

A BigMandala menu with ima

The 'Buddhist' Truth of HappyMeal

Diederik Prakke, March 2005

Preamble: Congratulations with this conference

I want to warmly congratulate all persons who have inspired and prepared this and the previous conference. In many ways we can trace our being together here back to His Majesty the King of Bhutan who, now more than three decades ago, coined the concept of Gross National Happiness, whether it was a spontaneous joke or a strategically pondered act. The mere fact that there are so many contributors, papers and participants here, illustrates to me the enthusiasm to look for *true* alternatives to the dominant road of development, and making those alternatives take shape. A stunning characteristic of that common road of development is not only that spiritual development is considered a private affair (which I can agree with), but also that spiritual integrity and growth is not an explicit reference point and objective of government policy. Left alone that religious practice is an integral part of the normal office routine in government bureaucracies. To put it in Buddhist terms: The dominant mode of governance is rich in Action, but is short of View as its starting point and purpose.

By saying the above I already jump straight into what I want to discuss in this paper: ***The possibility and potential of creating religion-inspired societies.*** I am struck how 'the West', in attempting to be neutral in terms of religion (over-aware of the past wrongs of colonialism and aggressive conversion) takes out the heart of the working place. This approach is actually everything but neutral, but spreads a materialistic worldview, that has become the dominant, impoverished governance-culture of our world today. In this paper I will share my understanding of the current developmental challenge of Bhutan, reflect on the relevance of giving religion a place in modernisation, and hint at the modest enabling role its government may play in this regard. Of age Bhutan has been a religion-drenched society, yet currently I sense an increasing tension, in which Buddhism so far emerges as a conservative rather than as a transformative boost to development. A better understanding and personal experience of Buddhism may reconcile the artificial contradiction between boldness and intellectual brightness of the educated generation on the one hand, and cultural integrity on the other hand. To the contrary: I believe that embracing Buddhism may be a key medicine to transforming the latent tensions present in societies like Bhutan.

A telling anecdote

'Although my father is highly educated, he is very religious'. I hold this as a key quote from a young Bhutanese since I first visited Bhutan back in 1990¹. 'Although my father is highly educated, he is very religious'. It's concise and powerful like a mantra. The word *although* indicates that it is self-evident to the speaker that education and religion are obvious opposites. His father knows about the universal law of gravity, but in prayer still magically pretends that he can almost fly. Daddy's switched the light of logic on, but still reserves some dark corners to cherish his superstitious puja's. We're not quite sure whether or not the speaker is embarrassed that education didn't cure his father's religious whim. Maybe he is potentially proud that his father combines tradition and modernity. Possibly he secretly even adores that his daddy despises 'Western indoctrination', even though he masters the ins and outs of the Western way of thinking.

Contents of this paper

In this paper I want to discuss how in Bhutan development and Buddhism may be reconciled by embracing them both completely. I will discuss how Buddhism may be a key engine to balanced development, rather than an awkward thingy from the past. Very understandably many young Bhutanese loose interest in Buddhism, as on the surface they get to see Buddhism ignores the questions of their daily life. You could almost suspect that an educated Bhutanese who still adheres to old traditions must be kidding himself, unwilling to accept the desillusions you are bound to spot if you sharpen your intellect. Ordering a BigMandala ima is not about popularising Buddhism, but about taking spirituality as the point of departure and aim of development. It is a hearty and spicy dish (ima is the name of Bhutanese chillipeppers) able to satisfy the hunger of people today.

So this paper is about the potential relevance of religion to development. I will focus on a particular country, in this case Bhutan, because I believe that there is no blue print religion or spiritual approach that will save this whole planet all at once. I will first discuss why I bring in Buddhism in the GNH debate, at least for Bhutan (in for example Afghanistan a renewal and further leap within Islam may be more appropriate for the majority of Afghani's). Then I will discuss the developmental challenges and possibilities of Bhutan, as I see them, in which of course I envision a key function for religious or secular paths that give life meaning and purpose. At that point I present in which way I believe my paper differs from voices and porposals I have heard so far. In other words: I will distill the unique key message I hope to bring to your attention and add to the evolving debate.

