

# Asian Gross National Happiness and its View on Law, Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goals



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By

Dorine E. van Norren

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*For Tsering ('long life')*

*'If you are always on a fishing expedition for a better life,  
the surface of your spiritual ocean will never be calm'  
—Bhutanese proverb*

*(Tshering, Gyonpo 2012. The Bhutanese Guide to Happiness, 365  
Proverbs from the World's Happiest Nation. London: Penguin)*



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# THE URGENCY OF GLOBAL HAPPINESS

JIGME Y. THINLEY

I am honored to be invited to write a foreword to this book that explains the relevance, pathways, and indeed the imperative of pursuing happiness as a societal goal for development and growth as humanity is challenged by existential threats as never before. These are not only growing in magnitude and multiplicity, but converging in their occurrences and frequencies because of the wrong choices and means adopted by society in its search for limitless prosperity.

Our planet, our only irreplaceable life support system, is collapsing. It is dying and just as the weaker species are disappearing forever, our end is nearing together with all other interdependent life forms. Only a few decades ago, such words as I am writing could be dismissed as those of doomsayers. Not any more, for these have become the reality that now torments humanity. And as the weak, vulnerable, and voiceless become the immediate victims, even the rich and powerful know that their turn is fast approaching.

My country that has pursued happiness as the sole purpose of development since the early 1970s was urged to share its rationale and practice with the world at the turn of the century. The world at the time was in a reflective, contemplative mood. Many felt a sense of hollowness in all that humankind had achieved. Bhutan presented the idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH) at a summit in Seoul in October 1998. It resonated with many attendees – political, thought, economic, and social leaders. GNH excited the media and spawned a plethora of books, wellness gurus, and enterprises. Serious academics including Nobel laureates took note and made happiness a serious matter for international discourse including in social, economic, and policy arenas. The world has, as such, come to realize the limitations and hazards of the GDP based economic model.

This book is the result of extensive research and analysis of the journey of GNH, from an intuitive guide for a small nation, to a global inspiration and reference for integrated holistic, sustainable and inclusive societal

transformation. I believe the book makes a substantial contribution to the ongoing discourse and progress on this path.

Prime Minister of Bhutan (2008-2013)  
Thimphu, April 2024

# INNER PEACE THROUGH COMMUNITARIAN HAPPINESS

## KARMA URA

The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has intrigued quite a lot of citizens around the world. Individuals wish for mental peace and contentedness, not only rising comfortable living conditions. Increasingly, Bhutan is well-known around the world for aiming at this. GNH, the idea proposed by the fourth King may provide a guide in that search. Not everyone in Bhutan has achieved GNH yet, but it is a policy orientation so that the process is not blind to people's diverse needs.

In a time of global crisis, people around the world are looking for a type of philosophy of development, which could bring sustainability of material conditions and provide individuals with much greater level of happiness. GNH is an early idea that resonates with the recent beyond the Gross National Product (GDP) movement.

What exactly inspired the fourth King and the country to balance GDP with GNH? Way back in the 1970s, His Majesty the fourth King had the farsightedness to appreciate that happiness of people was deeply linked with the social relationships that exists in Bhutan. At that time, organization of life was framed by communitarianism. In the communitarian perspective of living and life, an understanding about three things is significant. First, close bonds among people in a neighborhood, kinship, and friendship are key to good life or flourishing. Second, mutual uses and access to the commons, rather than private ownership and exclusion, has to be dominant. A great deal of natural resources were held in commons by the community and used through mutual understanding. And the third one is that the sense of consciousness of nature and land deities was a strong feature of communities. There was a greater sense of sacredness of life.

His Majesty the King was, in a way, talking about the relationship between man and nature, and the individual and the community. He insightfully put a very strong emphasis on preserving these two fundamental aspects of life – community and nature. Both of these are constituents of the GNH index

in its nine domains. But he was able to give far more prominence to GNH in the modern era, because the modern era risks losing values like this. In other words, the history and culture of Bhutan allowed him to propel the GNH concept forward to all people. The present King has innovated its application to new areas of which ‘The Mindfulness City’ is an outstanding example.

But how does an entire population get inspired by such an idea and why do they accept it in the face of modern markets and consumerism? Individuals’ thinking in Bhutan was embedded in the Buddhist concept of good life and flourishing. His Majesty was able to speak to that Buddhist mental side of the Bhutanese people who were generally aware of the Buddhist notion of ending suffering by relinquishing attachment and craving. The idea of the reduction of suffering is similar to the idea of promotion of happiness as the good life. That flourishing is further linked to the idea of Buddhist virtues, which are character traits. Material conditions must be improved, but so must we change the way we see and experience the world.

