

# The Role of Buddhism in Achieving Gross National Happiness

KHENPO PHUNTSOK TASHI

## Introduction

The effect of Gross National Happiness is both a shared desire and common ground for the people of the country. Every citizen of Bhutan should strive to be intellectual, civilized, and well-educated with regard to the inner causes, outer conditions and the effects on happiness in systematic and practical ways.

The practice of Buddhism employs innumerable skilful means for attaining complete enlightenment and ultimate happiness. This presents itself as the most challenging goal and also illustrates why Gross National Happiness cannot be achieved unless Buddhist philosophy is fully incorporated and practiced by each and every citizen of Bhutan. The cultivation of happiness is central to Buddhist philosophy and practices and there are limitless avenues and methods prescribed in the teachings through which happiness can be achieved at the individual or collective levels. Happiness is a quality of the mind that arises from positive mental attitudes which, among others, include the intention never to harm others, the desire to provide help and support to those around us, and to remain contented with one's life.

In order to achieve happiness one must work to develop a mind, which is enlightened, intellectual and civilized, and one must be diligent in following right philosophy associated with the teachings of Buddha. To achieve happiness, we should analyse our thoughts and actions in everyday life as well as those causes and conditions that are deeply inter-related. Every person who desires happiness should firmly draw a line between happiness and unhappiness in the mind and then this distinction must be translated or put into constant practice.

Universally, most philosophers, intellectuals or enlightened beings agree that the whole purpose and the greatest goal in life is to achieve happiness. There are two types of happiness: "Ultimate Happiness" and "Relative Happiness". Ultimate Happiness is the wisdom of complete enlightenment in which emptiness and compassion are found to coexist in an inseparable, permanent and eternal manner. Relative Happiness, on the other hand, is defined as an attitude of not harming, of helping others and in being content. Relative happiness, however, is impermanent and can change depending on the situation.

There are two categories of Relative Happiness: physical and mental happiness. Physical happiness is achieved through provision and meeting of the basic human needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. Once these basic

needs are met, the next step is depending on one's own mental state as the prime source for generating and achieving happiness.

There are thousands of different thoughts and states of mind that people can take on. Among these, some may be very positive and helpful and, hence, these positive attributes of the mind need to be further developed and nourished. Other thoughts or mind-states may be negative and thus harmful, and as such, such mental dispositions must be reduced. Therefore, the first step to be taken in seeking true happiness is to realize that happiness will not occur spontaneously. One must understand and strive to monitor negative emotions, and realize that they are evil and harmful not only to an individual but also to the society and the greater environment of the whole world as well. In order to achieve genuine happiness, one is required to transform one's own outlook and examine the usual ways of thinking and the various states of mind.

Considering this, one of the most important motivations for the cultivation of Gross National Happiness is related to the development of attitudes, which strive not to harm others. Buddhist philosophy also explains that if one desires happiness, one should seek the right causes and conditions that give rise to happiness.

Every Bhutanese citizen should educate himself or herself and work to develop the attitude of wanting to help others. The cultivation of altruistic mind reflects the main activity of a bodhisattva and such mental attitudes are indispensable for generating happiness for the entire society. If every citizen cultivates the feeling of compassion, it will automatically open the inner doors toward a more awakened mind, and through this process one can work meaningfully for the benefit of others.

The philosophy of Gross National Happiness, as enunciated by our enlightened Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wanchuck, relates to the concept of happiness as taught by the Buddha. His Majesty the King made it clear that the traditional way of measuring human progress by using the instrument of Gross National Product is inadequate in addressing the concept of happiness. The GNP measurement falls short because it addresses only superficial or conditional phenomena in our world. The Buddha explained that looking outward or relying on external support for the achievement of happiness is incorrect and an error. Buddhist philosophy states that relying on such external factors as the source of happiness will only lead to unhappiness. The Buddha advised his followers that if they desired true happiness, they should concentrate on cultivating inner contentment.

### **Types of Feelings**

According to Buddhist doctrine, there are three types of feelings: joyous, painful and neutral feelings (*tshor-ba bde-sdug btang-snyoms gsum*).

