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THE TRANSITION FROM EARLY TO MODERN HAPPINESS IN BHUTAN

Michael S. Givel

The Kingdom of Bhutan is located in the mountainous Himalayan region northeast of modern India and south of the modern Autonomous Region of Tibet. Since its inception in 1651, Bhutan has engaged in a unique governmental effort to promote happiness for its citizens. The original approach from 1651 to the 1970s centered on Mahayana Buddhist traditions of seeking enlightenment leading to bliss and happiness.

At the same time, the nature and meaning of happiness in Bhutan have evolved considerably from the seventeenth century to the present. Since the 1970s, a modern period known as Gross National Happiness (GNH) has taken shape, partly grounded in Mahayana Buddhist traditions. As influential modern trends such as world trade that transcends borders, world capitalism, and urbanization have progressed, this has precipitated a deliberate effort in Bhutan through GNH to preserve ancient Buddhist happiness practices. This attempt to preserve traditional culture has also been balanced with contemporary happiness issues, like a suitable standard of living. As a result, GNH has been a guiding framework in Bhutan to further a new form of happiness in the modern era, while at the same time Bhutan has worked for greater international recognition of its approach.

With this are two critical questions regarding the historical transformation of happiness in Bhutan. First, what is traditional happiness' direct connection to current happiness efforts in Bhutan? Furthermore, how has modern happiness in Bhutan influenced efforts for happiness worldwide? This chapter addresses these two questions using a qualitative chronological, historical, and content analysis approach. That will be accomplished by utilizing all pertinent peer-reviewed literature and research related to the historical evolution of classic happiness to modern happiness in Bhutan. Key milestones in relevant cultural and governmental development and changes involved in the transition from classic to modern Bhutanese happiness are explored causally and chronologically. Analysis also includes an overview of current happiness promotion from Bhutan to the world.

Traditional happiness in Bhutan

Ancient happiness in Bhutan began to be defined in the seventeenth century, with increasing detail in a series of official documents. In 1594, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the future founder of Bhutan, was born into the Gya clan in Tibet.¹ In 1606, the Shabdrung was anointed the eighteenth hereditary Prince-Abbot of the Brugpa Monastery at Ralung in Tibet.² During this period, the Shabdrung was ranked the fifth most powerful official in the Tibetan religious and political order. However, he was exiled in 1616 due to a power struggle with an opposing Abbot – gTsang-pa. Shabdrung later fled south of Tibet to what now is modern Bhutan. Shabdrung's arrival in 1616 began the traditional interest in defining happiness in Bhutan.

From the beginning of the nation of Bhutan in 1651 to the present, Mahayana Buddhism has been intricately intertwined with Bhutan's culture and politics.³ Buddhists far and wide recognize that suffering exists as part of the human condition. The state of enlightenment, defined as "extinguishing desire," involves becoming deeply aware of (but not one with) the reality of the vast, ever-changing, and impermanent cosmos. With this comes bliss and happiness, which is a principal goal of Buddhism. Traditional happiness in Bhutan emerged through a Buddhist dual system of government or theocracy, also known as *Chhoe-sid-nyi*. It was promoted through government and religious practices, edicts, and laws creating the condition for individuals if they chose to seek enlightenment.

The path to enlightenment and happiness

How can individuals attain enlightenment? That largely occurs through comprehension of the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth is the truth that suffering exists.⁴ The Second Noble Truth is understanding that suffering occurs through undue ego cravings for material things, power over others, sensuality, and failing to realize the path to enlightenment.⁵ The Third Noble Truth is knowing there is a path to cease suffering. That path is the Fourth Noble Truth, known as the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path provides direction on becoming enlightened, ending suffering, and being blissful and happy.⁶ The Noble Eightfold Path is divided into three parts. Sila includes good moral deeds and refraining from inappropriate actions of body and speech. Samadhi emphasizes meditation practices to achieve enlightenment. Prajña offers understanding and knowledge to being enlightened.

