

Gross National Happiness

Abstract This chapter outlines the multidimensional and integrated nature of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and explores its roots in a foundation of Buddhist-inspired cultural values. It argues that GNH is not only a national multidimensional development model for Bhutan but also a defining component of the image of the Bhutanese state itself, portraying an autonomous and coherent entity leading the pursuit of national happiness in partnership with Bhutanese society. Despite this image, the implementation of GNH policies is subject to the competing priorities and practices of the fragmented state and non-state governance actors involved.

Keywords Bhutan • Buddhism • Cultural values • Gross National Happiness • State image

Bhutan has increasingly seeped into western consciousness. This is perhaps best reflected in the growing number of popular non-fiction works about the country written in recent years. Their titles are instructive: *A Splendid Isolation*; *Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness*; *Beneath Blossom Rain*; *Married to Bhutan*; and *A Field Guide to Happiness: What I learned in Bhutan About Living, Loving and Waking up*. Collectively these works celebrate Bhutan's rugged geographic isolation, its mystical eastern spirituality, and the rural lifestyle that dominates much of its population. Bhutan, for many, is the last remaining Shangri-La. Paralleling

this romanticized view of Bhutan are competing perceptions that harshly criticize the country for the same reasons as those who romanticize it: its isolation, non-western perspectives, and predominantly rural life. *Foreign Policy* magazine included Bhutan on its 2010 list of 60 failed states. Accompanying the list was a photo essay in the magazine entitled *Postcards from Hell*. The essay criticized Bhutan for deviating from the path of western modernization. Bhutan, it argued, is a failed state given the percentage of its population that is rural, its isolation, its preservation of traditional culture, and its rejection of traditional measures of economic growth for its own Gross National Happiness approach.

Neither of these depictions of Bhutan is particularly accurate. Bhutan is not a traditional Shangri-La nor is it a backwater hell. In both cases, perceptions of the country are a response to its uniqueness. Bhutan is an isolated and small country in a region dominated by India and China. Much of its population of less than a million people lives within the many valleys and ridges that cut through the Himalayas. Unlike most of its neighbours, Bhutan was never colonized and remained almost entirely closed off to the outside world until the 1960s. As Bhutan cautiously opened up to the world, Gross National Happiness emerged under the fourth king, who ascended the throne in 1972, as a guiding development philosophy for the country. It represented a rejection of the dominant economic growth model and embraced a balanced, holistic, and integrated approach that focuses on happiness. For those who are schooled in the economic growth model, GNH is quirky, misguided, and backwards. For those dissatisfied with an all-consuming focus on growth, GNH offers a serious attempt at implementing a multidimensional and integrated development model on a national scale.

1 HAPPINESS AS THE GOAL OF GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS

Gross National Happiness is rooted in the simple notion that happiness is a universal aspiration and should be the core of development. Happiness comes from a well-rounded balance of the material and non-material. The accumulation of wealth is not the desired end of development; it is only a means that is interconnected to achieving the multiple social, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of being human. Moreover, genuine happiness involves an intricate link between individual and collective happiness. Both require and consolidate the other. The Gross National Happiness Commission, the apex body responsible for

operationalizing GNH in Bhutan, developed a definition of GNH that incorporates each of these components. According to Karma Tshiteem, former Secretary of the Gross National Happiness Commission, GNH is a development approach that “seeks a balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional and cultural needs of society” (Royal Government of Bhutan [RGoB] 2012, pp. 40–41).

All of this sounds intriguing but what does it really mean? What is the nature of the balance described by the GNH Commission? The key to understanding the nature of happiness within GNH is found in its Buddhist foundation. According to *Bhutan 2020*, the country’s long-term development plan:

[O]ur approach to development has been shaped by the beliefs and values of the faith we have held for more than 1000 years. Firmly rooted in our rich tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, the approach stresses not material rewards, but individual development, sanctity of life, compassion for others, respect for nature, social harmony, and the importance of compromise. (Planning Commission 1999a, p. 19)

