

What Does Gross National Happiness (GNH) Mean?

Keynote Speech by

Jigmi Y. Thinley,

Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs, Bhutan

2nd International Conference on GNH, Halifax, Canada, (21.6.2005).

Introduction:

Gross National Happiness, as the guiding philosophy of Bhutan's development process, was pronounced by His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, soon after his enthronement in 1972. Over the decades, many conferences and discourses have led to increasing elaboration and development of this concept as well as its practice. Our King was clear that happiness is the ultimate end desired, but not necessarily pursued by every Bhutanese and indeed, every human being. All else for which we labour are but means to fulfilling this wish. Yet it is ironic that human society is pervasively susceptible to confusion between this simple end and the complexity of means. This explains why conventional development or economic growth paradigm is seriously flawed and delusional.

It is heartening to observe that toward the end of the last century and at the beginning of this millennium, the reflective and the analytical across all sections of society are seeing the need to search for a clearer purpose and a more rational approach to development. There is a growing level of dissatisfaction with the way in which human society is being propelled without a clear and meaningful direction by the force of its own actions. It is also noteworthy that, there is a general consensus that conventional development process and contemporary way of life are not sustainable.

We see GNH as offering a more rational and human approach to development:

- ❖ First, GNH stands for the holistic needs of the human individual - both physical and mental well being. It reasons that while material development measures contribute, undeniably, to enhancing physical well-being, the state of

mind which is perhaps, more important than the body, is not conditioned by material circumstances alone.

- ❖ Second, which is a corollary to the first point, is that GNH seeks to promote a conscious, inner search for happiness and requisite skills which must harmonize with beneficial management and development of outer circumstances.
- ❖ Third, GNH recognises that happiness should not be approached or viewed as yet another competitive good to be realised by the individual. It supports the notion that happiness pursued and realised within the context of the greater good of society offers the best possibility for the sustained happiness of the individual. Further, while acknowledging that happiness may not be a directly deliverable good or service, it insists that it is far too important to be left as a purely individual responsibility without the state having a direct role. It may be emphasized that the society as a whole cannot obtain happiness if individuals compete irresponsibly for it, at all cost, in a zero-sum game. It is His Majesty's belief that the legitimacy of a government must be established on the basis of its commitment to creating and facilitating the development of those conditions that will make viable the endeavours of citizens in the pursuit of their single most important goal and purpose in life. To this end, GNH stresses collective happiness to be addressed directly through public policies in which happiness becomes an explicit criterion in development projects and programmes.
- ❖ Fourth, as happiness is the most common yearning of the electorate both individually and collectively and as it transcends ideological or contentious values, public policies based on GNH will be far less arbitrary than those based on standard economic tools.

Socio-cultural pre-disposition towards GNH:

Traditional polity in Bhutan, drawing much on the Buddhist culture, was always guided towards GNH. A Buddhist equivalent of a 'Social Contract' declared in Bhutan in 1675 states that happiness of all sentient beings and the teachings of the Buddha are mutually dependent. The legal code of 1729 further requires that laws

must promote happiness of sentient beings. As it is popularly known, much about what we may call Buddhist science of the mind is about managing feelings and emotions. Thus, a great deal of cultural knowledge and education in traditional society was aimed at conditioning the mind to give or cause happiness to all beings. Enlightening the inner self or human nature became a far greater task than taming nature and manipulating the world for personal or even national gain.

This helps explain why the Bhutanese should, in general, have a pre-disposition towards a more holistic, unconventional approach to development which recognizes happiness as the primary and perhaps, only purpose of development.

International Context:

In general, models for both developed as well as developing countries do not explicitly include happiness as a development end, and contemporary measures of progress do not usually address happiness. It is assumed to be the collateral result of social and economic policies. This is not to suggest that we should reject altogether current approaches and their indices. In fact, the purposes of Human Development, Sustainable Development and Millennium Development Goals are noble and supported by fairly well developed indicators. Likewise, the Genuine Progress Index pioneered here in Nova Scotia is a noteworthy measure of true human advancement. Equally, there are other institutions and individuals, both in North America and Europe, who are doing similar work. However, we should be open to the possibility that varying methodologies and resultant outcomes could be different from the goals of GNH.