Within Sila are Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.⁷ Right Speech is abstaining from speech such as slander and gossip that harms others. Instead, it is important to participate in speech that aids others.⁸ Right Action is not causing harm (including criminal acts) to all sentient beings.⁹ Right Livelihood includes working in occupations that do not cause harm, pain, or injustice to sentient beings.¹⁰ For instance, manufacturing, selling, and promoting weapons that unduly harm others are counter to Right Livelihood.

In Samadhi are three additional parts of the Noble Eightfold Path Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Right effort includes continuing meditation practices to counter undesirable mental states and to become enlightened.¹¹ Right Mindfulness concentrates on what is happening in the present, which is accomplished through meditation practices.¹² That permits one to have a profound awareness of the nature of the universe and is essential to becoming enlightened. Right Concentration is the practice of focusing a mind sharply and lucidly in order to become more aware of the nature of cosmic reality.

Prajña contains the final two parts of the Noble Eightfold Path, including Right Understanding and Right Thought. Right Understanding includes a deep grasp of the fact that the Four Noble Truths can counter suffering and lead to happiness. Right Thought includes cultivating a mental awareness that counters unwholesome ego cravings.¹³ When an individual completely practices and integrates the eight parts of the Noble Eightfold Path into their life, they are on the path to being enlightened and happy.

A critical practice in obtaining bliss and happiness through enlightenment is karma or the law of cause and effect.¹⁴ When an individual engages in ongoing good actions that counter unwarranted ego craving, including compassionate acts that do not harm any sentient being, these result in Vipaka or a ripening of good karmic deeds. When a person is reborn (though there is no guarantee of being reborn as is valid with reincarnation), good karmic deeds in a past life can result in a life of greater happiness, joy, and bliss.

Negative karma, or harmful deeds, in a lifetime due to ignorance of being enlightened, anger and hate, and undue ego craving means humans have stumbled and are destined to persist on an ever-turning Wheel of Life.¹⁵ Those who continue on the Wheel of Life are stuck and suffer in their current worldly existence. In a rebirth, depending on the accrual of good or bad karma in a past life, an individual can be reborn in six realms of existence.

The following definitions for these six realms should not be taken literally. Instead, they are metaphorical depictions of human existence. In the three higher realms are the gods, meaning experiencing a life full of vast pleasure and happiness. Next is the realm of demi-gods in which pleasure and happiness are abundant. However, demi-gods can squabble and fight among themselves. Finally, there is the human realm in which there is suffering, including sickness, old age, hunger, and poverty.

In the lower realm, due to bad karma, one can be reborn as an animal whose existence is principally instinctual and out of control. Further down are hungry ghosts where one is in a state of incessant seeking of undue ego cravings and desires. At the bottom of the lower realm is hell, with powerful suffering and deprivation. Only by becoming enlightened can an individual leave the Wheel of Life.

Overview of Mahayana Buddhist worldview

The core beliefs of Mahayana Buddhism include the impermanent, unified, and non-dual cosmic universe, mitigating undue ego craving, karma, transmigration or rebirth, and becoming enlightened. Throughout the cosmic universe, impermanence is where all matter and energy are created, persists, and declines.¹⁶ Becoming more conscious of this reality is significant in becoming enlightened.¹⁷ The non-duality of reality means that all in the unified universe are related to each other. In the end, there are no binary opposites. Moreover, any dualities, like armed conflicts, are based on self-illusions. Beliefs in dualities need to be removed to become enlightened.¹⁸ Undue and excessive ego cravings cause ignorance and evil in the world. Transmigration or possible rebirth in Buddhism is predicated on good or bad karma by sentient beings in their past lives. When a sentient being becomes enlightened, their suffering ceases.¹⁹ With enlightenment come bliss, joy, and happiness.

