

## **Paper Proposal for the Second International Workshop on Operationalising Gross National Happiness.**

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### **What Exactly is the Meaning and Purpose of Gross National Happiness?**

Outside of Bhutan the concept of GNH has been receiving increasing attention and is being looked upon with considerable interest. However, the popular pieces that are being penned are fleeting and decidedly uncritical. Part of the reason for this is that the concept although having a great deal of intuitive and immediate appeal to a wide variety of people, has been little developed outside of the kingdom. Indeed, this lack of development was apparent in the first seminar on operationalising GNH where a certain lack of traction was evident overall on how exactly to facilitate the goal through practical policy directive. This is perfectly understandable as with any practical philosophy, the specificity of proposed applications is a direct function of the specificity of the philosophy itself. Thus, in the absence of a detailed articulation of what GNH exactly means, many commentators have been left to fill in the unspoken blanks with suppositions and propositions which may or may not be appropriate given the unwritten grounding of a Buddhist development philosophy.

My sense is that writing to date has fallen into three broad categories. In many instances the most obvious contribution (and a very worthwhile one) has been to reinforce the realisation that Western ways cannot be adopted wholesale without creating social and ecological decline. Much has therefore been contributed in the way of documenting the errors of a globalising materialistic philosophy and this is valuable as it has deepened and broadened an appreciation of just how detrimental unrestrained market forces might be. However, in terms of positing applicable principles, such writing by its very nature falls short of the full ideal as it points primarily to what not to do but not to what to do instead.

A second major body of writing to this point falls into a functionally opposing camp, one that validates and recommends the general value of Buddhism as an approach to life. This again has been very valuable at a time when the overall legitimacy of any alternative to globalisation is being questioned as an implicit part of its hegemonic advance. However, in isolation, this approach can again be limited in the sense that it often fails to extend far enough to practically engage with the language, conceptual groundings and actual processes of contemporary market expansion and social transformation. Thus again, a certain lack of traction is observable with regard to determining actual practical means by which it might be translated into concrete GNH policy.

A third less developed body of writing (one which the current seminar clearly aims to expand) involves reports of the valuable and parallel efforts of others to organise for

thematically similarly alternative processes and outcomes. This again is a hugely valuable contribution but can easily suffer from a lack of clear applicability when systems and structures emerging from other cultural traditions and at other levels of application (community or tribe versus nation-state) cannot be readily linked to the specifics of Bhutan's cultural setting and its concrete aims with regard to national policy-making. Once again the root problem comes back to a lack of concrete referents as to what a GNH philosophy actually aims to achieve both as means and ends.

The present paper proposal then aims to try and clarify the actual philosophy that those interested in GNH are trying to implement in order that the wisdom contributed by writers in all of the three previous camps may be more practically gauged and applied in operational terms. Specifically it will try and deconstruct the meanings inherent in the Four Pillars of GNH (the most articulated form of the philosophy to date) in order that these may be practically related to the errors made by others subjected to globalising market forces, the traditional insights of Mahayana and the practical experiences of others. If this can be partly achieved then a much clearer apprehension of how these themes inter-relate and cross-fertilise one another might be possible.

To do this, I propose to take Lyonpo Jigme Thinley's lead and argue that a philosophy based on maximising happiness is a philosophy grounded in an explicit ethical perception – one that aims to facilitate the free expression of compassion, sympathetic joy, loving kindness and equanimity for the sake of all sentient beings. To do this requires the regenerating cultivation of the skilful maturities that underlie these (including what Peter Herschok might classify as attentional mastery, moral clarity and contributory virtuosity). In Buddhist philosophy, happiness is an inseparable component of these maturities and thus, happiness as a goal cannot be practically separated from their preliminary cultivation. In significant part then, the question of how GNH might be maximised involves a more central question relating to how exactly generosity, sympathetic joy, loving-kindness and equanimity can be cultivated at all levels within a national polity - and extended to govern economic, ecological and social management.

In this sense then, among the four pillars, Buddhist culture and the specific ideals of ethical inter-relationship provide the most fundamental locus of concern if Bhutan is to move towards its stated aims of achieving a happy society in, and on its own terms. After all, every culture would see good governance as key to achieving optimal practice but interpretations of what this consists of vary enormously – thus, cross-culturally, one nation's good governance is another's moral anarchy, and one people's benevolent oversight is another's totalitarian nightmare. Similarly, the other "pillars", of environmental sensibility and sound economic management gain their specific referents from the dominant cultural framework within which they are given meaning. Thus, one culture's economics of restraint is another's politics of denial; while one group's ecological obligations are another's unnecessary hindrances. Culture contains the shared sensibilities that give the other pillars meaning and as such, they are hollow and incapable of operationalisation unless explicitly tied to those sensibilities and the embedded priorities that would give policy making concrete guidance. Culture then, and Buddhist culture in particular is not just a co-equal pillar supporting happiness, it is the grounding that gives meaning to the other pillars and all that rests upon them.

With this in mind, I propose to write an in-depth exploratory paper outlining what I can best infer from the reading, writing and thinking that has been done in the area to date in order to concretise the notion of GNH from a Buddhist perspective. In doing this I aim to be as explicit as possible in articulating the core concepts in Mahayana Buddhism with respect to the ethical notions of ideal inter-relationship and from this point to explicitly relate much of what has been written to date regarding the errors of unrestrained economism, naïve iterations of Buddhist faith and the practical experiences of others. I will draw extensively on a variety of literatures and upon my own extensive experience working with other cultures and their attempts to forge more humane directions for their peoples. The end result aimed for will be a clearer formulation of how the nascent theory of GNH might be more constructively developed and how specific policy orientations might be fruitfully developed in light of this (for instance in the areas of fair as opposed to free trade, in education and media governance). I plan to spend some of my time when I next visit Thimpu (in April) testing these ideas with people central to the enactment of GNH policies in Bhutan with the goal of bringing this feedback with me to Halifax to share with those present at the second meeting on operationalising GNH.