

Values and Development: “Gross National Happiness”

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Mr. Chairman, your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

I am most grateful to His Excellency Nay Htun, UN Assistant Secretary-General, for the honour he has conferred upon me by inviting me to address this important meeting. I also wish to express my appreciation to the Government of the Republic of Korea for the warm hospitality that my delegation has received. I have accepted this invitation without false modesty, because it reaches beyond me as an individual towards my country, the Kingdom of Bhutan. We are deeply honoured by the fact that UNDP and Government of the Republic of Korea have considered fit to recognize our development philosophy as a worthwhile topic to be shared with you today. The Royal Government and the people of Bhutan value this inestimable opportunity through which the development ideal evolved by His Majesty the King is given a hearing beyond our own border.

I expressly bring to the distinguished gathering the greetings and good wishes of the King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who has been the fountainhead of philosophy, concepts and policies of our development for nearly three decades. His Majesty has proclaimed that the ultimate purpose of government is to promote the happiness of the people. This point has resonated in many of his speeches and decrees, which stress both increasing prosperity and happiness. His Majesty has said: “Gross National Happiness is

more important than Gross National Product”, and has given happiness precedence over economic prosperity.

1. The Place of Happiness in International Development Policies

Happiness is a shared desire of every human being. It is possibly the ultimate thing we want while other things are wanted only as a means to its increase. It is my great privilege to talk on gross national happiness as a non-quantifiable development objective in Bhutan. However, I am under no illusion that I can explain all the doubts that will arise, within the compass of this short and simplified talk. I am neither a social scientist nor an enlightened monk with specialist perspective into this issue. My shortcoming in this field is compounded by an indifferent academic climate: happiness has usually been considered a utopian issue. The academic community has not developed the tools we need to look at happiness, one of our primary human values. This has led to a paradoxical situation: the primary goal of development is happiness, but the subject of this very goal eludes our analysis because it has been regarded as subjective. The current approach may be too obtuse and unnecessarily scientific. We do not need scientific proofs to assess happiness meaningfully. We can, and in my opinion we must, raise policy and ethical questions about happiness. It is a universal proposition and value. It is a goal all humanity shares in common.

I venture to submit that happiness should be made a major focus in assessing welfare. Much is known about income disparities but nothing about the happiness gap either between social groups or between nations. The trends of happiness of people are unknown. Happiness is not the direct concern of many governments or international agencies. Consequently, social and economic policies have not been designed explicitly to address happiness. Although, many agencies have been highly sensitive to the movements in the social and economic indicators, it is hard to find any

institution articulating causal relationships between these indicators and happiness. Its absence in most policies contrasts sharply with the primary concern of each individual human being in his or her daily quest for happiness. But we infer rather boldly from improvements in socio-economic indicators that there might be growing happiness behind it.

Most socio-economic indicators are an attempt at measuring means; they do not measure ends. In this context, the Human Development Index initiated by the UNDP is the most innovative yardstick towards measuring the ends or objectives of development. Development strategies will certainly be influenced by its new ethos. Our five-year plans have paid particular attention to strategies for human development, as shown by one-fourth of our plan budget allocated to health and education sectors. I would like to pay my sincere tribute to the UNDP for devising and promoting HDI, the best index of well being we have. I hope that the authors of Human Development Report will consider the appropriateness of integrating some measure of happiness into this index.

I wish to propose happiness as a policy concern, and a policy objective. In turn this may call for a new policy orientation. This also implies new departures in research, if the concept is considered important. We need to ask how the dramatic changes propelling us into the 21st century will affect prospects for happiness. How will information technology affect people's happiness? How will shrinkage of biological and cultural diversities affect the individual and collective potential for happiness? Will the particular scientific world-view of contemporary education and curricula undercut in the next century the basis for the culturally rich and value-full basis of daily life? Will the process of secularization and nuclearisation of family increase man's loneliness, and self-enclosure in the midst of urban crowd? Does the rapid automation of society and the economy increase or decrease the prospects for the happiness of the individuals? How will global capitalism and competitive international trade make people more vulnerable to unhappiness and uncertainty of their lives? After all, with

the recent Asian currency crisis, we have seen that the Goddess of Wealth in a market economy can be very fickle. Will gene therapy help create desirable physical traits, and increase happiness? What forms of global and regional governance are best suited to promote happiness? There are only a few of the enormous number of questions we can ask, and we need to ask. I am optimistic that these changes in the next century will enhance the material comforts of the individuals. But the question still remains: will they increase happiness?