I will also share my little understanding about the 'realm' of religion. I want to point out that religion is (to start with and in final instance) not really about philosophy or morality, about being smart or gullible. Philosophy and morality do have their place in making human society possible, but are neither the start nor the end of the story. As far as I am concerned the spiritual dimension is about liberation, meaning, inspiration and love. Finally I conclude this paper with some proposals or dreams for applications, intentionally vague, as I do not feel it is up to me to push Bhutan's agenda into the direction of my personal vision.

¹ Another favourite quote from my first visit reads 'Produce from India is no good, but it's cheap; I like it'. Unlike the former quote, however, this one is completely unrelated to the remainder of this paper.

Religion and development

A week after the tsunami struck South East Asia, the Prime Minister of my country, the Netherlands, let a memorial function for an assembly of ambassadors and other dignitaries. After a good speech, the crowd observed three minutes of silence. And I thought to myself why, why, why? Why just silence? Why not prayer? As a practitioner of meditation I know about silence. But our Prime Minister is a Christian heading the Christian Democrats and I felt oddly impoverished that he didn't kneel down in prayer.

More perplexing is that I understood that in France symbols of religion are now forbidden in schools and public office. As far as I can see that is like throwing away your child with the dirty bath water. They wanted to promote Muslim integration and fight gender suppression in the name of Islam, but apparently found a truly targeted intervention too confrontational. So the Western solution is to take the whole heart out, not only the cancer. I believe we can only prove freedom of faith and religion, by embracing our own belief without embarrassment, if we have one. In the name of religion horrendous crimes have been committed, but this has not stained or contaminated the heart of the human longing to dedicate himself to that which is good.

I do not necessarily want to reverse the split between church and state which is dominant in the West, but I do think the split between work and religion is unfortunate. Of course people are free not to have a connection with any religion or meaning-giving dimension at all, but people who do should be encouraged (or at least feel free) to engage that inspiration in their work. If you take the 'spiritual' dimension away, what remains is materialism. In trying not to impose any philosophy, development co-operation and science preach that the material world is all there is. In short, you may separate state and church, but you shouldn't separate work and religion.

Why Buddhism?

Above I have advocated revaluing religion. But why zoom in on Buddhism and why connect it to the GNH debate? Buddhism has much to say (and even more to offer in terms of experience to those who care to practice it) about happiness. It says that knowing and living the truth, is true happiness. The happiness that Buddhism seeks does not depend on the subjective and passing experience of psychological ups and downs (as measured in self-assessment research on happiness). In final instance it also doesn't look at outer phenomena (such as economic growth, environmental protection, or education levels) to assess development. Buddhism looks at the spiritual development of people and society, expressed as wisdom and love², which is an absolutely objective fact, even though it occurs inside people and may therefore not be unambiguously perceptible to the untrained eye.

So I bring in Buddhism because it points at truth, the truth, which is at the same time the basis for true and stable happiness. We often talk of 'Buddhist' truth, but actually truth is merely truth, regardless of the denomination of the path you walked to find it (so that's why I put 'Buddhist' in the title of this paper in quotes. You may have come by air to Halifax, but that doesn't make Halifax an airplane. You may get to see the truth through

² Here I refer to what is referred to in Buddhism as two inseparable wings of a bird: Wisdom (the female principle, connected to the sun and emptiness) and compassion (the male principle, symbolised by the moon of skillful means or action).

Buddhism, but the truth itself isn't Buddhist. Just like the law of gravity isn't a Western truth, the luminous essence of mind is the truth, rather than a Buddhist version of it.

Probably other religions and wisdom traditions point in the same direction, and I focus on Buddhism in first instance simply because it is obviously intimately interrelated with Bhutan. In fact I personally believe that Bhutan's significance to the world at large lies in its Buddhist heritage and tradition. As far as I am concerned it's great that Bhutan also houses Hindus, Christians and increasing numbers of non-religious folks, but to the larger world I believe Bhutan's contribution lies in being a Vajrayana Buddhist kingdom. The country is soaked for centuries in Buddhism, and even those who do not consciously know (or misconceive) its philosophy, are profoundly affected by it.