Joyous feeling symbolizes happiness and something that all beings desire from birth to death. However, there is often a contradiction

associated with this feeling. In our search for joyous feeling, we often engage in worldly practices, which bring to play the negative forces of desire, anger and ignorance. These three negative emotions – or the three poisons as they are also called – are the primary emotions, which are associated with human existence and serve to block one's ability to achieve true happiness.

The Buddhist practice can play a vital role in removing these three negative emotions and introduce the ways and skilful means of achieving true happiness. However, it is also pointed out that, ordinarily, it is very difficult for human beings to achieve complete happiness because of our over-riding attachment to favourable things. That is why Buddhist philosophy describes the human beings as “desire beings” (*Dod-khamspa*) living in the “desire realm” (*Dod-khams*).

The second type of feeling in the mind is the painful feeling or suffering, which embodies the opposite of happiness.

The feeling that is characterized as a “neutral feeling” is one that is neither happiness nor pain but could be transformed to either of the two depending on circumstances, situations or activities associated with it at that point of time.

### **The Creation of a GNH State through the Process of Transforming the Mind**

If Bhutan wants to give birth to a GNH state, both the economic and spiritual spheres need to be developed together, but the spiritual aspect is the base from which to start. The whole nation has to go through the process of the transformation of the mind but particularly the policy makers and the country's planners. Where necessary, they have to both develop individually and to accept responsibility for the promotion of the concept of transforming the mind of all through the modern system of education and transmission through the media - newspapers, television and radio - as well as through the more traditional paths in order to reach the whole population. If all citizens received proper training in the development of the mind, they would become good in mind, body and deed and so would develop a sense of responsibility towards the creation of an ideal society.

The development of a curriculum, a training program with multi-media materials for use in education, formal and non-formal, could pave the way to ensuring the goals of GNH.

### **The Basic Argument**

It is my contention that the more conventional approaches to the creation of a GNH state such people participation in decision-making and a well-developed administration, development of industry such as hydro power and maintenance of bio-diversity, the integrity of culture and environment will not bring everlasting happiness, since such happiness

depends on whether people's desires are satisfied. For example, if a man newly electrifies his house, he is happy at the beginning but later he may not be so happy if he is unable to pay the bill. Consumer-based societies contain such contradictions - are the people in these societies ever content?

### **Teaching People to be Happy: Is this possible?**

Since Buddha said:

Complete enlightenment is supreme bliss.

The answer can only be yes, but people do however have to be taught to take spirituality seriously. To ensure the success of an enlightenment program, a plan will need to be very carefully developed and implemented. This program should be designed to reach everyone from ministers to sweepers. Think of the case of the sweepers; their contribution to society will be so much greater if they clean the ground with a greater sense of responsibility and an interest in the place where they live, since they will take pride in their work. At the Minister level, the effect will be so much greater, as Ministers have responsibility for so many others.

### **Present Situation in Bhutan**

One of the major issues of today is the gap between the younger generation's levels of spiritual understanding and factual knowledge. This gap seems to be becoming wider and wider. For example, most young Bhutanese attend the ceremony of empowerment given by Lamas and Rinpoches, but they do not fully understand and appreciate the significance of the ceremony. Now is the right time to start delivering training on spirituality, otherwise within a few years, the inner happiness developed through spiritualism will dissipate. In Bhutan, fortunately, Buddhism and the culture are intricately inter-linked. Nevertheless, everyone has to appreciate spiritual exercise its value and its usage in daily life. If not, desire and dharma will remain irreconcilable and contradictory as in so-called developed, modern societies that seek happiness but fail to find it.

The Government cannot deliver happiness to the whole nation by increasing economic development. In the same way, a citizen cannot achieve everlasting happiness for himself or herself without having enlightened and dynamic direction. The effort should be made jointly and collectively.

However, this collective effort should be directed primarily by the mind and not by body and speech. According to Mahayana Buddhism, it is accepted that happiness springs from an altruistic or compassionate mind. This type of mind is not only the origin of happiness but also allows happiness to be perceived and experienced by others. The mind is the king, speech is the minister, and the body is a member of the retinue or attendant. The mind is the creator or the source of all actions. As Buddha said:

"Mind is the forerunner of all phenomena, mind is their chief and they are mind made. If with a pure mind, one speaks or acts, then happiness will follow like a shadow that never departs".