Early Bhutanese governmental promotion of happiness

From a governmental and religious perspective, provisions for enlightenment and happiness began to be addressed in the early unwritten Constitution of Bhutan, as it unfolded over

a number of iterations. The unwritten Constitution included the Nga Chudruma of 1619, the Tsa Yig Chenmo of 1629, the First Legal Code of 1652, and an updated Legal Code of 1729.²⁰ Unwritten constitutions are non-constitutional writings that define a government's principal legitimacy, mission, and organizational form.²¹ The Nga Chudruma, with no direct provisions for happiness, was a testimony by the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal on the legitimacy of ruling Bhutan as a Mahayana Buddhist kingdom. The verses of the Nga Chudruma state:

I, who turn the wheel of the dual system;
I, grant refuge to all;
I, am the holder of the precious teachings of Palden Drukpa;
I, am the conqueror of all who pretends to be Drukpas;
I, am the one accomplished in poetry;
I, am the source of moral aphorisms;
I, the lord whose views are limitless;
I, refute those who hold wrong views;
I, the lord of the authority of debates;
I, am him before whom everyone trembles;
I, am the hero who conquers the host of evils;
I, am him whose powers cannot be obstructed by any sorcerer;
I, the mighty lord with mastery over speech;
I, excel in all sciences;
I, am the emanation prophesized by illustrious beings;
I, am the one who subdues imposters²²

The Tsa Yig Chenmo continued after Bhutan's establishment in 1651, a principal religious code of mandatory monastic conduct. A sole provision associated with happiness in the Tsa Yig Chenmo cites the Buddha in the Sutras:

A king, if he is fond of Dharma (the Buddhist religious codes and teachings), finds the path to happiness both in this and in the future lives. The subjects will act as the ruler acts, and therefore should the ruler strive to learn righteousness.²³

The First and Second Legal Codes contained civil and criminal provisions.²⁴ The only reference to happiness in the First Legal Code of 1652 is in the preamble:

It is the nature of the Buddha and his heirs to engage in various skills in activities through which the benefit and happiness of the infinite world of sentient beings are obtained.²⁵

There are numerous references to happiness in the Second Legal Code of 1729, as documented by Aris, who updated the first Legal Code.²⁶

In the Introduction, it was inscribed:

Following these words, in general, the happiness of all beings who are as limitless as the sky's extent depends on those very places where a Buddha's teachings have spread.

Later in the Introduction of the Second Legal Code were several provisions related to seeking and finding enlightenment:

The good religious observance of humans.
Form the basis of the holy dharma.
The practice of the dharma together with its basis.
Will gain one happiness.

A further reference to happiness specifies:

If there is no law, happiness will not come to beings. If beings do not have happiness, there is no point in the Hierarchs of the Brug-pa (leading school of Buddhism in Bhutan) upholding the doctrine of the dual system. Therefore, holding the precious doctrine in one's heart, it is necessary to enact legal observances like those of the Dharmaraja (head monk) Srong-btsans Gampo, which establish a justice devoid of bias or partiality.

The Second Legal Code continues by indicating:

The happiness of beings depends on the doctrine. Moreover, the doctrine of being who upholds it. Thus it happened, and so for beings who uphold the doctrine, there is cause for desiring an establishment of happiness in doctrine and among beings by setting up whatever is fundamental to a dual system (Buddhist theocracy) under which all beings are looked upon as an only child.

In the second part of the Second Legal Code, a critical section illustrates why rulers in a Bhutanese Buddhist theocracy should wisely lead so all citizens may become enlightened:

Now, as the chief actions befitting as Desrid Phyagmdzod, who is the illuminator of the doctrine of the joint system (of religious and state law) and master of the practice of legal observances, the Bhaavat (lord) has said in the sutras: If the king becomes enamored of religion, it is the path to happiness both in this and future lives. Subjects will also act as the king acts. Therefore he must learn how to live by religion.

