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## Buddhism as a Guiding Principle for Gross National Happiness in Bhutan

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### **Abstract:**

*Buddhism which was introduced in Bhutan in Seventh century has come a long way in Bhutan. Bhutan has gone through many phases in its history right from theocracy to the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in the year 2008. Now Bhutan has joined the growing number of democracies in the world. Bhutan has recently completed its third National Assembly Election on October 18, 2018. Countries all over the world focus upon GDP especially in order to measure the economic well-being of the people. In such forms of measurement and indexes, based only on monetary terms does not consider spiritual and emotional needs and the psychological well-being of the people. Bhutan is motivated by the Buddhist belief to achieve genuine happiness and has thus become till now, the only country in the world to officially follow the state of happiness. Today also, Bhutan's development policies and social and political institutions reflect Buddhist concerns for equality and compassion, particularly the sense of responsibility for maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering for all members of society. The government views happiness as a policy objective that can be achieved only by enhancing people's well-being. Gross National Happiness (GNH), measures the quality of a country in a more holistic way than the Gross National Product. It believes that the development of human society will take place when material and spiritual development occur side by side.*

**Keywords:** Buddhism, gross national happiness, development policy, society and culture

### **1. Introduction**

Bhutan is a small land-locked country which has a rich collection of culture, traditions and beliefs which are all based on Buddhist teachings and principles. Though small in size and population, Bhutan has always taken pride in its unique national identity and rich cultural and religious heritage. The history of Bhutan is closely linked with the spread of Buddhism in the Himalayas. Buddhism has always played an important role in the history of the country and the life of its people.<sup>i</sup> Since the emergence of the hereditary monarchy in 1907, the Kings have followed a path of smooth and gradual modernization. They maneuvered the country along the thin line between development and the preservation of Bhutan's unique cultural heritage. For decades, modernization, development and preservation were the main goals of policy decisions rather than actively democratizing the country.<sup>ii</sup> The monarchs in Bhutan have in a dual manner tried for development of the country on modern terms and have also tried to protect the traditional aspects of Bhutan. In 1998, Bhutan underwent a peaceful guided alteration to democracy which was initiated by the will of King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. Ultimately it was in the year 2008, when Bhutan's path to democratic transition was completed and Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy. The constitution of Bhutan was framed on 18th July 2008, which amongst others, was also influenced by Buddhism. The Constitution under article 3(1) specifically refers Buddhism as the spiritual heritage of Bhutan for its role in the promotion of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance.

### **2. Development Policy**

Bhutan's development policies and social and political in situations reflect Buddhist concerns for equality and compassion, particularly the sense of responsibility for maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering for all members of society. The government views happiness as a policy objective that can be achieved only by enhancing people's well-being. Hence goals such as alleviating poverty and increasing access to health and education are national priorities.<sup>iii</sup> It is due to this that in the recent years, Bhutan has achieved a good Human Development Index which puts it in equality with the other South Asian countries. Life expectancy has increased to 66 years; infant mortality rate has also fallen down to 61 from 1000 lives. These are just a few mentions, and likewise, Bhutan's developmental policies also had far reaching results. While explaining the idea of GNH, the King of Bhutan had said, our country has an ancient and unique cultural heritage which we wish to preserve as we feel that this is of vital importance for a small nation like ours. We do not wish to be swept away by the tide of materialism and consumerism. We are determined to preserve our rich spiritual and cultural values and traditions. At the same time, we must achieve a high level of economic growth with equality in order to improve the quality of life of our people.<sup>iv</sup>

Compared to the past, there are more religious people now because the teachings are more common. People are more aware now because they can hear teachings through the media such as radio and newspapers. Religious people have

increased over the years because nowadays there are a number of great saints and lamas who are coming and preaching the people. These sentiments suggest that peoples understanding of Buddhism is increasing with development rather than eroding because of it. Bhutan has also tried to provide the scaffolding for social norms for conservation and sustainable development through, (i) the confluence of government's stated goal of creating a unique Bhutanese identity, (ii) the Buddhist foundations of many of Bhutan's cultural traditions and national policies, (iii) the government's explicit linking of Buddhist philosophy with conservation efforts, and (iv) the unifying development principle of GNH.<sup>v</sup>