It is only possible to have full-fledged GNH state if all citizens go through this process of transformation of the mind. As the mind is guided, so will the actions of the body and speech follow. This is the basis of happiness.

### **Influence of Karma**

Not all Bhutanese citizens may be able to understand what is the right cause and follow the right path because they are born with the different karmic backgrounds. In one sense, it is good that there is a wide range of karmic backgrounds, since it means that happiness can be achieved through very different efforts. For example, farmers can be happy when they have a good harvest as their karma is to be farmer. So their contribution toward GNH can be increased level of self-reliance they enjoy through having abundant crops. Similarly, business people can contribute towards GNH by making profits and investing wisely and civil servants by showing loyalty and full dedication to their service. Spiritual practitioners can contribute by achieving realisation.

In Buddhism, karma plays a crucial role in shaping one's own destiny. For example, in Buddha's time a famine struck Magadha and many people were dying of starvation. One of the Buddha's disciples, who possessed the miraculous power to change a whole rocky mountain into gold, wanted to do so out of compassion and use the gold to buy food. He sought the advice of the Buddha on changing that rock into gold. But, the Buddha suspended this miraculous power, explaining that if the rock was changed into gold, more people would die in the future because they would fight over the gold.

Similarly, an 8th century Tibetan king named Muni Tsenpo felt sympathy for his poor subjects and he wanted to make them happy by giving them an equal amount of wealth. Three times in his reign he redistributed property, but poor subjects remained as poor as before and wealthy subjects as wealthy as before. Finally the king accepted that karma was very powerful and that people had to accept their Karma and apply their efforts accordingly.

The crucial message is that it is people's collective effort over both place and time which determines whether good or bad follows an action.

### **Strategy to Achieve GNH**

The training program should not be founded on force or compulsion, particularly in the case of younger citizens. A child-centered approach to training is needed to bridge the gap between mentors and children. This

group is however easy to reach through the modern educational system. To reach other groups requires a non-formal educational approach, using radio, television and newspapers and the Monk Body. Curriculum is already fully developed in the teachings of Buddha. It needs only to be simplified.

### **Delivery of the Curriculum**

All different community members - civil servants, farmers, business people, students, teachers, monks, gomchens and others - should have the opportunity to read and learn about achieving happiness. A series of simple and effective training materials should be developed which teach how to achieve and sustain happiness, appropriate to the needs of different audiences. These materials should be clear and inspirational. They should address all the relevant subjects, which can help enhance happiness. Research should be carried out to ascertain what needs to be included to make the training materials effective.

Training should be offered in all institutes, offices, private organizations, towns, village communities, and monasteries where Bhutanese citizens work and live.

Once people are awakened and sensitive to the causes and conditions of happiness, sustaining and enhancing happiness lies in the hands of the people. They will become the final lord of their own destiny to create a GNH state (human paradise). As Buddha said:

One is the refuge of oneself; what other refuge could there be?  
With oneself fully controlled, one obtains a refuge, which is easy  
to defend.

### **Analogy of Economic Growth and Mindfulness**

These days, there are many who believe the modern view of speeding up economic growth will contribute to the generation and growth of happiness. This is like starting a small engine and accelerating its speed in order to gain what is desired. A more Buddhist approach would be to slow down the speed with great care and mindfulness, using the brake, which is also part of the engine so that it doesn't fly out of control. Both aspects are necessary and indispensable in terms of contributing to the achievement of happiness. Having a happy life is the destination or goal of all living beings. But both quickening and slowing methods must be applied in equal strength in order to achieve what is desired in a successful way. If one fully trusts the strategy of fast or quick development as a means to achieving happiness, then one is also at risk of failure and disaster in the long run. Applying the philosophy of slowly building contentment is a better approach, a more workable antidote to the quick development of outer conditions like material advancement.

### The Three Obstacles

There are three obstacles, which limit the achievement of happiness and these include the outer, inner and secret obstacles:

The outer obstacle has two types: famine and war. When famine is present in a certain location, it is known as the aeon of famine (*mu-ge' skalpa*). During this period, people will be unable to experience happiness because they live in fear of starvation and theft of food from others. The only happiness, which could be experienced at this time, would be related to obtaining enough food and drink.