This Buddhist notion of happiness distinguishes between two forms of consciousness, *dukkha* and *sukha*, which have different implications for happiness. *Dukkha* represents the notion of suffering, ranging from extreme distress to minor discomfort. Suffering may occur in the face of change where immediate and external stimulation—good food, good fun, good sex—generate short-lived feelings of satisfaction that ultimately lead to frustration due to their impermanence. This is a form of temporary pleasure that is self-centred and superficial; it is not happiness at all (McDonald 2009; Ricard 2011). *Sukha*, on the other hand, is a stable and foundational form of happiness. Human fulfilment requires the cultivation of internal spiritual, mental, and emotional components rather than reliance on external stimulation. Adequate material necessities are important to avoid dissatisfaction but true happiness requires moving from dependence on such material sources to the harmonization of the material and non-material (Ricard 2011). Happiness in this Buddhist sense is not the smile that accompanies a new purchase at the local shopping mall; it is the deep-seated contentment that accompanies realizing one’s full human potential as an individual interconnected with society and the environment. It is towards this kind of happiness that Gross National Happiness is directed (Lokamitra 2004; Thinley 1999).

2 THE GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS FRAMEWORK

The deep-seated, multidimensional, and interconnected nature of this understanding of happiness forms the basis for the Gross National Happiness development framework. The framework was initially broadly constructed as four integrated pillars intended to work together to promote the material and non-material aspects of happiness: equitable social and economic development, environmental conservation, cultural preservation and promotion, and good governance. Exactly when this GNH development framework emerged is somewhat murky. GNH was initiated by the fourth king sometime after assuming the throne in 1972. Jigmi Y. Thinley, a former Prime Minister of Bhutan, reported that he first heard the king reference GNH in the early to mid-1970s (in McDonald 2010: 1). Multiple official documents date the conception of GNH to 1972 specifically (GNH Commission 2013, p. 29; GNH Commission/UNDP 2011, p. 16). Other documents date its emergence to the late 1970s or 1980s (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research 2016, p. 32; RGoB 2005, p. 15; GNH Commission 2009, p. 17). The latter is perhaps a reflection of the appearance of GNH at that time in the international media. Munro (2016) documents what appears to be the first written appearance of GNH in two *New York Times* articles written in 1980. More well-known is a 1987 interview with the king where he discussed GNH in an article that appeared in the *Financial Times* (Elliott 1987). By the late 1990s, the GNH framework was much more explicit in the Bhutanese government's development dialog (Thinley 1999). At what point the framework emerged in this timeline is unclear. The official documents that cite its emergence in the 1970s or 1980s contrast with Munro (2016) who argues that GNH did not exist as a central organizing theme for Bhutanese development prior to 1996. One Bhutanese document (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research 2016, pp. 32–35) seems to bridge these two, arguing that GNH emerged in the late 1970s and was applied intuitively until it was institutionalized much later. These multiple claims make it difficult to date a specific starting point for the GNH framework. Yet what is clear is that by the mid-1990s, an explicit framework was in place. The four pillars of the framework constitute the material and non-material dimensions required for happiness that are meaningful in the Bhutanese context.

The four pillars were more recently expanded into a more detailed conceptualization of GNH involving nine domains. These nine domains

elaborate the four original pillars into more specific dimensions including health, education, living standard, ecological diversity and resilience, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, time use, and psychological well-being. The nine domains are the foundation for measuring GNH but the four pillars have been the broad development framework that operationally structures the implementation of GNH, including in the country's current five year plan for 2013–2018 (GNH Commission 2013). At the same time, GNH is portrayed as a strategy that is dynamic and open to evolution (GNH Commission 2009, p. 18; Planning Commission 1999b, p. 12). Indeed, the guidelines for the development of the 2018–2023 five year plan position the nine domains as the updated organizing framework (GNH Commission 2016).