Later on, GNH metrics had to be introduced. The bureaucracy in Bhutan has grown considerably, and its operations had to be managed through metrics and indicators. The accountability system had to be strengthened through clear management tools oriented towards GNH. The nine domains of GNH contain 33 indicators, which include both objective conditions of life as well as subjective, intangible, qualitative aspects of the good life. The formula, or the way in which we calculate GNH, allows decomposition to the individual level. It is useful for policy making at a disaggregated level. Unlike GDP that aggregates everything and is calculated by sector, GNH maintains a view of the conditions of human beings. In GDP reports the individual simply disappears, which is not the case in GNH.

Two aspects of the GNH index might be of interest. Firstly, in the GNH index everything can be ascertained up to the individual level and up to each variable attained by an individual. These conditions or variables can be aggregated at the gender, income, village, or national level. This makes it really appealing to make any analysis at a demographic or geographic level and apply it to policymaking, either for the whole country, or a part of it, since Bhutan as a country is very heterogeneous. The possibility for the GNH index to be disaggregated is therefore an interesting feature.

The second interesting feature of the GNH index is that for each calculation, every variable, or every attainment, every condition of happiness has to be dichotomized as sufficient or not sufficient. This integrates an ethical

component into the GNH index. Apart from undesirable insufficiency levels, what is beyond sufficient levels is also a concern because it might not contribute to flourishing and abundance, but to surplus and irrelevance. This is an important consideration now that mankind is facing the question of sustainability of lifestyles.

Economic prosperity and financial wealth are necessary but they should not be the dominant societal aim to the point of suppressing happiness and wellbeing. A sufficient level of prosperity or material conditions is undeniably important. However, beyond that, the bases for happiness are not really economic or materialist. It is the ability to cultivate flourishing traits in human beings, so that the greatest levers of happiness - human relationship and support to each other through love, kindness, generosity, and care – remain vital. Economics and growth are important only to the extent that they can be distributed equally and democratically, and have social meaning to human lives. Fundamentally, what is crucial to happiness is the quality of relationships between human beings.

People often say that human beings cannot give each other happiness. They say that, because your and my happiness are subjective, individual experiences and people's emotional experiences differ. This way of framing the question is mistaken. In fact, human beings can be a direct source of happiness. Those who are bonded with you through kinship, family, and wider friendship are the direct sources of happiness. All the other things besides human beings are indirect means to happiness. Human relation and its qualities such as intimacy, commitment, and sharing are the fundamental constitution of human happiness. The most important thing is to maintain the strong care for children, elderly, and dependents. All other economic activities contribute finally to this care culture.

In economic theory, the individual is ontologically prior to market conditions or the economy. Everything is to be understood in terms of individual action. In the communitarian tradition, the community shapes, fosters, and develop individuals. Community is prior to the individual and can construct individuals in a certain way. The flourishing traits of human beings which can open them towards friendliness, compassion, and generosity can be fostered by being members of a community. It influences and feeds them and eventually makes them free, light, happy, renewed, and connected.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book deals with the value of GNH for contemporary society, not just the Asian one, but the Global society. The gift that Asia and Buddhism brings the world is in terms of cultivating (inner) peace and harmony.

Centering around the themes of the Sustainable Development Goals, this book contains a rich variety of examples of GNH, both in living testimonies of people, as well as in theoretical philosophical background. It uses both theoretical sources as well as interviews with people in Bhutan. In this context it analyzes both its development concept in cultural and socio-economic terms, as well as its relationship with nature and good governance, and its resonance across the continent in similar concepts.

Critics, that are also given space in this elaborate oversight, cannot maintain that GNH culture is merely a relic of the past, no longer embodied by the people whose heritage it is or that it is not practically implementable. The book clearly articulates how GNH is expanding conventional human rights and economic theory and what it could add. It does so by first analyzing how Buddhist heritage is translated into the constitution and the limited jurisprudence available. The book also describes the GNH policy practices and GNH-index in Bhutan, and to what extent it faltered and still has potential. The author is also clear about the enormous challenges faced by countries in the Global South wanting to chart their own course based on their cultural convictions, within the global neo-liberal context. The ideal of GNH is by no way achieved, just like with human rights, it will always be a benchmark in order to strive for a better world.