The second outer obstacle is due to war or conflict taking place and it is known as the aeon of war (*mtshon-gyi skalpa*). This situation too, will prevent people from experiencing happiness, as in this situation people are more concerned with being killed or killing others for various reasons. Buddhist teachings on non-violence can play an important role in avoiding such kinds of violence and help to develop greater understanding amongst the people by making them realize the great many advantages of peace and happiness.

The inner obstacle of happiness relates to suffering caused by illness or disease and the fear of death. These sufferings can result before a person has had the chance to complete his full lifespan. According to Buddhism there are 424 different kinds of diseases, which can attack either the physical or mental aspects of the body. When one experiences these kinds of obstacles on the way to achieving happiness, it is known as the aeon of disease (*nad-kyi skalpa*). In Buddhism, one may find many antidotes, including the use of bodhi-mind or the power of meditation, to recover from diseases or illnesses. Atisha Dipamkara, a saint from the 10th century, is said to have once had pain in his hand but when he asked one of his closest disciples who possessed bodhi-mind to provide blessing, the pain disappeared.

The bodhisattva sutra says:

"May the aeon of disease, famine and war be pacified,  
May the aeon of peace, prosperity and happiness be enhanced".

The secret obstacles, also impairing happiness are desire, anger and ignorance. These are also known as the three poisons in Buddhist philosophy and as long the three poisons reside within the mind, chances are very slim for one to be able to develop happiness. These emotions are called the three poisons because they have the power to make everyone suffer - both in this world and the next. Many of the Buddha's main messages in 84,000 groups (or heaps) of teachings given during his 45 years of life focused primarily on helping humans to eradicate these three poisons from the mind. The teachings continue to serve as an antidote to the secret obstacles.

### **Four Noble Truths for Ultimate Happiness**

If one truly wants to be happy, the first thing one has to do is to strive to avoid or abandon suffering as quickly as possible. Just as the Buddha assured his first five disciples, it is only when one alleviates or abandons suffering that only happiness arises. Happiness and suffering are contradictory in nature and do not abide simultaneously. By remaining ignorant, suffering cannot be removed. The Buddha gave various discourses on the cause of suffering and explained that the moment one realizes the cause of suffering; one can feel happiness and relief. Moreover, one then becomes very active and can hardly wait to practice the path leading to happiness and liberation.

The main cause of suffering is attachment or craving which is the binding force that holds all humans within the cycle of samsara (*'khor-ba*). As long as craving or thirst for attachment exists within the mind, it will continue to be the cause for renewal of existence or rebirth. This craving or attachment is often associated with the need for sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now and here and the fulfillment or gratification of various passions through the physical senses.

It is, therefore, important for us to see through to the truth of suffering and to recognize its cause, path and cessation through learning, contemplating and meditation. The moment one discovers the truth of suffering, one will understand its cause, path and cessation. These are the four noble truths, key teachings of the Buddha that help us to attain or reach ultimate happiness.

### **Causes and Conditions of Gross National Happiness**

Buddhist philosophy explains that nothing comes into being without cause, and when conditions are created, there is nothing that can prevent the resulting consequences. Buddhism stresses this to ensure that people understand and then put it into practice in their daily lives. Buddhism also teaches that the path to happiness is liberation from suffering, and this involves a deeper understanding of the nature of existence.

Buddhist view contends that there are conditions for existence within a perpetual cycle of dissatisfaction, but that humans have the ability to end such a cyclic existence through gaining insight into the true nature of suffering and thereby eliminating or reducing it. For the Bhutanese, an understanding of the dynamics between cause, condition, and effects are critical to each individual's quest for happiness.