And last but not least, I bring in Buddhism because I have become a Buddhist. When I first visited Bhutan I loved to see the ceremonies, regarding them as an exotic, animistic and naive relic of the past. Back in the Netherlands I visit some of the many small Buddhist groups, increasingly impressed by their wisdom, which (at least sometimes) went beyond holding on to groovy flower-power hippy dreams. At some point I was completely captivated, ashamed and shocked reading a book by the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. His book gave a sharp description of the functioning of the human mind, in which I found all my personal secrets displayed, whereas I had assumed that a Tibetan meditator would only have some sweet and moralistic advice to the backward herdsman in the valley below his cave.

Now I am an increasingly devoted student of Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, who is scheduled to speak at the opening of this second GNH conference. At the moment I write this I have no idea whether his opening address rings true to me, but he touches me and draws me out through his teachings and especially through his life example. By fully manifesting both in the West and again in Tibet, and engaging in the full vitality of life (next to being a Buddhist teacher he also is a marathon runner) he wakes me up to the full width and depth of life. Recently he made spontaneous visits to important Buddhist monasteries and teachers of the so-called crazy wisdom lineage, showing a fearless direction and complete dedication to both East and West. To me herding of the Sakyongs actions is always a bit of a painful shock and a welcome fresh breath at the same time, knocking me out of a cozy Buddhist cocoon in which I exclude the vastness of this world and the Buddhist vision.

Participating in this conference is exiting to me, as it brings together two key ingredients in my life. Bhutan, a country where I lived altogether over seven years and that brought me Buddhism, my wife and our beautiful two children, and the Shambhala Buddhist lineage, that I am a member of. I wonder very much: How much will these two recognise each other and truly connect?

Challenges of Bhutan

Above I have already postulated that Buddhism holds potential answers in particular for Bhutan, but I haven't discussed to which problems! Below I share some personal perceptions on Bhutan's current assest and challenges, on the understanding that these are descriptions are not timeless judgements, but momentary impressions and conclusions. My views change over time, and I base myself on limited observations, and will not even try to prove myself right. For the reader it is food for thought, informing you how the society of Bhutan comes across to a particular Dutch Buddhist. This person lived

in the Himalayan Kingdom for most of the nineteen-nineties, and is still connected to Bhutan through his marriage with a Bhutanese beauty, with whom he cares for two children that are the fruit of their love³.

As for Bhutan, what strikes me is how little both laymen and many monks and nuns know about Buddhism. Some of them know quite a bit about the daily rituals and the local natural deities. And many have a deep devotion for their revealed incarnate lama's. Although this may be called 'blind-faith', I do not look down on it at all, specially when the devotees are still deeply rooted in Bhutan's traditional rural culture. As a Jesuit Father said about the Bhutanese 'I don't try to convert, because they live in the Holy Spirit', or in the words of a Bhutanese lama 'They are so pure in their innocence'. Buddhism is in its core not an intellectual affair, but a matter of a completely open heart. So their 'blind faith' is congruent with what the Buddhist teachings attempt to help you develop.

Yet for the younger, educated generation this usually doesn't work the same way. They have developed their intellect, their curiosity. If their questions about Buddhism or their questions about life are not responded to by Buddhism, they are bound to loose interest. To many youngsters Buddhism becomes no more than a cultural form. Although I then feel sorry that they do not enjoy the fruit of a tree so close to them, I do not consider this a problem. Let them search fulfillment in their lives through other means.

I first see a problem when they cannot find a truly satisfying *purpose* in life anywhere, or when people try to preserve Bhutan's Buddhist heritage in an *unskillful*, at times doctrinaire manner. That the latter happens is unfortunate, but rather understandable. I see it happening as a consequence of actually sensing that there is something worth preserving to Buddhism, but not knowing exactly what it is. I myself sometimes feel frustrated when something is dear to me, but I cannot let my enthusiasm spark to someone else. If people do not long to eat my medicine, I easily start trying to shuffle it down their throat. As long as I can't explain and prove to them what exactly is so great about it (and I can't as long as I don't precisely know myself), my only option is forcing. But generally this will be counterproductive, because people experience me as needlessly intruding. Even if they yield temporarily to my power, I seed resistance for the future. The problem is not that the medicine isn't good enough. The problem is that as long as I myself don't quite know what *exactly* is so good about it, I can't rouse genuine curiosity.