2. Gross National Happiness as a Goal of Development in Bhutan

Let me now elaborate on our experience, first by outlining briefly the main philosophy of development in Bhutan, and how it relates to gross national happiness. Both the conceptual justification of advocating gross national happiness and the operational consequences are sketched to give an impression. I hope that our development philosophy will have relevance beyond our own borders, and that the goals and opportunities of the next century will be viewed also from a new angle.

Gross National Happiness best captured our distinct perception of the main purpose of development, rooted in our philosophical and political thought. Added to that were also the lessons we could draw from the experiences of other developing countries. We asked ourselves the basic question of how to maintain the balance between materialism and spiritualism, in the course of getting the immense benefits of science and technology. The likelihood of loss of spiritualism, tranquillity, and gross national happiness with the advance of modernisation became apparent to us.

There are many telling experiences of how ordinary Bhutanese themselves strive for a balance between spiritualism and materialism. Allow me to narrate an incidence, which

poignantly brought out the case to me. When I was the regional governor of Eastern Zone in the late 1980s, a prominent man double cropped a high yield rice variety with official encouragement. The man wielded much local influence and we wanted other farmers to emulate him to diffuse the high yield rice variety. He had a bumper harvest and considerable surplus grain that year. We had a perfect success story to motivate the rest of the farmers. You can imagine our astonishment when our model farmer refused to grow it the following year, because he said that the bumper harvest had left him enough to live on for another year. He would rather live leisurely and spiritually.

However, by and large, sharpening materialistic appetite, and pursuing economic prosperity has come to be the purpose of development planning everywhere. There is much to commend in this approach, when and where the satisfaction of basic needs has eluded a large part of the global population. Material conveniences and technological improvements are greatly desirable to ameliorate the harsh, brief and brutal existence in many parts of the globe. But, beyond a level, an increase in material consumption is not accompanied by a concomitant rise in happiness. There is ample evidence to support this conclusion.

In addition to the conventional notion of development that focuses on quantifiable indicators of economic prosperity, Bhutan's vision of development stresses non-quantifiable goals such as spiritual well being and gross national happiness. We do this through a concerted policy of cultural promotion and the provision of free education, health and other social services. Cultural promotion is one of the four key objectives that we have consistently upheld, over the last four decades. The four major goals are economic self-reliance, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance. Without good governance, none of the goals are achievable. These four goals are superficially antithetical, but they are fundamentally complimentary and consistent. The cost of maintaining culture and environment often makes

development projects more expensive in the short run but pays in the long term. It would have been easier for us to become economically self-reliant had we not been so deeply devoted to the promotion of our culture and environment. Cultural and environmental objectives can be restraining factors in the pursuit of blind economic interests. The rich character of the society in Bhutan would have become diminished, even impoverished, if we had allowed a flood of cultural influences and environmental degradation to set in. At the same time, the susceptibility of the people to a diminution of happiness would have increased if we concentrated only on generation of wealth.

3. Enlightenment Education for Happiness

Within Bhutanese culture, inner spiritual development is as prominent a focus as external material development. This follows from an original meaning of development in Bhutanese context in which development meant enlightenment of the individual. I hasten to add that enlightenment is not solely an object of religious activity.

Enlightenment is blossoming of happiness. It is made more probable by consciously creating a harmonious psychological, social, and economic environment.