Since inner causes and outer conditions are interdependent, every citizen of Bhutan should be aware of or educated about them in order to be able to contribute to the profound effect of Gross National Happiness. This would include things they can do for themselves as well as things they can do to help or support others. Every person should be taught and refreshed

from time to time on the advantages of cultivating and working with the required causes and conditions. Although there are countless inner causes, we can condense these into three principal causes for a clearer understanding:

- (a) Attitude of not harming (source of self-liberation or source of individual happiness)
- (b) Attitude of helping others (source of bodhi-mind or source of happiness for all sentient beings)
- (c) Contentment (source of satisfaction or rejoicing)

The outer conditions, in general, can be any development or policy established by the government which brings about a better situation for the good of the people. The outer conditions can be summarized into five distinct categories as listed below:

- (a) Education (source of knowledge or wisdom)
- (b) Good governance (source of justice)
- (c) Cultural promotion (source of spiritualism or identity)
- (d) Economic development (source of prosperity or source of physical happiness)
- (e) Environmental preservation (source of harmony)

Developing an attitude of not harming means being mindful and awakening to oneself. If one is ignorant of oneself, there is then a danger to both the self and the larger society and many mistakes can be made which ultimately bring dissatisfaction and/or unhappiness to oneself and others around them. The principle of not harming embodies the complete tenet or doctrine of the Theravada School of Buddhism, whereas cultivation of the attitude of helping others includes the Mahayana perspective as well. However, the practice of developing contentment is found in both the schools.

In today's western or modern world, development has reached to a point where thousands of options or facilities are easily available at people's fingertips. But due to ignorance related to not fully understanding the nature of the cause and conditions of happiness, people continue only to confuse themselves. These well-developed societies are convinced - through their own learning - that economic development and wealth alone can never bring total happiness, but only bring about dissatisfaction and continued craving. Economic gain is regarded as an outer condition of happiness and it is considered secondary or supplementary by both philosophers and enlightened intellectuals. Real happiness itself resides in the mind and is generated only from the use of right attitudes and actions. Happiness is not an outside phenomenon.

As Acharya Aryadeva states:

"All outer phenomena are accidental and conditional. Happiness and hope lies in the right attitude and aspiration".

Happiness can be measured by people's contentment with what they have and their inner disciplines, but not through material gains they make. From a Buddhist perspective happiness cannot be measured based on owning material goods because these things only bring about more frustration, since great care must be taken to protect them. The mind further becomes preoccupied with the desire to procure more material goods. This happens because one is not aware of the inner causes of happiness.

Following the principle of contentment doesn't mean that he or she cannot become rich or meet life's required basic necessities. If one has a contented mind, one will then become wiser in terms of using properties in a meaningful way and will be able to appreciate what one has, giving rise to happiness. For those who rely on outer conditions in order to obtain happiness, they will achieve the kind of happiness, which is unstable and tenuous. A Buddhist approach to happiness ensures that it is stable and sound.

### **Attitude of Not Harming**

As mentioned earlier, one of the three inner causes includes the attitude of not harming others. It serves as the source of individual happiness or liberation. This attitude needs to be studied and then developed within the mind as it forms the basis of happiness. The three doors - body, speech and mind - should also be trained because harmful things can easily emerge from these "doors". When we talk of "others" we must also consider both animate and inanimate beings other than our-self. One may wonder why this attitude of not harming is so necessary for those who desire happiness. It is because Buddhists believe that every sentient being experiences the same feeling of pain and joy which is also experienced by ones-self.

It is extremely important to establish a society, which is free from harm and fear of harm similar to that of a utopian community of monks or nuns. In Bhutan, it is possible to have a violence-free society, as we are Buddhists and peace loving. Moreover, Bhutan has an enlightened, Bodhisattva monarch as manifested by our beloved Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck.

Buddhists believe that the destruction of the environment will bring about disaster in society. Based on these views, Buddhism teaches the principle of not harming others.

According to Buddhism, the principle of not harming others also includes the various environmental aspects such as the five elements of soil, water, fire, wind and space, as well as mountains, forests, rivers and lakes

all of which directly or indirectly support sentient beings through nourishment and provision of natural resources. These also provide economic gain for the country in many ways. Buddhism believes that many unwanted disasters would occur in the world if the environment is neglected and disturbed. This is why Buddhists are very conscious in terms of respecting the environment and trying to minimize any harm on it.

If happiness is to be born in the minds of all Bhutanese people, the most important thing to consider is the need for training the mind to develop an attitude of not-harming all those who desire happiness. Authorities should set goals and frame development policies in line with the attitude of not harming others as spelt out in Buddhist philosophy.