What GNH calls for is a holistic, comprehensive approach to development. It calls for proactive public policy and programme intervention and commitment of necessary resources. But we could agree that these diverse efforts and coalescence of interests can and must contribute to the promotion of happiness as a serious state responsibility, and that it must not be rejected conveniently as utopian or ideological.

It is a matter of some satisfaction to note that the media, academia, development experts and social engineers alike have shown growing interest in the subject of happiness in recent years. The desirability and feasibility of happiness as an essential goal and purpose of society have been bolstered by empirical findings of and an upsurge in research. Surely, these are a reflection of the rising popular concerns and interests of society - that society is not content with our unsustainable, unfulfilling and unhappy way of life amid ominous signs of our collective future. This should help engender further understanding, knowledge and wisdom, through such worthy activities as the one in which we are presently engaged. I am certain that public interest and concern in the subject is not a passing trend and that public acceptance of the powerful and compelling reasons will serve to impel deeper research and policy intervention.

1. A good reason to begin with, as corroborated by unquestionable data, is that the manifold rise in real income in several highly industrialized countries over the last 50 years has not led to similar increases in happiness. It is evident that triumphs in the rat race to earn more, have more and consume more do not bring true and lasting happiness. The rich, the powerful and the glamorous, it appears, are often the ones who are more impoverished spiritually and socially and thereby are less happy. While there is certainly considerable room for improvement to what and how we measure both wealth and happiness, the lack of any correlation between the two, after meeting basic needs, clearly indicates that happiness cannot be found on the unending, rudderless journey powered by man's insatiable greed.
2. This brings me to the second reason - the illusion of market-led happiness. The market demands greater efficiency and higher productivity. It demands ruthless competition, maximization of profit and employs enticement as the means. But these are the very causes that serve to dehumanise society and undermine the factors that create happiness. As has been well documented, demanding and grinding work life that is necessary for efficiency and productivity is difficult to be balanced with leisure and social life that give us satisfaction. Moreover, mobility and job-changes imposed by the market are

inconsistent with the vital need for sustained community life just as emotional security is diminished by market economics. And it bears repeating that, edging out the weak, making profit the main motive for industry and capitalizing on the baser instincts of envy and greed are not the ingredients for a harmonious society.

3. Related to mobility and locational changes as dictated by our professional lives is our attempt, at the same time, to stay connected through better virtual and real communication. Yet the third concern springs from the reality that people are living ever more apart despite being ever so connected. We only have to remind ourselves of the near complete disintegration of the extended family structure or network in the urban and industrialized societies, higher rates of divorce, single parenting, the erosion of trust and loss of genuine friendship that are known to be factors in unhappiness. If upbringing by single parents is an increasing aspect of modern life, aging alone is also a rising prospect. It is ironic that longer life spans afforded by science and medicine should serve to prolong the pains of loneliness and desolation.
4. The fourth reason is to be found in the rise in mental illness, alcoholism and related crime across all categories of age. Then there is suicide which is a clear sign of the absence of emotional and psychological anchors in society. It is symptomatic of the failure to see any purpose in life and the loss of hope for happiness. Depression rates too seem to be substantial in many societies and the latest American statistics in this regard are alarmingly most revealing.

My list is, of course, not exhaustive. These simply represent some of the more popular concerns that the academia and media have brought into sharper focus. Given the socio-cultural impulses from within and evidences from without, it was with no little consideration or conviction that we in Bhutan opted for a development process that some say offers a new paradigm.

Policy Response in Bhutan: Four Pillars of GNH:

GNH is a broader concept and more profound in its implication than conveyed by the current set of policy-bundle priorities as represented by the metaphor of pillars in Bhutan. Within Bhutan, the four priority areas of GNH are perceived as a normatively defined means towards promoting GNH, and that is to create the conditions that would enable every citizen to pursue happiness with a reasonable chance of success. We do appreciate that these may not necessarily find universal application. Further, I must admit that the idea of measuring happiness was dismissed with the remark “look at the faces of the people and see it in the breadth of their smile”. Rather, we focused on the broad policy priorities that were assumed to be macro-conditions of collective happiness.