Another passage in the Second Legal Code notes:

Following these words, since this southern range is itself the unequaled and glorious Brugpa Rinpoche's field of conversation. There is a definite need/for no inferior designs to hinder the happiness of beings and the doctrine by honoring on high the lotus feet of Mighty Ngag-gi d-Bangpo, Jina's ruler.

Moreover:

In general, instituting laws is for the subjects' happiness in various districts. In particular, it is to uphold, guard, and diffuse the sangha (religious community), which [abides by] the Vinaya (complete teachings) rules of the Buddha and [forms] the basis of the doctrine.

A subsequent reference to happiness in the Second Legal Code indicates:

When the Vinaya rule declines, the land is filled with oath-breakers.
The causes of happiness of beings diminish.

The last passage referencing happiness in the Second Legal Code states:

Which is the goal of temporal circumstances, the sure result of beneficial happiness.

These sections in the Tsa Yig Chhenmo and the First and Second Legal Codes from 1629 to 1729 provided for the Bhutanese government to promote conditions through wise rulers to allow citizens to become enlightened. This early version of happiness remained essentially unchanged from the seventeenth century.²⁷ Seeking enlightenment and happiness remains, up to the present, a central feature of Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan. How this traditional Mahayana Buddhism has adapted to powerful modern global secularization trends provides a primary basis for understanding and describing the promotion of modern happiness in Bhutan.²⁸ Increasing secularization stemmed from the complex combination of modern science, contemporary technology, global capitalism, and materialism instead of or in disenchantment with traditional religious practices.²⁹ The governmental effort to promote traditional and religious happiness in the presence of ongoing secularization formed the core of the Bhutanese program known from the 1970s to the present as Gross National Happiness, or GNH.

Modern happiness in Bhutan

GNH as a strategic goal

The early period of modern GNH in Bhutan as a strategic and broad governmental goal aligning Bhutan to GNH was launched as part of a significant political modification, developing soon after the advent of a new ruler and involving the first election to the office of Prime Minister. Bhutan's first elected Prime Minister, the Honorable Jigme Y. Thinley, recalled the process as follows:

I was with His Majesty the (Fourth) King (King Jigme Singye Wangchuck) on the day of his coronation in 1974. He had ascended to the throne just two years earlier following a two-year period of mourning for the previous king, who passed away in 1972. Now I think that it was barely months thereafter that I heard him mention the term Gross National Happiness for the first time, so we are going back more than thirty years.³⁰

The early strategic governmental purpose of GNH in Bhutan was later described in writing by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in two 1980 *New York Times* news stories.³¹ King Wangchuck was quoted on April 29, 1980, *New York Times* as saying, "There is gross national product, but there is also GNH. He said while he is eager to improve the standard of living, he thinks there are other standards of contentment that should not be endangered

by development.”³² In a November 16, 1980, *New York Times* news story, King Wangchuck stated, “...gross national happiness should not be sacrificed in the pursuit of a greater gross national product.”³³ A more detailed description of what GNH meant as a strategic goal appeared in a 1987 *Financial Times* of London news story when King Wangchuck declared:

We are convinced that we must aim for contentment and happiness. Whether we take five years or 10 to raise the per capita income and increase prosperity is not going to guarantee that happiness, which includes political stability, social harmony, and the Bhutanese culture and way of life.³⁴

This creation of GNH as a primary societal endeavor to promote happiness is due to the impetus to preserve ancient Buddhist culture and traditions amid increasing secularization. The rise in secularization in turn resulted from the increasing transformation of Bhutan into a modern capitalist consumer economy.³⁵ The extent and nature of the rapid change in Bhutanese society has been described by Phuntsho as follows:

One can safely claim that Bhutan has undergone much more change in the last 50 years than it had in the 500 years before that. Due to the successful programmes of modernisation and the widespread influence of the outside world through education, tourism, travel, and media, Bhutan is witnessing the adaptation, alteration, decline, and disappearance of traditional cultures at a scale and rate never seen in the past.³⁶

