

## **Happiness and Spirituality**

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Buddhism defines happiness as the state of mind that enjoys inner peace and is contented. A state of wellbeing that the great Indian Pandit Nagarjuna explains in one of his compositions is as follows:

There is no treasure like contentment. Of all the types of wealth, it is contentment, which was told by the teacher of god and men, which is the most supreme. Strive for contentment and should you achieve it, even without material wealth, you will truly have found your fortune.

The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has been widely promoted and discussed in recent years in Bhutan and has even caught the interest of intellectuals, social scientists, and politicians throughout the world. Seminars and conferences on GNH over the years have served to highlight the importance of catering to the social development of the nation, including the spiritual health of its citizens as well as the promotion and preservation of its unique culture. While conventional development models stress economic growth, the concept of GNH is based upon the premise that the true and sustainable development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side, serving to complement and reinforce one another.

Bhutan, as the foremost proponent of this concept, places economic self-reliance, environmental preservation, cultural promotion, and good governance as the foundation for bringing happiness into the lives of its people. In its attempt to cater to the immediate socio-economic needs of the Bhutanese people, the roles of spiritualism, religious practice and faith in achieving happiness and wellbeing have been largely ignored in the vast discourse on GNH.

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According to Buddhism, the cause of happiness is virtuous *karma*, the law of causality and delusion. Our entire experience of the physical world is simply a projection of our mind. Since it is a production of our karmic mind, the experience will exist as long as we remain in *samsara*. Positive, virtuous and beneficial actions result in happiness in the present life and a higher rebirth in the next life. Unwholesome deeds or bad *karma* beget sufferings in this life and rebirth in the lower realms. Therefore, happiness can be achieved through acts of virtue and selflessness in this life. Buddha said in the *White Lotus Sutra*:

The external world is formed and created by Karma  
The inherent sentient beings are born from the seed of  
Karma.

The four pillars of GNH can thus be considered conditions for attaining the happiness and wellbeing of a nation by the creation of good *karma*.

The definition of happiness for most people is based upon having physical comfort and fulfilling their needs and desires, such as, driving a car, having a big fat bank account, owning a plush home, taking vacations to exotic locales and eating gourmet food. These superficial and impermanent attainments can be brought about by the judicious application of the indicators of GNH. The other happiness, which is founded on the attainment of a deeper mental contentment, can only be brought about by applying oneself to the practice of the Dharma. The Buddha said in the Sutra, *Instructions to the King*:

As the moment comes for you to leave, Oh King!  
Neither material wealth nor dear friends and relatives will  
follow.  
And wherever one travels henceforth,  
The Karmic deed is all that follows, like one's own shadow.

The great Tibetan yogi Milarepa sang this song to Lan Gom Repa:

He who has a thorough Realization, at ease in the self-  
sustaining Reality, is ever joyful. He who is enslaved by his  
desires, insatiable and always longing, is ever sad.

Bhutanese clergies have always taken upon themselves the burden of bringing about happiness and social harmony to the community. Looking back in history, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal unified Bhutan during the 17th Century and created its first formal government, the Dual System of Governance. This system of governance combined both the secular and religious which complemented one another and worked together for the benefit of Bhutan's citizens. Zhabdrung created the laws of the land based upon the sixteen principles of moral conduct and the ten virtuous deeds, which had been previously developed from the teachings of the Buddha, which gave these laws a distinct religious flavour. The codified laws took into consideration the material and spiritual rights, benefits and responsibilities of both individual citizens and the greater community.

In fact, by adhering to the laws of the land, one could put into practice the Bodhisattva ideals and enrich one's own spiritual training. The rules and regulations are steeped in Buddhist teachings and at their core is the practice of benefiting other beings. *Karma*, the law of cause and effect, was explained by Shantideva, the great seventh century Indian master, in the *Bodhicaryavatara*:

All those who are unhappy in the world are so as a result of their desire for their own happiness. All those who are happy in the world are so as a result of their desire for the happiness of others.