Furthermore, the book examines to what extent Bhutan based its international negotiation strategies on GNH with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as how people in Bhutan perceive the Sustainable Development Goals from the perspective of GNH. It concludes with what potential GNH has for rewriting development theory both from the legal perspective - such as a wider collective sense of (human) dignity - and from the economic and sustainability perspective, considering man and nature as interdependent, sacred, and part of a greater whole.

This book invites Asian and Bhutanese people to remain vocal about their positive heritage, and continue to progress into the post-colonial future, especially in the international realm. How to entice international readers and negotiators to step out of their normal mode and see the world through the eyes of the other.

At the same time, it invites the non-Asian readers to take cognizance of the rich history and everyday reality of Asian philosophy and way of life. It entices them to embrace the potential of intercultural knowledge and understanding to brace the challenges of climate change and global inequality. How to reconcile the seemingly opposite universal values with cultural particularities and maintain the best of both.

## PREFACE:

### MY PERSONAL JOURNEY

This book first appeared as an annex to my Ph.D. research: *Development as Service, A Happiness, Ubuntu and Buen Vivir interdisciplinary view of the Sustainable Development Goals*, (van Norren 2017). It was inspired by my stay in Sri Lanka, where I first learned about Buddhism. India, with responsibility for Bhutan, had been my preference to go to for my first diplomatic posting, but at the last minute I had changed my mind and put Sri Lanka. I would have been, after all, in-between the two countries of India and Bhutan, not truly living in either of them. My classmate who had made me enthusiastic about Sri Lanka, at the last minute, changed Sri Lanka into India/Bhutan (since I made her enthusiastic). The Venerable (Sri) land of Lanka, it became, formerly also known as Ceylon. My classmate went to India to deal with Bhutan.

Buddhism was obviously not part of my Dutch diplomatic training or duties and also not of the diplomatic course of Sri Lanka History and Culture that I volunteered to follow with the local diplomats. I, rather, learned about it through the people I met, notably my landscaper Kamal who would come to my house once a month to look after the Japanese garden. Other than taking care and talking to the plants, Kamal would dedicate himself to drawing intricate patterns into the white gravel, all of which were part of the feng-shui of the garden or *kanso* as it is called in Japan. While drawing his patterns, he talked to me lovingly about the Buddha and his teachings, to which I listened with interest. He also tried in vain to explain the notion of feng-shui and energy to me, but I was not terribly interested at the time. The fact that one of my wealthy friends had broken down half of his house to change the position of the front door because it was not in the right feng-shui position, evoked laughter from his close friends and me. Many years later, on holiday in Colombo, I designed the feng-shui of the house of my friend Nirmala, but I don't think she followed my advice.

Since my arrival in Colombo the ambassador had encouraged me to engage in cultural cooperation. I was however far more interested in the politics behind the civil war, human rights, and humanitarian aid for the refugees, in my mind infinitely more important subjects. Feeling somewhat depressed

that the situation in the country in the late 1990's only deteriorated and I was not getting anywhere with my efforts for more donor coordination in human rights work, I finally seriously took up my responsibilities in mutual heritage. It cheered me up, in an otherwise grim environment, with military checkpoints at every corner of the street, including in front of my side lane. We developed a close cooperation with the Department of Archeology and the Central Cultural Fund (CCF). Though their main occupation was the cultural triangle of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, and other (sacred) cultural sites - destinations that I visited multiple times - we started a second cultural triangle in the South, involving Dutch heritage including Galle fortress. As a goodbye gift of our intense collaboration in founding the Mutual Heritage Centre, Director General of the CCF, professor Suraweera and his deputy Hettipathirane - including their team - gave me the book on paintings of Hindagala, many of which included religious depictions and the story of King Dhammasanda trying to find 'the virtuous way of life.' Another goodbye gift book, this time by its editor Edwin Ariyadasa who happened to be at the same office at the same time, was the Treasury of Truth, the illustrated Dhammapada, a collection of teachings of the Buddha in verse form and one of the most widely read and best-known Buddhist scriptures. It was clear that I was not going to escape some spiritual education in this holy island.

The real change came however when, upon return to Colombo during a holiday, one day I walked into a massage salon, where a lady from Tibet took care of me. Much against my will – I wanted a career - I was spoon-fed Asian wisdom. By a twist of fate, we met again in The Netherlands, where she had settled and practiced as a Reiki teacher. I may have moved on to another diplomatic posting in Turkey, mainly dealing with Iraq, but clearly Asia and its teachings were not done with me. Upon my return to the Netherlands, this time catapulted into the North-American political world, I tried to make sense out of my journey in my young adult life. It had started at the age of eighteen in France, brought me to study and work in Southern Africa, and then on to Asia, the Middle East, and the United States of America. I needed some coherence. Tsering became a tutor, friend, and mentor, and helped me through it.