A major 1998 speech in Seoul, South Korea, by His Excellency Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, Chair of the Council of Ministers, Royal Government of Bhutan, to the Millennium Meeting for Asia and the Pacific provided a further pronouncement of Bhutan’s broad strategic goals and support of GNH.³⁷ In that speech, Lyonpo Thinley stated that GNH was in a “paradoxical situation” in which

... 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.³⁸

Lyonpo Thinley then stated that impacting happiness in the world as a policy inevitably contends with the leading implications of the modern age – including information technology, shrinkage of cultural diversity, scientific methods undermining traditional spiritual beliefs, overall secularization, rapid automation, loneliness, capitalism, and new arrangements in global and regional governance.³⁹

According to Lyonpo Thinley, early GNH was a broad conceptual approach to mitigate modernization. That occurred by balancing materialism with traditional Mahayana Buddhist traditions and values. That was to be accomplished through four complementary and equally emphasized strategic goals, also known as the four pillars. The four pillars included economic self-reliance, environmental preservation, cultural promotion, and good governance.⁴⁰

Initially, the pillar of cultural promotion within GNH centered on promoting enlightenment. As Lyonpo Thinley explained:

Within Bhutanese culture, inner spiritual (Buddhist) development is as prominent a focus as external material development. That follows from an original meaning of development in the 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.⁴¹

The environmental preservation pillar was defined as lessening damage to the natural ecosystem. That was because humans are sentient beings that co-exist with other sentient life forms on the planet.⁴² The pillar of economic self-reliance focused on countering the rich's overreliance on money and wealth at the expense of the poor. Good governance at that time was oriented toward decentralizing political and administrative power within Bhutan's hereditary monarchy.⁴³

A 2005 keynote address to the *Second International Conference on Gross National Happiness* by then Bhutanese Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs, Minister Jigme Y. Thinley, provided an updated Bhutanese government description of the broad strategic meaning of GNH.⁴⁴ GNH included addressing the more holistic concerns of Mahayana Buddhism, more conducive societal conditions toward becoming enlightened and happy, and the government's role in advancing happiness. The updated four pillars of GNH now include sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance.⁴⁵ Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development focused on economic activity, including the role of non-economic social activities like free time and family life. It also included income redistribution. Conservation of the environment included happiness as related to preserving and maintaining natural ecosystems. Preserving culture included maintaining traditional values with human rights and freedom of religion. Finally, good governance in Bhutan pertained to drafting a new constitution providing democratic rights and responsibilities.⁴⁶

Modern GNH and methodological expediency

In 2008, Bhutan, with the adoption of its first written Constitution, became a form of democracy known as a constitutional or democratic monarchy.⁴⁷ The new Constitution provided and required government implementation of GNH. As Article 9 of the Constitution states, "The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness."⁴⁸

Also, in 2008, the Centre for Bhutan Studies developed the Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI) to quantify, operationalize, and assess government values and programs related to GNH.⁴⁹ On page 16 of the *Tenth Five Year Plan of Bhutan (2008–2013)*, also published in 2008, was a new and more thorough explanation of the quantitative nature of GNH assessment and implementation.⁵⁰ The strategic and original four pillars of GNH

were to be expanded into nine quantifiable domains measuring specific complex national demographic sentiments of happiness.

Furthermore, the new effort included assessment of central government agency performance and goals in implementing GNH. As a result, the GNH Commission has overseen national planning, national evaluations, and government agency implementation of GNH throughout the Bhutanese executive branch.⁵¹ As written in the 2015 report, *Well-being, Happiness, and Public Policy* published by The Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies in Thimphu:

These nine domains of GNH were developed by Dasho Karma Ura (Director of the Centre for GNH Studies) to specify the four pillars of GNH articulated in Bhutan's 10th plan. They were used in the initial pilot of the GNH index, fielded in 2006, in the first national pilot GNH Index in 2008, and the 2010 GNH Index.⁵²

