf of those who are poor and marginalised.

10. The Care of Creation

The Earth is God's gift and all species have a rightful place in it. Humans share this habitat with other kind and have a special duty to be stewards and trustees of the Earth.

In Western Philosophy Kant, Bentham, Mill and more recently Rawls also argue that a prior moral culture is a criteria for happiness. Why then is there an urgent need to promote the idea of gross national happiness? First, there has been an abandonment of happiness as the ultimate goal to be sought. Happiness has been replaced by goals such as wealth and Western models of political democracy. If happiness is the ultimate goal of a government, then democracy must be viewed holistically, that is, as having four equal component parts: political democracy, economic democracy, socio-cultural democracy and ecological democracy. A holistic model of democracy parallels the four pillars of gross national development.

GNH also requires an alternative model of development. This can be found in Amartya Sen's theory of "development as freedom", a holistic conceptualization of development that parallels the four pillars of gross national happiness. Sen's theory is a critique of mainstream economics as he emphasizes each person's capability related to socio-cultural development, human well-being and quality of life.

Sen's capability theory addresses people not as commodities or human capital who through skill, knowledge and effort can increase production possibilities, but as persons with lives that they value in which they have the capacity to make moral choices.

In the GNH model the means and nature of economic activities chosen are as important, if not more so, than their results in terms of economic growth. Any measurement system for a GNH economy must, for example, value social and economic contribution of households and families, free time and leisure. Indicators must not be biased towards consumption. Finally, a GNH economy would prioritize ecological biodiversity. Bhutan, as part of the gross

national happiness program, launched a vigorous greening and biodiversity program. The result is that 26% of the country is dedicated as wildlife sanctuaries and 72% of the nation remains forested. This is in stark contrast to poor countries emphasizing policies of economic growth. Bhutan's ecological biodiversity program is also directly responsible for the preservation of indigenous cultures.

Gross national happiness is a holistic model of governance, economic development and the maintenance of cultural integrity. Once again, stress must be placed on the fact that culture is not just a co-equal factor in an adaptive pattern of development; it is the critical orientation that drives the whole pattern of collective development. To succeed, gross national happiness needs a citizenry that has developed a moral maturity that will enable each citizen to realize that his/her happiness is related to the national happiness. Bhutan remains a work in progress, but the world needs more national leaders prophetic enough to state that gross national happiness is going to be a priority goal.

¹ Editor's note: see the origin of this expression in Rosanna Lauriola's essay, which focuses on

the semantic aspect of words related to happiness in ancient Greek.