Switching to a think tank with all this wealth of knowledge and being infused by academic circles, finally my life mission started to take shape, in writing reports on development issues as one of the secretaries to the independent Advisory Council for International Affairs (AIV). Moreover, I was to communicate the 'non-Western' to my Western interlocutors engaged in the development of 'underdeveloped' nations. This did not

happen without a clash. Upon my enthusiastically naïve suggestion that we needed to include the indigenous perspective of the Africans, Asians, and Indigenous Americans themselves in shaping a new international development agenda, I was met with fierce rebuttal. Cultural relativism or even the risk thereof, had no place in human rights debates. For all our want of participation, non-discrimination, and accountability, this was one bridge too far. Much to my dismay there was no space for my text on other worldviews in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) report I had to prepare for the AIV. I then concluded that I would make the ‘non-Western’ perspective on the MDGs the subject of *my* research.

Two months later Bhutan launched a Resolution at the UN, demanding that Happiness become the ninth MDG. It didn’t make it, but nonetheless the tone was set. I decided to include Bhutan as one of my case studies, having already selected South Africa from personal experience. Ecuador was to become the third one, since it clamored together with Bolivia for Harmony with Nature and managed to start a UN program in 2009 under the same name. After posting me in yet another region (the European Union department), the MFA subsequently granted me a year study leave. An interesting journey began.

At first, I had no idea where to start. I sojourned in Sri Lanka and visited India, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and even a tiny part of Laos, but never the Himalayas. Our former ambassador to India, whom I happened to work with on a program in New York, introduced me to the Friends of Bhutan Society. The month I had designated to start my research on Bhutan, the society announced their twenty-five-year celebration, with a meeting in Zealand in the south of the Netherlands. All experts on Bhutan in Europe assembled there, together with the ambassador of Bhutan, Sonam Tsong, and his staff. After three days of friendship, the ambassador promised to do his best to obtain an extended visa for me, which after six months, succeeded. I was honored to receive a travel grant from the Van Tussenbroek Foundation for my field research in Bhutan, and I was off for five weeks to the Land of Shangri-La (paradise).

Here I was hosted by the Center for Bhutan Studies, which also happened to organize a Gross National Happiness Conference that year in Paro. Local journalists shared their rolodex of phone numbers with me for people to interview. The son of the Jambayang resort owner climbed to Tiger’s Nest temple with me, a pilgrimage I had to make according to him. The next challenge was to get out of the capital Thimpu and interview people in-country.

Yet another serendipity made that the GNH-Centre in Bhumtang opened the same month and send around invitations for an opening ceremony. Overjoyed with the travel visa for the other provinces that the MFA organized for me on the spot, I sought to book an airplane ticket. They are all sold out, the travel agent told me. I was going to miss the opportunity to meet the local GNH community, who obviously had booked earlier than I did. Karma, the travel agent, was quick with a solution. I was to accompany him, travelling by car, as he was also planning to go. On the way to the central province of Bhutan, we stopped at a Tshechu, a spiritual festival. After the joyful celebration in Bhumtang where I stayed at a local house, Karma gracefully lent his car and driver to me and had another car sent from Thimpu to pick him up from Bhumtang. I had to see more of the country, they all agreed. And so I traveled to the far east to Trashigang, and through Mongar to the serene northeast border town Tashiyangtse. My stay ended with a splendid conference in Paro, meeting the entire international GNH community, after which I took the plane over the Himalayas once more, with more than enough to write about.

Figure 1 Bhutan and its provinces



Source: Wikimedia, Districts of Bhutan,  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Districts\\_of\\_Bhutan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Districts_of_Bhutan)

My scientific journey may not have led to a diplomatic ambassadorship as I had aspired it to do, but, upon completion of my PhD, my Tibetan friend Tsering told me she was very happy that I now had become a World Ambassador for Happiness. Other than laughing about this newly invented diplomatic position, I carry the title with honor.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BTP Bhutan Tendrel Party

DNT Druk Nyamrup Tsogpa

DPT Druk Phuensum Tsogpa

EU European Union

GNH Gross National Happiness

GPG Global Public Goods

G77 Group of 1977

LDC Least Developed Country

OWG Open Working Group (United Nations)

PM Prime Minister

MDGs Millenium Development Goals

PDP People's Democratic Party

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

UN United Nations

UNDP United Nations Development Program