The three domains of standard of living, health, and education were subdivided under the heading of equitable socio-economic development. The original pillar of good governance remained its own domain. Sectioned from the original pillar of preservation and culture were the four domains of cultural vitality and diversity, psychological well-being, time use and balance, and community vitality. The original pillar of ecosystem vitality remained as a domain.⁵³

Furthermore, an explanation of the basis of the values for the new nine domains included:

Who says that the domains are of value? Anyone can. We do not establish the nine domains based on any single philosophy, religion, or theory of human good. Rather, their value rests, epistemologically, on practical reason, which means it can be corroborated by anyone who is observant of their own and other's experiences of fulfillment through direct experience, literature, film, or conversation, and does not have a prior ideological or theoretical framework but is open to experience.⁵⁴

Essentially, each domain embodies a vital part of Bhutanese national well-being and happiness. In a more holistic manner, GNH was to be achieved in all domains, with no domain superior to any others.

In 2005, the Bhutanese government moved forward toward operationalizing the nine domains of GNH with evidence-based statistical data.⁵⁵ A national psychometric random sample was subsequently utilized to assess citizen perceptions of GNH. The GNHI survey used a multifactor statistical approach known as the Foster-Alkire statistical method of sufficiency.⁵⁶

The GNHI survey included questions related to the nine domains, and this was later further subdivided into 33 weighted indicators.⁵⁷ For example, the health domain had four weighted indicators: self-reported health at 10 percent, healthy days at 30 percent, disability at 30 percent, and mental health at 30 percent.⁵⁸ Happiness in GNH is calculated by calculating the percentage of happy people, and then calculating the intensity or sufficiency of happiness by survey respondents in six or more of the nine domains.⁵⁹ Sufficiency of happiness is determined by the average number of domains in which not-yet-happy people are happy. This has in turn been divided into those who indicate they are deeply happy in 77 percent to 100 percent of the domains; extensively happy in 66 percent to 76 percent of the domains; narrowly happy in 50 percent to 65 percent of domains; and unhappy in 49 percent or fewer of the domains.⁶⁰

While the GNHI is intended as an authoritative approach to assessing happiness trends in Bhutan, there have also been recommendations for another authoritative measurement approach to assess happiness based on a comprehensive dashboard set of indicators.⁶¹ The dashboard approach includes utilizing several critical indicators like the GNHI with other surveys – for instance, civil liberties and political rights conclusions from the annual Freedom House survey;⁶² or annual survey results from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that focus on countering poverty and climate change.⁶³ The key conclusions of all of these surveys are then compared side-by-side to provide a nuanced examination and description of current trends in happiness in a society like Bhutan.⁶⁴

From the official Bhutanese standpoint, however, the use of modern statistical assessments to measure demographic perceptions of happiness and governmental implementation of GNH continues to refer back to the earlier Bhutanese Mahayana Buddhist values and traditions. In the modern era and particularly since 2008, this has been balanced with constitutional requirements for freedom of religion.⁶⁵ Particularly through the emphasis on the domain of cultural vitality and diversity, but also as part of some other domains, the goal has consistently involved preserving and promoting early Bhutanese and Mahayana Buddhist traditions and culture. This is clear in the historical context of GNH, with the original public declarations and government goals. By 2008 and thereafter, the whole GNH campaign – complete with unusually elaborate assessment mechanisms – became a prime governmental public policy approach in addressing modernization, globalization and capitalism, and secularization, balancing these modern trends with Bhutan's ancient Mahayana Buddhist traditions and culture toward the goal of becoming enlightened and happy.⁶⁶

GNH since 2008

Since 2008, a rich scholarly literature on GNH has emerged in two main conceptual areas. That includes GNH as a form of Buddhist modernism and GNH as a unique development approach. Two other vital sub-areas have focused on how the Bhutanese government has implemented GNH, from a governmental public policymaking perspective, and how the program represents an exercise in deliberative democracy.