While the four pillars exist alongside the expanded nine dimensions, understanding the nature of GNH best draws on the four pillars. The pillars have been assessed in the literature in greater detail as they have been around longer. Moreover, respondents in this study almost always identified with the four pillars rather than the nine domains. The nature of the pillars, and to a lesser extent the domains, and the values at their foundation are described in a range of official documents, speeches, and scholarly studies (see, for example, Givel 2015; GNH Commission/UNDP 2011, pp. 15–17; Priesner 2004; Rinzin 2006; Rinzin et al. 2007; RGoB 2005; Thinley 1999). The first pillar, sustainable and equitable social and economic development, is based on the assumption that economic growth is important but not an end in itself. Equitable economic growth that enables people to live in dignity while not being overcome by a spirit of overconsumption is critical for promoting happiness. Further, growth in the economy is an important vehicle to promote improved education, health, and other social conditions in a manner that is equitable in the present and across generations. The values of balance, dignity, egalitarianism, and sustainable consumption form the core of the pillar.

The second pillar, environmental conservation, recognizes that humans are intimately interconnected with the natural environment and all sentient beings. A healthy environment is inherently interlinked with human happiness. Pollution and overconsumption of natural resources must be avoided and conservation pursued. This does not mean environmental conservation should be pursued at all costs. As natural resources impact people's livelihoods, balance and harmonization are required

between environmental conservation and socio-economic development to ensure sustainable livelihoods. Interconnectedness, balance, harmony, compassion, sustainability, and the sanctity of all life are values at the foundation of the pillar.

Cultural preservation and promotion, the third pillar in the GNH framework, recognizes that culture is critical to happiness as it provides a basis for individual and collective identity and unity. It also strengthens community bonds across generations. Maintaining culture is particularly important in the onslaught of increasingly homogenous global culture and its consumption-based values that threaten to undermine indigenous values and practices. In the Bhutanese context, this means preserving and promoting cultural characteristics like close family ties, the balanced use of time, religious practices, voluntarism, meditation, and traditional knowledge. The values of balance, unity, and interconnectedness among people are the foundation of these Bhutanese cultural characteristics. At the same time, the cultural pillar is not constructed as purely traditional and static. Culture is dynamic. The pillar therefore requires a balance between fostering traditional cultural uniqueness on the one hand and cautiously drawing upon the benefits of other cultural influences and globalization on the other hand. The preservation and promotion of culture within the official GNH framework is intended to protect a national culture that is unifying yet dynamic and open to evolution.

As the final pillar of GNH, good governance provides a vehicle to pursue the other three pillars. For the pursuit of equitable socio-economic development, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation and promotion to be effective, decision-making needs to be responsive to people's needs, free of corruption, and engage all relevant stakeholders. Central to this is building trust in leaders and institutions. The values of fairness, justice, responsiveness, effectiveness, and accountability are the foundation of the pillar.

The Gross National Happiness framework is not merely these multiple dimensions that individually promote happiness. Central to understanding the role of the GNH pillars in guiding Bhutanese development is their integrated nature. They are meant to be interdependent, recognizing the complexity and interrelationships within and across social, economic, ecological, cultural, and governance systems. Bhutanese government documents and speeches describe the four pillars as "synergistic", having a "harmonious balance" and being "interwoven in reality"

(GNH Commission 2009, p. 17; RGoB 2005, p. 15; Thinley 2007, p. 7). The interdependence of the pillars requires attention be paid to their interactions or what has been termed the “meticulous orchestration” of the pillars (Rinzin 2006, p. 30). Such orchestration requires that the notion of balance across the dimensions be at the core of the Gross National Happiness approach. Indeed, Bhutan’s GNH strategy is often referred to as “the middle path”.