In my perception this happens a lot in the area of culture, tradition and Buddhism in Bhutan. The younger generation doesn't automatically adopt old conventions. In response the older generation feels disrespected, and starts pushing for obidience and compliance, using the best arguments they guess may constitute the heart of Buddhism. Yet here blind-faith becomes a problem. Whereas the Buddha ran away from home to achieve liberation from suffering, attachment and untruthfulness, the uneducated interpretation of Buddhism has it that being a good citizen is a matter of doing what you are told to do. In this case the attempt is to use Buddhism to draw people together socially, rather than to

³ My personal perception of Bhutanese society had a number of stages, which I often see back in the way other foreigners relate to Bhutan. At first I saw Bhutan and Buddhism as picturesque, but naïve and backward. Then the profound dimension of Buddhism behind the shallow-eye captured me. In step three I romanticised: I tried seeing the whole government of Bhutan as implementing completely enlightened policies. I was setting myself up for a disillusion in the fourth stage, being a resentful acknowledgement that not everything was perfect. Currently I consider myself as mostly in the fifth stage, in which I see both unique and fantastic practices and opportunities, as well as problems, pain, wrong-doings and challenges.

liberate them and empower individuals to take find there own innate freedom. In short, tradition becomes empty and oppressive, rather than warm, personal and liberating.

In a slightly better case, Buddhism is not misused to make you abide by the rules, but is misrepresented as a self-improvement project. Just try a little harder and you will become a Buddha. Rather than saying that you already possess basic goodness, as Buddhism teaches in truth, the Buddha is then said to accept you if you admit your sins, bow down and try a little harder to be nice. You are still denied your Kingdom, are still encouraged to become other than who you are already, making you prone to disappointment. And to mention another common misunderstanding: Buddhism is not a love-and-light approach, or slow motion version of reality, promoting that you glide through this world with half-closed eyes. In fact tantra is said to go faster, rather than slower, than the desperate chaos of samsara. Much like Freud in the West, it is said in tantric Buddhism that you have to 'kill your father', which stands for going your own way, free from the fetters of expectations and reward.

If Buddhism is reduced into an attempt to suffocate and make you predicatble, it is no wonder that people start to look elsewhere for fulfillment in their lives (which, as I said before) is not a problem to me. The problem I mentioned comes when they don't find it elsewhere. Some find another religion and are happy with it: Great. But others try alcohol, drugs, sex or machoism, craving for satisfaction. The most sensitive among them have to take an extra dose, because they see through their own deception, and can't cover up that deep down they know they didn't find it yet.

This is, by the way, something I observe time and again worldwide, for example also recently in Africa. The children of the upper middle class in a poor country like Zambia, run from party to party, loaf around the streets, occasionally making trouble. Whereas their parents spend their live's energy with the clear aim of climbing the social ladder, the spoiled brads start comfortably high on it, but don't find a worthwhile purpose striving for. Those who had the softest hearts, may need the hardest shell, covering themselves so tightly that they become the hardest criminals. As much as they may vandalise, that much they shout for meaning, as much as they may sleep around, that much they long to belong to something.

And they have no clue that there is an answer much bigger and much closer to them than they expect. Because to them the Buddhist lama's on their thrones don't seem very near, nor are the moralistic stories of their teachers and parents very appealing (who may not have a very clear either, as discussed above).

Above I haven't talked about the many wonderful, free and alive characteristics of Bhutan, which I also recognise and enjoy (I had my reasons to work so many years in the country). To get a balanced picture, I should praise the fun, laughter and dances in the villages, the peace in the mountain retreats, the sacretness of many a shrine room, and the stunning beauty of the Himalayas themselves. I do not strife to sketch a balanced picture, because I am not trying to pass a judgement.