GNH and Buddhism in the modern age

In our contemporary age of modernization, Buddhist modernism, including GNH and the nine domains, derives from traditional Buddhist values and traditions. This has occurred as these traditional values encounter and adapt to significant modern secularization and economic changes in societies,⁶⁷ including the movement from a traditional rural base to an increasingly urban society.⁶⁸ In Bhutan as elsewhere, a primary catalyst for a more modern and secular society has been world capitalist transactions in markets, trade, and investments in which goods and services flow between nations.⁶⁹ From a historical context, the resultant transition from traditional happiness to GNH represents a new period in the nature of happiness in Bhutan.

GNH as a more holistic development approach

GNH as a form of Buddhist modernism is also directly connected to GNH as a development approach.⁷⁰ GNH, which balances modern materialism and secularization with

traditional Mahayana Buddhist practices and traditions, represents a more holistic and multi-dimensional development approach.⁷¹ Thus, economic growth and development are interlinked with and dependent on various factors, including social areas like education, environmental protection, and political areas like anti-corruption and democratic practices.⁷²

Concerning equitable socio-economic development, one area of academic scrutiny has been whether GNH involves a form of “degrowth” to counter unsustainable economic development.⁷³ Verma has argued that “sustainable degrowth” and GNH both represent an effort to enhance human well-being and ecological sustainability. In particular, Verma argues that unbridled economic growth is often conceptualized and advanced as only forwarding free market neo-liberal policies. This neo-liberal approach disregards other important development policies – including environmental protection, cultural preservation of traditional Tibetan Buddhist culture and values (in Bhutan), and good governance.

On the other hand, Masaki argues that expanding economic growth is compatible with GNH and does not impede greater happiness.⁷⁴ From a conceptual perspective, all nine domains that include economic growth can provide for and are characteristic of modern GNH as a development approach.⁷⁵

GNH as public policy

In addition to assessing national sentiments related to happiness, another fundamental purpose of the nine domains and 33 indicators of GNH is the quantification and measurement of government agencies’ implementation of GNH governmental policies and programs.⁷⁶ Public policy is defined as what government institutions, including executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, do or do not do. For instance, what Bhutanese legislative parliamentary laws promote GNH, and for what purposes? Or what written judicial decisions have Bhutanese higher courts rendered to interpret the legality and purpose of GNH? Or what have public agencies in the executive branch done to carry out and further the intent of GNH?

Bhutanese legislative policymaking from 2008 to 2019 included ratification of happiness provisions in the 2008 Bhutanese written Constitution and legislation in five of nine GNH domains.⁷⁷ The 2008 constitutional provision requires that Bhutan implement GNH as an all-encompassing national policy and priority. The Acts in which happiness was codified were in the areas of health, economic development, cultural resiliency, good governance, and ecological resiliency.⁷⁸ One other Act codified happiness in the new area of disaster management. There were no written court decisions related to happiness from 2008 to 2019.⁷⁹ As noted earlier in this chapter, in the executive branch, the GNH Commission has overseen the national implementation of GNH in all government agencies.⁸⁰ From 2008 to 2019, and as is required in the 2008 Constitution, Bhutan’s executive, legislative, and judicial governmental actions have provided a solid foundation for sponsoring and continuing GNH with no major changes.

GNH as deliberative democracy

Recent scholarship has maintained that Bhutan is or ought to be practicing deliberative democracy.⁸¹ Deliberative democracy is defined as an effective method of government enactment of laws, regulations, and programs. At the same time, based on policy expert

evaluations and decision-making, it does not bypass democratic decision-making by all, including non-policy experts.⁸² Within a deliberative democracy system, networked private and public policy actors and entrepreneurs advance their policy agendas. Thus, deliberative democracy promotes open group and individual involvement in governmental policymaking. This involvement can be based on cooperation or contestation.