Enlightenment is a goal of psychological evolution for any lay person, regardless of his or her formal faith. Some societies in Asia, notably those in the Himalayas, have been conscious of mental or psychological evolution. The mind has been an object of conscious refinement. The psychological engineering has been aimed at realization of positive mental and psychological powers. These powers are not directed outwards to the control of the natural world. Rather, they are turned inwards, towards our own mind, so that we can understand our mind and its relationship both with itself and with the outer world. The knowledge of the self is important to attain individual liberty and freedom, to gain happiness. I attach a

slightly different meaning to concepts like freedom and liberty than is customarily done. We can gain freedom fundamentally through the destruction of delusion, aggression and desire. It would be inappropriate for me to digress too far on this topic. Suffice it to say that, in varying degrees, the contemporary world may be too acutely preoccupied with the self in the sense of paying excessive attention to our selves, our concerns, needs and likes. There is a paradox here: excessive preoccupation with our selves does not lead to a real knowledge of our self. Happiness depends on gaining freedom, to a certain degree, from this particular kind of self-concern.

Bhutan's traditional educational institutions and monastic apparatus were eminently suited to the continuity of such a philosophy of life. The ideology of the state and society, its laws and ethics has been conditioned by this philosophy. Today, this effort is being renewed by a curriculum that tries to blend education in the Buddhist world-view with scientific studies. This may appear to be a contradiction, but we are convinced that they are fundamentally consistent with each other. The permeation of society with such values and perceptions is important for spiritual well being of the people. Bhutanese development strategy entails widespread support to monasteries and retreats. It further includes interweaving of spiritual persons like monks and lay priests, not only in daily life of the people, but also in health, education, and environmental programmes.

4. Environmental Ethics and Happiness

The normative emphasis on minimization of self-concern and self-interest is usually construed as turning away from the world as it is and rejection of development or positive change. This view is far from accurate. In our opinion minimization of self-concern is an important step in the process of constructing a happier web of human relationships and of transforming Man into a less intrusive and destructive force in our natural and human environment. Man is just a sentient being, among other forms of existence. The assumption that

Man is on top of the chain of beings is a false comfort, considering the mysterious web of inter-dependent relationship that is now being confirmed through scientific studies.

Reality is not hierarchical but whole, circular, enclosed system. Sustainable development and environmental care is in the interest of every being every day, not just in the interest of future generations alone. A strong ethics of conservation, underpinned by the beliefs just described, influenced Bhutanese environmental policies. Bhutanese policies on the environment and sustainable development in fact preceded considerably the current global awareness of the deterioration of eco-system

Permit me to cite some examples: Bhutan's most significant national park was created long ago in 1962. More than 26% of the country's area is now managed as protected areas so that the country's astonishing bio-diversity can be preserved. 72% of the country is under forest cover, most of it in pristine condition. Although forest is one of the main natural resources of the country, one of the basic tenets of our development philosophy is not to exploit it commercially. We are happy that through the sink-services our natural forests provide, Bhutan continues to contribute disproportionately to the cleaning of the global atmosphere.

We would all agree that the mounting threat to the global eco-system arises from two sources: (a) increasing population and (b) increasing per capita resource consumption. In Bhutan, family planning and education of women are intensively promoted to slow down population growth so that the equilibrium and harmony between man and nature, which was characteristic of Bhutanese society, can be always maintained. But, we also have begun to anticipate the problem of high per capita resource use at some stage. The rationale for reducing the size or scale of the economy relative to the eco-system can not be derived effectively from conventional economics, which is concerned more with efficiency of

production and distribution. Market economics is myopic when dealing with the scale of economy relative to the ecosystem. I believe that we have to encourage ethics, ideologies, faiths and institutions, which favour sustainable lifestyles at a collective level. This is another reason why we in Bhutan have chosen certain features of a culturist model of development.