The tension I perceive underlying society in Bhutan is not particularly something to be afraid or ashamed of. Of course its consequences can sometimes be farreaching (I believe for example that some of the issues I raised brought unnecessary escalation and suffering in South Bhutan), but in Buddhism the cause of suffering is basic unawareness, an unfortunate misunderstanding, rather than an original sin. A challenge is to look at it and accept is honestly without deception or denial. In Bhutan this is a major challenge,

because people are often very bonded to their society and government. Even a dispassionate open-ended question can be felt and responded to as an attack. And that provides me with another opportunity to point at the potential that Buddhism may hold for Bhutan. Because the basic practice of shine (or shamatha) meditation is exactly designed to bring about that kind of equanimity. Shine, peaceful abiding, is about looking at what goes on in your mind without judgement, but with tremendous curiosity and softness, willing to bear witness and be surprised at any moment.

The difference of this paper

My conviction that Buddhism (or other traditions addressing this level) should be central to the GNH debate, seems to distinguish my contribution quite sharply from most contributions at the 2003 Seminar in Thimphu⁴.

- A large number of papers focussed on measuring GNH, mostly trimming GNH down into an amalgamation of economic development, environmental protection and cultural preservation. Although these efforts might fulfill the needs of policy-makers, they entirely lose what I find refreshing and inspiring about the concept. If the debate 'professionalises' in this direction it will reduce the relevance of Bhutan in the GNH debate into a scornful and pity folkloristic illustration. Acting scientific about GNH may be helpful and necessary to get heard by the international establishment, but I do not see it as instrumental to the governance of Bhutan. I do not argue that measuring is no use at all, but I do believe that the larger challenge ahead of us is to allow the spiritual dimension in governance on its own terms. To work with this dimension we need not first artificially translate it into the concepts and vocabulary of the currently-dominant global culture of politics and research.

Besides, the traveller on the academic road will note (as in any other social science relying on statistics), that indicators are never fully accurate in describing the phenomenon you are after. I understood, by way of an example, that the sales of anti-depressants is proposed as an indicator of happiness, with low sales indicating higher levels of happiness. For me personally such medicine are a great help to get and stay out of crippling fear and resentment, and I believe GNH would sharply rise if more people in pain would find the right medical support to surmount their trouble. So my warning here, as a trainer in development and project planning, is never to lose sight of the moon (happiness) that the finger (indicator) is merely pointing at.

- Another chunk of papers discussed subjective self-assessments of happiness, not daring to suggest that there is something objective and value-free about inner psychological and spiritual development. Or more precisely: Self-assessment gives you necessarily details on your current position, but not on your target. Even in democratic institutions a true leader is not the one who follows public opinion blind-folded, but a person who influences it in the direction of her vision. Satisfaction is nice-to-know information to assess your room-for-manceuvre, but it doesn't make daring choices about the society you want to help create.
- Some (but not all) papers that mention Buddhism, refer to it as a cultural glue to mold a strong society. In this perspective Buddhism is a means to make people accord to

⁴ Below I probably exaggerate the differences of view and opinion, in an attempt at least to clarify that the variety of views may *not* be different quarters of the same roadmap to happiness, and Bhutan is challenged to make its choices.

the establishment, rather than (as I prefer to conceive of it) as a tool for personal and social liberation and transformation. And most papers that focus on Buddhism, refrain from applying this philosophy to the actual current society. They abstain from expressing a humble, honest personal perception of what is positive and (especially of what is) negative in society, and coming up with recommendations to public or private actors. Finally, I saw most GNH-papers with a Buddhist slant, approach Buddhism merely as a philosophical and moral system with do-it-yourself recepies for life. As mentioned before, that is of course included in the Buddhist tradition, but I do not see that as the part with most immidiate relevance to (Bhutan's) challenges. I believe many societies are longing for inspiration, meaning and love that Buddhism is able to satisfy.

This second conference attempts to take a step from merely reflecting what GNH may mean, to practicing it. It is about heaven and earth, rather than dreaming about heaven alone. My paper probably calls people to ***regularly take a step aside while taking this forward leap***. I do not want to be an obstacle to actually *doing* something, but I do want to keep the question alive where we are going. If we forget that, we might as well continue the good old common road to deveelopment.