The deliberative policymaking perspective is congruent with the classic pluralistic theoretical political perspective.⁸³ In classic pluralism, it is said that various interest groups can all equally engage in political bargaining among themselves and have equal access and abilities to influence legislation and policy in a political process. That is mainly based on incremental or small political decisions through group interaction, with a variety of policies based on decision-making or on maintaining the status quo.⁸⁴ Also, in classic pluralism, the relationship between rulers and the ruled is reciprocal; there are multiple centers of power, and power is decentralized and non-cumulative, with no one group dominating.⁸⁵ It is still too early to determine whether the new Bhutanese democracy is based on deliberative democracy and classic pluralism or on some other theoretical model of democracy – for instance, elite pluralism and democracy in which more powerful interests, groups, individuals, and classes tend to dominate over others in the political process.⁸⁶ Ongoing scholarly research will begin to answer this vital question.

GNH from a global perspective

A crucial aspect of the GNH movement in Bhutan has been the effort to promote greater international attention. A crucial step to advance GNH in international affairs occurred on July 19, 2011, which was when the United Nations General Assembly approved Resolution 65/309, *Happiness: Towards a Holistic Definition of Development*. The Resolution was sponsored by Bhutan and passed without a dissenting vote. The Resolution recommended that member nations begin national domestic processes and policies to incorporate the primary goal of well-being and happiness.⁸⁷ The Resolution also stated that “the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal,” as reflected in the goals and objectives of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.⁸⁸ This Resolution was non-binding on member states. Beginning in 2012, the United Nations has also issued an annual *World Happiness Report* that reviews the current state of world happiness in member nations, as well as current policy and societal issues that impact happiness around the planet.⁸⁹

Conclusion

Traditional happiness in early Bhutan rested on the main societal mission of wise leaders promoting the conditions for citizens to seek and become enlightened and happy. Since the mid-twentieth century, Bhutanese society has been in a rapid transition.⁹⁰ Ancient Buddhist beliefs are now contending with and adapting to modernization, secularization, and globalization.⁹¹ A detailed overview of the features of modern GNH since 2008 has been well documented and researched. A synopsis includes the following.

- First and foremost, GNH is a form of Buddhist modernism. This chapter illustrates that the historical context and evidence are overwhelmingly clear in this regard. The purpose of GNH is to preserve Buddhist traditions to become enlightened in the face of powerful

modern forces in the world, such as secularization, capitalism, and urbanization. But the result has been an unusually early, focused and explicit governmental effort to define and measure the components of happiness in the contemporary world.

- The period from the 1970s to 2008 emphasized the constituent features of GNH, based on broad qualitative and documented governmental policy statements and goals. From 2008 to the present, the strategic goals of the original four pillars of GNH were expanded into nine quantifiable and equally emphasized domains.
- With the nine domains, Bhutan's GNH approach is significantly more holistic than conventional measures of societal progress based on economic output and productivity, such as GDP. GNH is more holistic because it incorporates multi-dimensional social, cultural, and environmental considerations, advancing them as equal in importance GDP and other strictly economic outcomes.
- Public policymaking in Bhutan to further GNH and happiness from 2008 to 2019 in the form of executive branch actions, judicial decisions, and constitutional provisions and legislative Acts has, so far, substantially implemented the original overarching provisions and goals of the nine domains. There have been no significant or even minor societal challenges in promoting GNH as required in the 2008 Bhutanese Constitution.
- Some scholars have also posited that the new GNH and democratic system since 2008 have provided an opportunity for deliberative democracy in Bhutan. That is congruent with classic pluralist theory. Ongoing research is needed to investigate this further.

The meaning of modern happiness and GNH in Bhutan has been solidly grounded in general overarching concepts of traditional and modern happiness. Where Bhutan goes in the future in advancing and indeed defining Buddhist modernism and happiness continues to be an unfolding story. The same holds true for any international implications of the Bhutanese approach.

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