What is clear to us is that in a state bearing responsibility for collective happiness, GNH must be a serious arbitrator of public policies. And GNH as a programme for social and economic change to remove obstacles to happiness must focus on the content and nature of public policies. If promotion of happiness is the primary purpose of a GNH state, then it is essential that the institutional arrangements of a society reflect this value. Yet it is very challenging to even contemplate what a GNH state should be like. The nature and theoretical foundations of a modern developing or libertarian democratic state are well-known. But the structures and processes of a GNH state are yet to be defined clearly. If at all this needs to be done, should it be distinct from either the ascendant liberal state or declining socialist state. What will be the nature of GNH political economy? What will be appropriate social welfare, legal and constitutional foundations for GNH? What will be its educational and health policies? How would the polity have to change? And so forth.

There are many questions that require examination beginning with the basic principles. I am in no position to even suggest at this moment that Bhutan is a GNH state though it aspires to be so. Through conferences like these and researches on happiness, we hope to find lessons and learn while continuing to craft public policies consistent with GNH.

At this stage in Bhutan, and as I have just mentioned, the creation of an enabling environment for GNH is being undertaken through a set of four key strategies

popularly known as the four pillars. These are:

- (1) Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development,**
- (2) Conservation of environment,**
- (3) Preservation and promotion of culture and**
- (4) Promotion of good governance.**

These thematic areas may very well be an incomplete catalogue of policy areas for good development, but they do encompass the important areas of concentration to serve the intended purpose. In building and strengthening the four pillars, we must be mindful of their inter-dependence, as indeed in reality, to ensure holistic development. Only with such a holistic perspective, the externalities which are eliminated as costs in one sector cannot reappear in another. I would also add that alternative policy frameworks for GNH are certainly conceivable. It would be interesting to see what this conference may produce in this regard.

Sustainable and equitable Socio-economic development: The necessity for materialistic development is obvious from the scale of economic suffering faced by the majority of global population. Ignorance, ill health, deprivation and poverty in their most abject forms are still serious challenges faced by much of the developing world. Economic growth is of absolute necessity to eradicate poverty. It is, therefore, true to say that for many countries and for vast sections of our global community for whom physical survival is an every day challenge, economic policies are what matters most. Securing jobs and livelihood are prerequisites of happiness. For them economic policies are happiness policies, but not otherwise. In general, there appear to be three considerations that must guide GNH driven economic development.

1. First, in a GNH economy, the means and nature of economic activities chosen are as important as their result in terms of economic growth. As research by Genuine Progress Index have shown, a GNH economy must make qualitative distinctions in the mix of economic activities for the same level of growth and size of economy.

Second, the measurement system for a GNH economy must necessarily be

different from conventional measurement of GDP. It must value social and economic contributions of households and families, free time and leisure given the roles of these factors in happiness. The indicators must not be biased towards consumption. It must take into account conservation of social, environmental and human capitals.

2. Third, a GNH economy must concentrate on redistribution of happiness through income redistribution far more seriously. This is not only an ethical proposition but rather because we cannot escape from the reality of living in a world of distorted perceptions where people derive satisfaction from relative, and not absolute wealth or consumption. The self-defeating, vicious spiral of catching up with or bettering the Jones's amid unconscionable inequality is a hindrance to collective happiness. Yet, orientation of our perceptions towards actual and absolute needs and the ability to find satisfaction upon having fulfilled such needs is in itself a near impossible but inevitable challenge for a GNH economy.

Conservation of Environment: Moving on to environment, it would seem from happiness researches that environment and biodiversity are not strong correlates of happiness. This is partly because apparently, no one has attempted to seriously measure happiness against environmental variables. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue against the value of environment in everyday life and hence our happiness, given that our health and aesthetic experiences depend on the quality of physical environment around us. This is particularly true for the Bhutanese who live in an extremely fragile environment. Among farming communities, such as majority of Bhutanese, living not only close to, but in nature, livelihood depends directly on richness of their immediate natural environment which bestows on them free, wholesome foods, medicines, pleasure and a host of essential materials. I contend that even the development of our finer senses depend on our regular, if not daily, access to natural environment. Thus, I would argue that there is a demonstrable relationship between happiness and natural environment..