Contentment, the source of genuine happiness and inner peace is characteristic of true dharma practitioners. The dissatisfaction, unhappiness and frustrations that we so often encounter and create in our daily lives, which are materially developed, tend to be absent in most monastic communities. In going forth from home to homelessness, the clergies seek to abandon attachment to worldly life, but in so doing also take on the responsibility of bringing psychological wellbeing to the community.

The Bhutanese clergy has a clear distribution of roles and functions in regard to their pastoral responsibilities. For the most part, members of the clergy are engaged in providing spiritual

services to lay communities in times of death, sickness, as well as on joyous occasions, such as marriage and job promotion. It is the presence of the clergy that helps to assuage their fears, weaknesses, anxieties and desperations during difficult periods as well as enhancing their joy and confidence in good times.

On the other hand, there are those who dedicate their lives to prayers and practice in inaccessible and remote mountain hermitages. By forsaking material comforts, these practitioners work towards fulfilling their goal of gaining enlightenment in order to come back to better serve all sentient beings.

Happiness, or the joyous state of mind, has always been a recurring metaphor in religious literature for yogic attainment. Milarepa, the Divine Madman and many other yogins, both in Tibet and in Bhutan, have sung often about the joy of liberation and of sublime bliss. It may surprise most people that these materially poor practitioners could be so happy even without the basic necessities and comforts. The answer may be that they have found complete contentment through practice.

For the most part, a majority of the members of the Bhutanese clergy contribute three quarters of their time towards the performance of religious ceremonies and rituals for the welfare of the State and its people. The objective of these religious engagements is to promote the peace, prosperity and wellbeing of the country and its citizens. Many Bhutanese take for granted these religious engagements and view them as the responsibility of the clergy. They often do not take into consideration that the large number of monks who participate in these daily rituals and ceremonies are in truth deprived of the opportunity to engage in more meaningful and profound Dharma practice and training. The monastic body is willing to make this sacrifice in order to satisfy the needs of the country and its people.

In addition to imparting academic and life-skills training, monastic education is an avenue to train youths to be compassionate, loving, kind, and non-violent. The curricula in the monastic institutions serve to build a solid foundation in humane value-based education, thereby contributing toward a more altruistic frame of mind and practice. The benefits of a monastic education, including providing knowledge and contributing to the

social development of the country, has prompted the monastic hierarchy to open its doors to aspiring monks and nuns throughout Bhutan. The monasteries accommodate all those who come specifically seeking a religious education as well as those who come because they do not have access to a secular education.

The contribution of the Bhutanese clergy toward the promotion and preservation of culture is very significant. The monasteries have for centuries educated and trained the Bhutanese population long before the establishment of secular schools in the mid-twentieth century. The preservation of most forms of arts and crafts, dance, drama, literary and traditional practices have been the handiwork of the monasteries and the religious leaders. In fact, monk scholars have been at the forefront of documenting and preserving the history and tradition of the country.

As Buddhists, we believe that the root of happiness can be found within oneself and in order to find this contentment one must practice the dharma. Therefore, the monastic body should play a larger role in achieving GNH by having a more active role as spiritual guides to the Bhutanese people in order to shift the focus away from temporary material happiness to everlasting inner contentment.

Throughout the history of Bhutan, the monastic body has played an integral part in the development of the country as well as the preservation and promotion of Bhutanese culture. Even during the time of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, his vision could not take place until the establishment of the *sangha* which became the base for the unification of Bhutan. It is only appropriate that at this time of great change that the monastery continue to be involved in the development of the country in order to ensure a balance between the spiritual and the secular needs of the people. Through the blessing of attaining the three *kayas* of the Buddha, through the blessing of the unchanging truth of the Dharma and through the blessing of the unwavering aspiration of the *Sangha*, may all our prayers be fulfilled?