### 3. Buddhist Principle and Beliefs

Buddhism is deeply ingrained in the society and the culture of Bhutanese people. Isolated for centuries and only recently being opened to the outside world, most of Bhutan's traditions and cultures are intact both in tangible and intangible forms.<sup>vi</sup> Broadly speaking the intangible cultures of Bhutan are, values, social gatherings, (like the festivals), indigenous art and culture, and preservation and promotion of these good customs has been achieved naturally through the way people think and act.<sup>vii</sup>

According to Buddhist principles, most of the customs are derived from the Buddhist ethics like, compassion, freedom, spirituality, peace and happiness, friendship.<sup>viii</sup> The Bhutanese culture which took shape under heavy Buddhist influence has many unique features, out of which three— happiness, gender equity, and environmental conservation are of particular importance.<sup>ix</sup> Culture and most of the traditions of Bhutan have been directly influenced by Buddhism—be it their festivals; their eating habits, or their dressing code, a glimpse of Mahayana Buddhism is easily evident in them. For a society whose culture is so imbued with Buddhism, it is quite natural for its people to be very religious.

Since the people of Bhutan are very religious, they would not do anything without the command of religion. Every single incident from birth to death is associated with religion and all the customs related to them have a religious base. The Bhutanese society is very much centered on the practice of Buddhism. Religious beliefs are evidenced in all aspects of life in Bhutan. Prayer flags flutter on every house on the hill side. White flags on the roof of a house in Bhutan basically signify that the people of that particular house have made their offerings to please the local god.

Basically, three types of faith mark a Bhutanese personality.<sup>x</sup> The first is the prayer, which includes all those short daily individual acts led by the monks that can continue for days. The purpose and the duration of prayers always vary. Prayers can be either sutras or mantras of the Buddhist teachings and they may be either lyrical or philosophical.<sup>xi</sup> The second type of faith evident among the Bhutanese is the spirit of volunteerism for the construction of community temples and the installation of spiritual offerings in the temples. A 2004 national survey confirmed that no other infrastructure activity required a greater number of labourers than the construction and maintenance of temples. The annual labor contribution of each household to large and complex temples surpassed the voluntary labor spent in building community schools and suspension bridges and safeguarding sources of drinking water. Bhutan has around three thousand monasteries and these monasteries signify the presence and the representation of Buddhism and help to project the Buddhist insights.<sup>xii</sup>

The third type of faith among the Bhutanese personalities is seen in the string that Bhutanese people attach to the wrongness of killing any life form. According to Buddhism, even those beings which can spread diseases should not be killed. But in reality, the people of Bhutan eat a lot of meat; however, they do kind of feel morally comfortable if the meat is imported or if somebody else will kill the animal for meat consumption.<sup>xiii</sup>

The Buddhist people in Bhutan believe in the three main vehicles of Buddhism which are as follows: 1) Hinayana form of Buddhism: is also known as the lesser vehicle is the form of Buddhism which do not really believe in idol worship and does not consider Buddha to be a form of god. Instead it believes that each being has to work out his or her own salvation through monastic self- discipline. 2) Mahayana form of Buddhism: is also known as the greater vehicle of Buddhism is a form of Buddhism which believes in idol worship and considers Buddha as a fully-fledged god. It proposes for salvation for the entire universe through the intervention of the bodhisattvas. 3) Vajrayana form of Buddhism: is also known as the Tantrayana or the secret mantra vehicle form of Buddhism. This form of Buddhism is considered to be the fastest path to enlightenment.

Customs for the morning devotion consist of offerings water and also the incense sticks which is also known as the phe or the sang and keeping a butter lamp burning continuously in front of the idols of the god.<sup>xiv</sup> Special rites and rituals also mark specific days of the Bhutanese calendar dedicated to Guru Padmasambhava, the Tara who is considered to be the mother of all Buddha's and the Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyal. Thus, Buddhism has strong influence over the people of Bhutan and their lives on a daily basis.

### 4. Gross National Happiness

Countries all over the world focus upon GDP especially in order to measure the economic well-being of the people. Besides GDP countries also focus upon the Human Development Index (HDI), in order to measure the non-economic actor of the people. However, all such forms of measurement are based only on monetary terms and the well-being of the people is also quantified in terms of money only. Spiritual and emotional needs and the psychological well-being of the people cannot be taken into consideration by these indexes. This gap has been fulfilled by the unique concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which combines the economic need of the people with their spiritual and emotional needs. The concept has been solely laid upon the teachings of Buddha, which say that the happiness is not just dependent upon the materialistic things alone but also depends on spiritual and emotional satisfaction of the individual. GNH has been the central developmental philosophy of Bhutan.<sup>xv</sup> Coined by the fourth King of Bhutan King Jigme Singye Wangchuk in the year 1980s by declaring that for Bhutan Gross National Happiness is more important than the Gross Domestic Product. His

vision was to create a GNH society: an enlightened society in which happiness and well-being of all the people and sentient beings is the ultimate purpose of governance.