Given our intuition about environment and happiness, and our fear of the immediate consequences of tampering with the wrathful nature of the Himalayan ecology, Bhutan launched vigorous greening and biodiversity preservation policies, the implementation of which have not been without costs in terms of foregone industrial and commercial opportunities. But our country is greener than it has been in living memory, with 26% of it dedicated as wild life sanctuaries and 72% forest coverage.

But it is not enough that we take local or national actions. There are so many external factors that do and can directly affect our survival. Global warming for instance has already led to very visible and alarming rates of the withdrawal of glaciers, which are the sources and natural regulators of our river systems. Predictions about the definite possibility of the disappearance of all the glaciers in the third Polar region namely, the Himalayas, within the next 30 to 50 years are terrifying to say the least.

The latest report of our department of geology and mines, which has been studying glacial behaviour since 1967, is not encouraging at all. For not only Bhutan could eventually become a barren desert but the process leading to it could be devastatingly painful and prolonged. Much of our fertile valleys could be swept away by the glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) that are no longer a rare phenomenon in the mountain regions of the world. The impact of all this on the two and a half billion people living on either side of the Himalayas and on the security of the whole world is unthinkable especially given that water scarcity is already a major concern. It would not only be the Maldives and other low lying islands and coastal real estates that are at risk unless green house gas emissions are controlled and reduced. Likewise, Bhutan's susceptibility to the harmful rays of the sun on account of the depletion of the Ozone layer could be significantly more than those in the lower elevations.

The world needs to desperately recognize earth as a mortal organism that must be nourished and protected. It desperately needs to accept the mountains of evidence which prove that our finite natural resources are running out while nature's magic of regenerating and replenishing are fading away. Someone called Bhutan an acupuncture point in the leviathan body of our ailing planet!

Preservation and Promotion of Culture: Let me start on the priority area of culture for GNH by pointing out that culture received a rare global attention last year through the UNDP's human development report titled "Cultural Diversity in Today's World." Free choice is equated with cultural liberty and as being central to human rights and human development. Throughout, the report resonates with the message that an individual must have the right to choose, change, and revise various elements of his multiple cultural identities.

While there should be all the space for choice, we should distinguish situations where individuals change their identities voluntarily from situations where powerless individuals are changed by profoundly pervasive forces such as open-sky and free trade regimes which spawn cultural hybridization, creolization and displacement of vernacular economies, even before one realizes. This is particularly true in highly asymmetric situations like Bhutan where massive external cultural influences could literally overwhelm local cultural values when the borders open wide under the onslaught of globalization - hence the need for a vigorous promotion of indigenous cultures as a context for making available true choice to individuals. We believe that a state which does not preserve its cultural richness is one where the choices and well-being of its citizens are diminished and greatly constrained.

It is, however, true that there is also a difficulty in reconciling human rights with cultural rights which are group-based rights. As it has been pointed out, group-based rights do not sit easily with the concept of individuals as autonomous choosers. Nevertheless, what we can say in favour of group-based traits implied by culture is that choice is instrumental for pursuit of well-being and happiness. But as is well known, well-being and happiness are largely a shared pursuit. Happiness exists and grows with sharing. I find it rather difficult to accept that human development should be seen only from the point of view of individual liberty and as being concerned with 'widening choices to be and do what one values' (should I say, please?) without relating to any larger societal good.

But the matter about human rights and cultural liberty seems to be more complex in reality. Let me take one point. We need to be attentive to human beings not only as

bearers of the same set of universal rights, but also as far more complex individuals with cultural and social particularities that define them. We need to adhere to human rights and liberty as basic universal minimum standards to mediate individuals' claims against each other or between individuals and the state. But we could explore further the view that completely meaningful interdependence can arise only when and if we do not see ourselves as just independent and as separate bearers of rights, but as relational beings. As one scholar put it, suffering and unhappiness in the end, arise not so much from factual conditions of loss or misfortune, but when the flow of meaningful relationships is blocked or interrupted.