Without working to make these ideas and practices concrete or substantial, happiness will not materialize or be achieved by just speaking of happiness or by wishing happiness. As the Buddha said:

"Taking one's own body as an example of pain and suffering, one should strive not to harm others."

### **Attitude of Helping Others**

The second cause, which can contribute to the achievement of happiness, is developing the attitude of helping others. This is like a supreme intelligence, which is the source of global happiness. The essential nature of this practice or attitude is having a great, loving heart and recognizing that all sentient beings are included as the object of love and help. This is one of the main doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism and this view has existed for centuries in Bhutan. A person who possesses such an attitude is recognized as a bodhisattva and grows rapidly into a charming, gentle and compassionate person full of tender and affectionate thoughts. Loving and caring in an unbiased manner, he or she always works continuously for the duties of this high calling and disregards any thought which is not pure and wise.

Gross National Happiness can be born out of this attitude and wisdom. If such perspectives are developed then the Bhutanese people will understand how happiness can be achieved as it is a logical concept. Life is one, says the Buddha's devotees, and we can live for all in an interdependent manner. It is therefore nobler to work for the betterment of all rather than just for oneself.

In order to develop this remarkable attitude one should first be thoughtful of practice and words of the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine and then through seeing the benefits of helping others, follow the ideal path as illustrated through the four means and six perfections on the way to achieving Gross National Happiness.

Mahayana Buddhist philosophy also goes on to say that happiness is born from giving help to others. However, it is indispensable to have proper

guidelines for practicing the ways and strategies for generating the attitude of helping others. Only a handful of people are able to receive proper training on developing the attitude of helping others and even among those, very few are able to realize the benefit. And fewer yet will be able to practice this moral support, which provides and gives encouragement to all to help others.

The attitude should be possessed and practiced especially by policy and decision-makers, as this will empower them to provide guidance to the greater body of people at large. There should also be programs organized that provide each and every member with an opportunity to learn either in a group or to further their own individual learning through a competent and trustworthy mentor. Then, according to their knowledge and experience, they should share and impart this knowledge to the people who are closely associated with them.

### **Contentment**

The third cause of happiness is contentment - a source of appreciation and the ability to rejoice. Happiness can be measured by contentment and contentment functions as an antidote to feeling need, jealousy and miserliness. A content person will appreciate and be able to rejoice in the other person's wealth or good fortune knowing that wealth is the fruit of previous good karma. So demonstrating contentment also includes the aspect of wisdom that acknowledges or celebrates the good in other's wealth and belongings without craving for them. One who lacks contentment will only see their own needs increase and experience further and often endless suffering due to the desire of obtaining the desired things one after another without end.

Again, this is the opposite of happiness as one's innermost thoughts are always preoccupied with the intention to deceive, feeling deprived or scheming to obtain things that are felt to be needed. One also speeds up the effort for economic gain. There is no happiness in a person who lacks contentment because they will always suffer from feeling that they never have enough. They will not be able to develop good strategies of generating wealth in the beginning, they will suffer in the middle for fear of meeting obstacles that will impair their ability to obtain what is desired, and they will also suffer in the end because of needless worry related to losing their wealth. All this suffering arises from lack of contentment. In a way contentment is like a straight line that balances need and satisfaction.

Many people misunderstand the notion of contentment. It does not mean that one who is content must give up everything and be denied the basic needs for survival. Being content means that one can be satisfied with whatever one has and can reduce the need and desire for having too many things.

Many find it difficult to measure the degree of richness and wealth. However, from a Buddhist perspective those who are rich can be measured in terms of whether they also possess contentment or not. In the 12th century, one of the Chinese emperors wanted to learn who was the richest man in Tibet at that time. An answer was given that the yogi Milarepa was the richest. The meaning implied was that although he was materially very poor but spiritually he was extremely rich and was contented with whatever he found along the way on his spiritual journey. He was the happiest yogi in his time.

As the Buddha also explains:

"The best indicator of wealth is the measure of contentment found. And enlightenment is the supreme indicator for measuring happiness as well".

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