

GNH

The growing interest abroad in GNH, fueled by GNH publications and seminars, is an honour for the concept that the 4th King of Bhutan launched almost 25 years ago. His Majesty the 4th King said that a GNH society means the creation of enlightened society in which the happiness of people is the ultimate purpose of governance. He raised GNH as a public good and therefore the key concern of public policy. His speeches imply that corporations, ministries, and other institutions must create favorable macro-conditions in which individuals striving for happiness can succeed. Otherwise the chance for the attainment of their happiness is low. The 5th King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigmi Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has proclaimed fulfillment of the vision of GNH as one of the four priority responsibilities of his reign.

Among his many pronouncements on the GNH, the 4th King said, as early as 1986, that GNH is more important than GDP. That he said GDP is valuable to the extent it enhances GNH was revolutionary. A quarter century has passed. Now this lone voice from the Himalayas is beginning to resonate around the world, as the poor desire happiness from the those of poverty and the rich desire happiness in spite of wealth, and both rich and poor desire happiness and peace in the midst of conflicts. It is a common aspiration that

unites-all human beings. In fact happiness is also an aspiration for all beings who have capacity to feel emotions, as Buddhism pointed out 2,500 years ago. International opinion is gradually converging on happiness as a unifying collective goal.

First, let us remind ourself that for the last 50 years or so, countries have been using GDP to measure their national performance and progress, when in fact it should have been a sub-ordinate or secondary measure, considering the fact that GDP has some inherent omissions and weaknesses. Although there are many, I limit myself to two of these omissions which jars with Buddhist perspectives.

Firstly, GDP is biased towards proliferation of wants, new needs, and new desires. GDP measures what is produced and consumed through market transactions. But does only what is produced and consumed have value? Does not conservation and what is deliberately conserved has no value worth appreciating?

In an age increasingly aware of resources running out and environmental collapse, our measure of progress should give value to conservation that is foregone consumption and production. And does not Buddhism tell us that detachment from wants and desires is also a source of happiness? GDP measures produced capital and human resource well. From a holistic point of GNH we should

equally measure environmental, cultural and social capitals, for they are crucial to happiness and sustainability.

Secondly, GDP is biased towards paid works as it records paid works. But it is biased against free time and unpaid works which it does not value and count. Buddhist perspective tells us that to lead a preoccupied existence of work just for a living is a life without freedom. Leisure and free time are obviously liberating departures in a work and commuting - dominated life. However, leisure is not valued in GDP. How cruel a statistical account it is! For example, if child care and parent care by members of a household working on a unpaid basis came to a tragic end today, our happiness and welfare would plunge to new depths, but GDP would not budge an inch. However, the next day, if all of these services became sold-products, GDP would rise. But there is a world of difference to child care and parent care carried out by family members and the market, paralleling the difference between innate affection and sanitized services between the family and the market respectively.

These and other weaknesses of GDP as a measure of well-being are further supported by repeated findings of a lack of correlation between income (GDP) growth and satisfaction levels in many countries, like the US, UK and Japan. In these high income countries, over the last 30 years, GDP curve has soared like the flight of a majestic eagle but

satisfaction has stuck flat like a humble earthworm making puzzled social scientists look for plausible explanations. This dismaying lack of correlation is relieved by cross section findings that rise in income does lead to rise in life satisfaction for the poorest members (lowest quintile) of society. Nevertheless, the bigger question about a lack of correlation in general between income and satisfaction begs for answers.

Social scientists have advanced three hypothesis or conjectures to explain the gap between income and satisfaction. The first conjecture is that people's satisfaction is felt relative to others with whom they compare for status and material identity. If such attitude of comparison compromises happiness, both equanimity and equality needs to be cultivated to deliver us from relative to absolute experiences. If a frame of reference affects subjective well-being, inequity will continue to exert a powerful negative effect on happiness so long as inequitable distribution remains. And equanimity needs cultivation to generously regard other's true good fortunes as they are.

The second conjecture is that a new experience or possession will produce a peak satisfaction first but it will decline there after, ultimately to a set level. To offset this, much will depend on overcoming sensory saturation through heightened attentive virtuosity so that we can

invoke and evoke the initial moment of surprise, wonder and awe, as when we first saw a flower.