Perspectives

I would insult and ignore the internal dynamics in Bhutan if I concluded this paper with a detailed actionplan with deadlines and proposed responsables. Pushing unasked recipes wouldn't provoke a lot of enthusiams anyway.

When our family returns to live in Bhutan probably in a few years from now, we will be curious to see whether we can be of help. Until then it doesn't seem realistic to be closely involved with developments on that side of our globe. The kinds of development that we would love to contribute to though are often already taking shape. I rejoice very much in the production of the movey 'Travellers and Magicians' cast recently by a boisterous Bhutanese lama in his own country. At the moment I write this paper I also look forward how the visit of the Dutch rock group Bløf to Bhutan will turn out. I don't know the band well, but have sung a beautiful balade of theirs in a music school band I joined some years ago to become more fully alive myself. Because that is what the spiritual dimension I talk about simply comes down to: Ways and means to help and hearten people to come alive.

On this level Buddhism isn't all that different from other religions, and paradoxically Bhutan may maintain its own identity best by fearlessly opning itself to the larger world. Recently I attended a moving service in Nairobi, realising that this way of celebrating Sunday had made a round trip to the USA. Africa's most precious contribution to the world is probably its music (as much as Bhutan's contribution is Vajrayana Buddhism), which awakens the life force in the stiff and frozen hips of even a man like me. But to get in that Nairobi church, the music first travelled centuries ago with the slaves to Louisiana and Virgina. Having been assimilated in the US, white missionaries brought the service and its gospel songs back to Kenya. For a Buddhist, knowing the doctrine of non-self, this isn't even all that surprising. You become yourself, by opening yourself to others without hesitation or prejudice. Another encouraging move is that the Alliance Francaise, still fairly unique as a donor in this domain, plays a big role in enabling musical exchange within Africa. While not denying the importance of food and water, I bet that this is as important as our traditional development projects.

My above examples illustrate that governments normally only play an enabling rather than an active role in 'religion and development'. In Bhutan the government is rightly retreating from its former dominant role in shaping society. But given its unique history, the government of Bhutan may play a more than average part in promoting Buddhism as a means to get a deeper understanding of life, among others because education is still largely in government hands. Although I seem fairly alone in this in my circle of friends, I think that the Bhutanese national dress policy is basically a good one. Maintaining the dignity of your tradition is something you need to practice, and for which you need to dare display and demand a certain discipline, just like practicing good table manners. Just like you can't drink tea without a cup, you can't have a tradition without form.

Provided that free will isn't tempered with, daily meditation practices, retreats, rituals and for example talking circles could enrich the development of children, adding the levels of Buddhist teachings that I indicated are currently obscure to the average Bhutanese. Taking advantage of international experiences in this regard, the education sector in Bhutan could develop a curriculum that engages body and speech as much as it currently employs mind. And, according to the principle of 'practice what you preach' similar initiatives could be developed within the civil service.

Dedication

I wouldn't be truthful to what I maintained above, if I would end this paper without a simple prayer, so please allow me.

May the poor in food or meaning,
Experience the vast and profound pulse of this marvelous universe
May Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche live long to serve humanity,
And may I be a light-beam spreading his blazing love.

By this merit may all obtain omniscience,
May it defeat the enemy, wrong-doing,
From the stormy waves of birth, old-age, sickness and death,
From the ocean of samsara, may I free all beings.

By the confidence of the Golden Sun of the Great East,
May the Lotus Garden of the Rigden's wisdom bloom,
May the dark ignorance of sentient beings be dispelled,
May all beings enjoy profound, brilliant Glory.

Ki ki, so so!

Diederik Prakke is a trainer and consultant in human and institutional development with MDF (Management for Development Foundation). For the past twelve years he is a Buddhist practitioner and member of the Shambhala Buddhist community, headed by his teacher Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. He lived in Bhutan for over seven years working as a water engineer in capacity building, first visiting the country in 1990. Currently he lives with his Bhutanese wife and their two children in the Netherlands, but travels frequently and widely to 'developing' countries for his work. He loves, amongst others, music and icecream.