Rinzin (2006) clearly connects this notion of GNH as the middle path to Buddhist values and principles. The values underlying the individual pillars of GNH are defined as distinctly Buddhist values and these are often linked to Bhutanese culture (Givel 2015; Dessallien 2005, pp. 38–39; Priesner 2004; Rinzin et al. 2007; Ura and Kinga 2004, p. 42; Tashi 2004, Tideman 2011). Subsuming religion within culture is not without its conceptual challenges (Dugbazah 2009; pp. 12–17; Geertz 1993, Chap. 4). Nonetheless, GNH constructs Buddhism as the core of the cultural values of the country. They provide the foundation upon which GNH rests. The pillars of GNH act as a strategic framework rooted in Buddhist cultural values intended to foster the achievement of happiness as the end goal of development. What is often less clear is exactly *how* the pillars do so. Popular perceptions of GNH often assume a direct link between the implementation of the framework and the creation of happiness. The reality is more subtle. The Bhutanese state’s official construction of the GNH framework emphasizes the role of the framework in promoting the material and non-material conditions necessary for pursuing foundational happiness; the framework itself does not directly lead to happiness (GNH Commission 2009, p. 17; GNH Commission/UNDP 2011, p. 16; RGoB 2005, p. 18). According to Karma Tshiteem, former Secretary of the Gross National Happiness Commission: “Happiness still remains an individual responsibility, but the State makes sure that the necessary conditions are there for people to pursue the path they choose” (in Braun 2009: 34). This is a critical distinction. GNH does not create happiness for individuals and society. Similar to the human development paradigm, the GNH framework creates enabling conditions that provide people with the ability to choose to live happy lives within their national context, where happiness is understood as fulfilling one’s deepest human potential. Such human potential is self-regarding and other-regarding where both are interconnected with the environment. Accordingly, development policies and programs that

generate equitable socio-economic development, a healthy environment and vibrant culture, all supported by good governance, are intended to create the enabling conditions that allow Bhutanese individuals and society to pursue happiness and fulfil their full potential.

3 GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS AS THE IMAGE OF THE BHUTANESE STATE

The Bhutanese state's official construction of GNH as a multidimensional and integrated national development strategy has leant itself to defining the Bhutanese state itself as a "GNH state", or, more often, as a state aspiring to become a GNH state. Gross National Happiness is often portrayed as a normative statist goal, a legitimization of state policy, or a self-representation of the state itself (Ura 2007, p. 41). Examples are numerous. The state's central role in promoting the enabling conditions for GNH is entrenched in article 9.2 of the constitution. Many central government ministries have GNH embedded within their mission statements. Recent public sector reforms were couched in terms of promoting GNH. Legislation on the role of local governments ties them explicitly to fostering GNH. The fifth king, upon his ascension to the throne in 2006, declared that pursuing GNH will be a defining component of his reign. GNH is deeply infused into the very character of the state.

Just as significantly, GNH is portrayed as being more than a national development strategy that is a fundamental component of the state. Gross National Happiness also strengthens the state. Its uniqueness as a multidimensional development strategy rooted to the Bhutanese context is the foundation for maintaining Bhutan's identity and, consequently, its sovereignty (Mancall 2004; Planning Commission 1999b, pp. 10–12). Bhutan's location in a region of geopolitical giants where sovereignty has been threatened or extinguished in places like Sikkim and Tibet makes it vulnerable as a tiny nation of less than a million people. Gross National Happiness provides a national project that carves out a clear national identity, a distinctly "Bhutanese" identity that provides a uniqueness for the country to protect itself from external claims. Gross National Happiness is therefore part of the state's character as well as its protector.

The state-in-society approach argues that the state is a dualistic entity made up of a coherent and unified image on the one hand and the

actual practices of its component parts on the other. The characterization of Bhutan as an aspiring GNH state illustrates that Gross National Happiness is a critical component of the image of the Bhutanese state. GNH is officially constructed as part of the foundation of the state that promotes the multidimensional conditions for its citizens' happiness and undergirds the sovereignty and unity of the state as a coherent entity. According to a former Bhutanese cabinet minister, "The good thing is that GNH is the image of our country. It is our North Star. We sail our ship in faith and hope" (Powdyel 2007, p. 75). But this image of the state can be precisely that, an image only. As the state-in-society approach argues, it is distinguished from the actual practices of the state's various parts as they engage with one another and with society. The Bhutanese state may be an avatar of the Bhutanese population, officially guiding the country towards the creation of the conditions for happiness, but this image can be acted upon in different ways by the actions of state and society actors. The multiple levels of government, emerging private sector, growing civil society sector, international donors, and a non-Buddhist minority of ethnic Nepalese who, in the 1990s, were at the centre of an ethnic conflict, all hold the potential to pursue a range of priorities in the process of implementing GNH. These priorities may subvert the image and outcomes of a coherent GNH state. The official construction of an image of a GNH state does not necessarily make it a GNH state in practice. The GNH governance framework seeks to address this challenge.

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