The third conjecture is that after a certain level of affluence, as enjoyed in high income countries, people want not material but post-materials goods, which may be associated with affection, trust, security, freedom, creativity, meaning of life and so forth. These intangible goods provide perhaps a more promising route of explanation, which I will elaborate drawing closely on Buddhist perspectives and ideas on the nature of happiness.

From a Buddhist point of view, let me distinguish two means to happiness, contrasting them with conventional understanding. Firstly, the conventional way of perceiving happiness largely as a consequence of sensory pleasures dependent solely on external stimuli is only partly true. Emphasizing external-stimuli-led happiness will naturally lead to further demands for material consumption. But Buddhist understanding shows that happiness can be achieved through internal means by training on contemplative methods (meditation). Interesting neuroscience researches are beginning to reveal that meditation elevates contentment by perhaps changing neural pathways.

Secondly, the conventional way of perceiving happiness is quite individualistic, in the sense that happiness is defined

as what an individual conceives of it and fulfills it in terms of that conception. It can be an egocentric happiness that fails to see that happiness accrue from liberating relationships of benefiting and being benefited, contributing and being contributed between people to people and between people and other forms of life. The uniquely Buddhist discourses on dependant origination, lack of fixed nature of anything, and hence mutual relevance of all things inform GNH that unhappiness and suffering results from breakdown of enriching relationships, and ignorance is the denial of our relational existence. In a sense, happiness can not be defined apart from quality and direction of relationship. "These are only relationships which are going happily and unhappily". So, it would imply that indecision-making for socio-economic development, we must examine all issues of the public sphere (tax, trade, technology, health, education, institutional development technology, urbanization, environment etc.) by asking one question. Does it promote liberating relationships because that is integral to happiness?

Now, let me step out into the reality of Bhutan. Self reported happiness level is quite high: 6.93 out of 10 per capita inspite of income level of \$ 1500 or so per year. In a survey in 2007, 97% reported satisfied family relation; 79% reported satisfaction over financial security or livelihood; 61% reported that there is someone to show love and affection most or all of the time. Yet, 19.5% also reported

they felt stressful, mainly from financial pressure, illness in the family and work-life. About 7% expressed they felt more unhappy than usual and 10% lost sleep more than usual. Asked what six or seven most important things that made them happy are in rough order of importance, the answers were: financial security, family relationship, health, farm production, education, spiritual pursuits, good governance and ethics. All of these leading sources of happiness are domains associated with public good that either flourishes or withers depending on the direction of relationship that is influenced by social, economic, political, spiritual, and technological changes.

How did His Majesty create the conditions of happiness in Bhutan? In the main, by continuing to fulfill the triad of goals of economic self-reliance, cultural conservation and environmental conservation since the beginning of development planning in 1961, by striking an ever-difficult balance between the three. The core question that was kept addressing while making public policy decision was, and should have been, always. “Does it increase or diminish the relational capacity of all involved toward happiness? How can development take us to a higher, more intense and better level of relationship that can result from meaningful diverse capacities of those related, considering that we must have different capacities to make a difference? Development is improvement of relational capacity leading to better relationships and better contributory capacity.

Let me conclude by describing some practical measures taken by Bhutan under the enlightened governance of His Majesty the King in support of those factors which Bhutanese rated as most important for happiness, at the stage of our history. As far as financial security is concerned, the environmentally clean, hydro-power and energy intensive products has been the key to income generation. For the integrity of family relationship which exists within the web of community relationship and traditional neighbourhood, some stark examples are, by law, allocation of 80 free trees to each house construction that results in the necessary accommodation of multi-generational extended family. Houses are owned in rural Bhutan, with no mortgages. Health and education has been and will continue to be free.

Yet, we must continue to ponder drawing on Buddhist social science perspective on the deeper meaning of health and education and of development itself as constituted by a variety of sector programme in technology, communications, urbanization trade and industrialization.

From a Buddhist perspective, we cannot and should not draw deep conceptual binary distinctions between the individual and society, mental and the physical, the individual and environment and so forth. We should focus

on their quality and direction of their relationships, since all things arise in a dynamic pattern of interdependencies.

I submit a point that illustrates the implication of this perspective. Happiness is not relative but relational. Development is improvement of relational capacities that lead to diversity, the basis of empowering ourselves to make meaningful difference in relationships.