I also find the emphasis on rule of law to regulate human interrelationships intriguing. There is a paradox in preaching against conformity and promoting rule of law at the same time. Excessive emphasis on the rule of law to the extent of regulating most forms of human relationships and conduct by the state at the cost of social and customary norms and practices is, in my opinion, state coercion to conform. It undermines the virtue and the indispensability of social and voluntary responsibility arising from respect for and belief in society and its values. I have often wondered whether diminishing community life along with its imperatives is the result of our voluminous laws. It seems sensible, as an example, to strengthen those customs and traditions which require married people to be good to their spouses and children because they see virtue in it and want to enjoy the happiness that it generates rather than to be seen doing so because the law requires it with threat of retribution.

Good Governance: In one sense, securing any public good, such as collective happiness, depends on realising governance oriented to it. Logically, if a government should reflect the ultimate democratic desire or opinion of the people, which is happiness, then the nature of governance should also be attuned to it. But I must admit that both theoretically and practically, we are far from grounding GNH in any contemporary system of government and political structures, of which the most well-established is liberal democratic system.

However, in keeping with times, we in Bhutan are about to formally take up parliamentary democracy. His Majesty the King, the fountainhead of all positive

changes, has recently circulated the Draft Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan that opts for liberal democratic institutions. We have taken such a system as the best conceivable institutional arrangement for securing any public good and good governance. But we should not betray ourselves with the belief that liberal democratic system is the climactic manifestation in a linear and convergent evolution of political institutions, as some scholars have supposed.

Distinguished participants, you are well aware that even in the best of the great democratic societies, the signal values of democracies like freedom and equality that man has struggled to attain seem set at one moment but unsteady at another. We are well aware of the tension between freedom and equality and the shifting boundary between them. Likewise, we are reminded time and again, of the vacillating lines between the private and public domains, and between secularism and politics.

All human institutions are systems of relationships between and among actors; in themselves they have no inherent nature. We can always attempt to move in a direction of improving our shared situations or 'relationalities', which are where happiness arises and dissolves, depending on the quality of relationships. In so doing, we can improve any institutional arrangement and human conditions. For example, even alleviating poverty - a primary objective of most governments and international agencies - is only partly a matter of alleviating objective material circumstances. As I understand, poverty results from failure of relationships which can be revived or strengthened by better values and intentions in the heart of institutions.

What seems to demand attention even among democratic states is the question about motivational values that drive the institutions holding power, instead of their forms alone. We need to ask whether values and intentions that guide them and the processes employed for governance, both at the national and international levels, are aligned with search for happiness, where every person's happiness matters to equal degree. The fact that national governance and international relations are so intertwined as never before, as national governance is rarely independent of the international context in a globalized world, also presents opportunities. It provides scope and reason to ponder question and rethink the aims, content and nature of

international relations and global institutions. We must ask and consider as to whether focusing on happiness can lead us to a more peaceful, harmonious and equitable world and truly sustainable and civilized human society.

Conclusion:

To sum up, GNH is a balanced and holistic approach to development. It is based on the conviction that man is bound by nature to search for happiness, and that it is the single most desire of every citizen. The only difference between Bhutan and others is that we do not dismiss it as a utopian quest.

Bhutan hopes to learn from the ongoing discourse on the subject. We are deeply encouraged by the growing number of articles and books that have begun appearing on the subject since our first international conference on GNH in Thimphu. Likewise, we have had the pleasure of welcoming many research scholars and prominent journalists to Bhutan. Evidently, there is growing interest in how to be happy as opposed to how to make money. Dollars and cents are not the bottom line in life. It is our hope that as more thought is given to this common quest in life, there will be more ideas and reasons why GNH should guide human development to further human civilization.

I wish the conference Tashi Delek and Happiness.

Thank you.