While many definitions and explanations have been given to the concept of Gross National Happiness, there is not a single official definition given. However, the following definition given below is the most used and accepted definition for Gross National Happiness (GNH), Gross National Happiness, which measures the quality of a country in a more holistic way than the Gross National Product, and believes that the beneficial development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other.<sup>xvi</sup> Put very simple GNH is based on the conviction that material wealth alone does not bring happiness or ensures the economic growth, and modernization should not be at the expense of the people's quality of life or traditional values'.<sup>xvii</sup> GNH aims at increasing the well-being of the people and decreasing the sufferings of the people by combining the economics desires of people along with their spiritual and emotional desires.

There are four main pillars of Gross National Happiness in Bhutan. These four pillars of GNH form a useful framework to define the broad areas of developmental activities through which GNH can be pursued: 1) Equitable and sustainable socio-economic development 2) Preservation and promotion of culture 3) Conservation of environment 4) Good governance. Gross National Happiness basically sees as to what matters to the people and are they really happy excluding the material happiness and then policies are framed according to the needs of the people. But just the whole of GNH will not be able to measure and implement practical programmes and policies. For that an index will be needed that would take into account the important dimensions and principles of Gross National Happiness. Taking into consideration the necessity of such an index, in November 2008, the Bhutanese government adopted the Gross National Happiness index with an aim to reflect the GNH values, set the benchmarks and track performances and policies of Bhutan.

The GNH index measures how well the people of Bhutan are doing emotionally, socially, and economically and this index consists of nine domains: Psychological well-being, Preservation and promotion of culture, Cultural diversity and resilience, Education, Time use and balance, Community vitality, Health, Ecological diversity, good governance and the living standards of the people. In articulating Gross National Happiness (GNH), the King drew on Bhutan's deep well of compassion and non-violence towards all sentient beings, based in its 1,200-year-old history of Buddhism.<sup>xviii</sup> GNH is considered to be a holistic move towards progress. It tries to balance internal happiness with the external situation and it also addresses both non-material and material well-being of the people. Although material wealth is associated with the physical well-being, one's mental or internal well-being is not habituated by material needs alone. Well-being arises when sustainable and equitable economic development is balanced with environmental and cultural conservation and good governance. This has been referred to as the middle path which is derived from the Buddhist principle of avoiding extremes and taking a balanced view.<sup>xix</sup>

Bhutan is motivated by the Buddhist belief to achieve genuine happiness and has thus become till now, the only country in the world to officially follow the state of happiness. Bhutan formulates its national goals and policies on the basis of socio-economic progress and also takes into consideration the less experimental factors like emotional and spiritual well-being of the people. The King by proposing to promote the concept of Gross National Happiness instead of Gross Domestic Product has made a clear commitment to preserve Bhutan's cultural heritage and natural environment.<sup>xx</sup> Buddha said that a person can survive without religion but can never survive in a society of peace and success without love, kindness and compassion as with these tenets a person will be happy in both the present and next life also.

Buddhist teachings say that compassion and kindness should be shown for all the human beings and the other living beings in the world including the natural environment. It is on the basis of this, that the environmental conservation was made the fourth pillar of Bhutan's concept of GNH.<sup>xxi</sup> The two features of Gross National Happiness which are directly influenced from the Buddhist teachings are as follows: 1) Ends not means: the conventional developmental model often mistakes 'ends for means' and 'means for ends'. In GNH 'means and ends' are separate and clear. Everything else is a means towards achieving the ends, which is happiness.<sup>xxii</sup> 2) Holistic not fragmented: GNH is a holistic concept which considers all dimension of development equally important. It is about meeting holistic needs of the human beings such as psychological, emotional, spiritual, physical, social and environmental. GNH is about breaking narrow walls built around sectors in government or economy which results in fragmented reality of life.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Similar to the concept of GNH in Bhutan, there are many other facets of developmental policies and aspects in Bhutan which have taken influence from Buddhism, a few of which are discussed below:

#### 4.1. Environmental Conservation

The concept of environmental conservation is entrenched in the Bhutanese development philosophy of Gross National Happiness and it is one of the four pillars of gross national happiness. This reflects the importance of environmental conservation in Bhutan. According to the Buddhist political theory; a state exists not only for the human being's welfare but also for the welfare of all the sentient beings. Buddhist and traditional beliefs about appropriate interactions with animals and plants are codified in Bhutan's conservation principles and laws. The Biodiversity action plan recognizes that the mountains, rivers, streams, rocks and soils of Bhutan are believed to be the domain of spirits.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The four main events of Lord Buddha's life (birth, enlightenment, first teaching in deer park in Sarnath and his death), all took place under the tree. So due to this, Buddhist holds great respect for the trees and the environment. So, taking this factor into consideration, Bhutan has adopted environmentally friendly strategies in the process of development. It takes into special consideration that when any initiative is taken for development purpose, the environment will not be put to stake or peril. The Constitution also mandates that 60 percent of forest cover be maintained

for perpetuity,<sup>xxv</sup> and that the government has the specific responsibility to preserve, conserve, and improve the environment; prevent pollution; secure ecologically balanced sustainable development; and enable safe and healthy environment.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The National Environment Protection Act of 2007 (NEPA) sets the overarching legal framework for environmental protection and management in Bhutan. It outlines the following: (i) principles of application to environmental protection; (ii) the Constitution, functions, and powers of authority under the National Environment Commission (NEC); (iii) protection of environmental quality by managing hazardous substances, environmental pollutants, and managing waste; (iv) protection of forests, biodiversity, and ecosystem integrity; (v) the rights to environmental information and citizen participation; and (vi) procedures for environmental inspections, verification, enforcement, and penalties.<sup>xxvii</sup> Bhutan has gone to great lengths to preserve its Buddhist culture, and the country has robustly promoted sustainability and the protection of the environment as their top national priorities.

## 5. Conclusion

Buddhism which was introduced in Bhutan in Seventh century has come along way in Bhutan. Bhutan has gone through many phases in its history right from theocracy to the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in the year 2008. Through these strings of developments, Buddhism has always played a major role in all aspects of Bhutan, and at the same time evolving itself in parallel to the changes Bhutan gives great emphasis to Buddhism for its rich collection of culture, tradition and beliefs. Buddhism has played a vital role in laying the base on which the identity of Bhutanese people and of Bhutan as a sovereign country was built. Since Buddhism has been deeply imbibed in each and every aspect in Bhutan, the values the Bhutanese people care for are all based on the Buddhist principles and teachings.

The constitution of Bhutan was framed on 18th July 2008 which amongst others was also influenced by Buddhism. The Constitution under article 3(1) specifically refers Buddhism as the spiritual heritage of Bhutan and its role in the promotion of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance. Further, the laws and policies formulated in Bhutan such as conservation of environment, tobacco control law and law for the conservation of Tigers in Bhutan do have an element of the ethics and principles of Buddhism ingrained in it. Also, the development of the concept of Gross National Happiness developed by the King of Bhutan further shows that the rulers of Bhutan have been keen and enthusiastic on promoting Buddhism in Bhutan. People and society have been equally important along with the rulers in promoting and sustaining the culture and traditions from generation to generations. Similar to the rulers, the people are also playing an important role for preserving and promoting the culture and traditions of the country which are firmly based on the principles of Buddhism. The people of Bhutan are very religious and they would not do anything without the command of religion.

In Bhutanese society every single incident from birth to death is associated and done with religiosity. In nutshell, the Bhutanese society is very much centered on the practice of Buddhism and its people are very religious. Buddhism has been vividly influential in the realms of culture, economic developments and socio-political developments within Bhutan. Moreover, Buddhism has also been able to shape Bhutan's foreign policy in certain ways. One of the objectives of Bhutan's foreign policy has been to preserve the religious and cultural heritage which itself is based on Buddhism. Bhutan while conducting its external relations has particularly seen to it that its religious and cultural heritage is kept intact. Further, compassion, freedom, spirituality, peace and happiness are all part of the Buddhist ethics, and while developing relations with different nations, Bhutan always emphasizes and maintains these ethics of Buddhism. Also, at the international level, Bhutan tries to develop a cordial link with other Buddhist countries like Japan and other South East Asian countries.

Thus, Buddhism in Bhutan has had a strong influence over the political, social, and economic and of course cultural life of Bhutan. Buddhism is not just a religion here but also a guiding star to help Bhutan to conserve its identity, sovereignty and above all to help Bhutan to develop and grow through sustaining its culture and traditions.

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