5. Income and Happiness

A growing income does not always lead proportionately to an increase in happiness. Consumption patterns everywhere seems increasingly to be based on emulation of the consumption patterns of our admired peers elsewhere. Our need is increased when we find that others in our reference group have more. As psychologist and economist say, happiness depends on relative income, not on absolute income. In a world where everyone who has less is trying to catch up with everyone else who has more, we may become richer but happiness becomes elusive.

People may become richer but they will not have a greater gift for happiness. Nations will not rank higher on the scale of happiness as they move up on the scale of economic performance. As is widely known, this is due to the fact that the value of money in giving happiness or utility diminishes as the amount increases. More seriously, the way people allocate money does is not always optimal from a social point of view. I can not stress more the enormous loss and waste, in terms of overall sub-optimal expenditure, caused by what appears as an individual's rational choice resulting in sub-optimal public choice. Personal car purchases leading to traffic jams, as well as national military expenditures resulting in regional and global insecurity illustrate this discrepancy. The results are counter-productive, with far-reaching negative implication on the climate of happiness and peace.

6. Governance and Social Structures for Happiness

Individual's quest for happiness, and inner and outer freedoms is the most precious endeavour. It follows then that society's ideal of governance and polity should promote this endeavour of the individuals. The founders of our country dedicated the particular system of government in Bhutan to promote certain visions of enlightenment and happiness of the citizens. The country itself was perceived as a kind of mandala, a place where Man could transform their infrastructure, polity and social organizations to create gross national happiness.

The Royal Government of Bhutan and His Majesty the King of Bhutan continue to be guided towards the fulfillment of that vision in the evolution of its political and social structures, taking both the strengths of our resilient and ancient society, and genuine virtues of western democracies. Before the advent of modernization in Bhutan in 1961, Bhutan consisted of self-reliant and self-subsistent communities, possessing well-defined community based rules and institutions to facilitate the use of common resources. In the earlier phase of development relying on top-down planning, the importance of such community structures and people's knowledge was compromised. Happily, their erosion have been checked now due to the wisdom of His Majesty the King of Bhutan, and the top-down decision making has been reversed. Since 1981, His Majesty the King initiated a vigorous programme of administrative and political decentralization. The decentralization policy has enhanced the democratic powers, social responsibilities, transparent processes, and structures of villages and communities to make decisions at grass roots levels.

The greatest change in the devolution of power took place in June 1998 when His Majesty the King devolved full executive powers on the Council of Ministers that was elected by the National Assembly of Bhutan. Since then Bhutan has entered into a new era of governance, supported by many other measures to increase integrity, accountability and

transparency of government. Such democratic changes are a part of a continuous process.

At the same time, we are committed to the strengthening of social cohesion and unity on which gross national happiness also depends. The pursuit of individual self-interests during modernization often threatens the rich bonding of individuals as members of extended families and communities. We wish to preserve social structures in which every one, whether children or elderly, are honoured and respected. For example, we wish to preserve the social value whereby people are elevated with age. The breadth and quality of social relations lie also at the root of happiness of a person throughout his or her life cycle: from childhood to old age. We can not relegate any member of the society to homecare, without depriving them of their happiness.

7. Concluding Remarks

Bhutan has followed a multi-dimensional approach to development: aimed at spiritual and material balance and harmony. The international opinion towards Bhutan's development philosophy has always been supportive and I hope it will continue to be favourable. But, every alternative development approach is also a challenge. While we accept the reality of globalisation and cultural change, we can always endeavour to select the most beneficial aspects of it. To make the correct choice is our greatest present and future tasks; and we believe, very profoundly, that it is a challenge that every country must take up and confront the challenge of increasing human happiness boldly and creatively.

We remain deeply committed to economic, political and social freedoms. A genuine experience of these freedoms and goals, however, can not be deepened without inner freedom. The nature of freedom and happiness, which all of us seek, will itself become more profound with the inner freedom we can gain.

I hope and pray that the third millennium will bring greater happiness in all countries, and in all societies. May we begin the third millennium by striving to promote a kind of global and national governance which promotes gross national happiness the most.

I would like to thank you for giving me this great privilege of addressing you.