

The pursuit of happiness – gross national happiness in Bhutan: what can we learn for the UK?

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"There is a glimmer of hope that we will pursue happiness collectively as a human race and in so doing, we will enjoy greater stability and peace. A country, a people, a community that is pursuing happiness, cannot be belligerent, cannot want to possess what their neighbours have. Happiness is to do with sharing and the wonderful thing about happiness is, you know, sharing gives joy. It's amazing. Happiness is infectious. And it is compassionate. Its base is founded on compassion. You feel care for others and it grows with sharing. All these hot spots could disappear.

His Excellency, Minister Jigme Thinley 12th September 2006

CHASING THE RAINBOW: IN SEARCH OF HAPPINESS

Why is it that, in the last year or two, we have all become so obsessed about 'happiness'? Or so it appears. There is a seemingly unending stream of press articles and TV coverage about how to become happier, how to breed happy children, food and activities that makes you happy, what happiness 'really' mean. Questions are raised about whether happiness can be measured or whether it can be taught. Is it a genetic endowment or is it learnt? Are some nations 'happier' than others? How do we become 'happy'?

Happiness has seeped into our psyche and crops up in the most unexpected of places. For instance, Slough has become the unlikely beneficiary of 'happiness training', which claims to have shifted 'happiness scores' in the town upwards by 33%.¹ Then there is Wellington College, a public school which has introduced lessons in wellbeing and happiness.² Determined not to be outdone, state schools in Manchester and South Tyneside are following suit. Even David Cameron claims that, 'It's time we focused not on GNP but on GWB – general wellbeing. There's more to life than money.'³ No-one, it seems, is exempt from the happiness police. Did you know that 'cheerful' nuns live longer than 'less cheerful' nuns; actors who won Oscars lived four years longer than those who didn't; sex gives most happiness, but it is fleeting, taking up, on average, only 0.2% of our time each week? (Layard 2005) And we won't get picky about how these characteristics and activities are measured.

But then you might ask, 'Is 'Happiness' as a cultural phenomenon – rather than purely a personal ambition – of widespread public interest anyway? Is this just a media generated obsession; a stop-gap between terrorist outrage and the bickering between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown?' However, if this was the case, we might have expected 'The Pursuit of Happiness' to have fizzled out by now, to have faded back into obscurity, whilst we obsess about some new fad or fashion. This has not happened. Besides, the obsession is not restricted to the UK. It appears to be worldwide. The Sunday Times, leading the bandwagon, announced some months ago, 'Coming Soon: The Viking Guide to Happiness'. This headline was based on a survey carried out by Leicester University which placed the Danes at the top of the pile when it comes to happiness. The UK ranked a mere 41st.⁴ Then there is The Happiness Institute, Australia's first ever clinic developed to teach people to be happy, which opened in Sydney in 2003. Across the other side of the globe, US business schools are incorporating teachings from the Bhagavad Gita into their syllabuses to help budding corporate executives find inner peace and happiness,⁵ whilst in India, 'The Hindu' asks, 'Is modern life making children unhappy?'⁶ and the front cover of the 'Special Christmas Double Issue of 'The Economist',⁷ reads, 'Happiness (and how to measure it)'. Even Hollywood has become infected, with Will Smith starring in a new film entitled, 'The Pursuit of Happiness'. Type 'Happiness' into Google and you get 65,800,000 hits worldwide.⁸

It doesn't stop there. Academics have got their teeth into happiness with frightening zeal. There have been conferences on 'Happiness' the world over; Nova Scotia, Sydney, Birmingham, Vanuata (a South Pacific island and, according to one survey, the happiest place in the world), Washington DC, Munich, Monterey, Milan...and so on. Suddenly, after years of being scorned for their wishy-washy ways, philosophers feel able to host conferences with titles such as, 'Happiness and the meaning of life'. (Birmingham 19th May 2007). It is tempting to think that academic happiness comes from the doubtlessly tiring necessity of trailing from conference to conference ('South Pacific next week, what a drag'), but that seems churlish.

There have been hundreds of academic books, papers and articles written on the subject of happiness. But most of them do not satisfactorily answer the question 'Why?' Why is it that this intense interest in happiness has erupted? Why now? What is it that people really feel when they say that they are 'Happy'? What are we missing and why do we believe that 'happiness' can fill the gap? I will leave these questions hanging for a moment whilst I turn closer to home.

THE POVERTY OF AFFLUENCE: RESEARCH ON MONEY, WELL BEING AND HAPPINESS

As business psychologists we, at Campbell Keegan, have been researching wellbeing, happiness and wealth within the UK for the last 25 years. Two recent projects, in particular, related to health and wealth (for Weight Watchers and Norwich Union respectively), have fed our interest in the Happiness Debate. Both of these projects have been ongoing for a year and a half, through a rolling process of research – including day long breakthrough workshops – with each stage feeding into the next. And both involved quite profound issues related to how people feel about themselves and, especially, their aims, hopes, fears and goals for the future. These projects forced us to address the ways in which the prevailing social climate, personality characteristics, events and opportunities can create or sustain happiness. Or, conversely, how they can undermine it.

In this process, a number of key themes were highlighted, which I can only touch on here. We have, for example, found some quite unexpected patterns of feeling amongst High Net Worth individuals which suggests that, not only does wealth – beyond a certain, quite modest, level – not make you happier, but it correlates with 'un-happiness' in the form of raised anxiety and a far greater tendency to live in a mid-term projected 'future', eschewing 'today' and its possibilities. To parrot the cliché, 'Money (above a fairly basic level) really does not bring you happiness'. Across varied life stages, socio-economic groupings, gender, ethnic background and type of employment there was rumbling discontent with the values and cultural assumptions which underpin materialism but, at the same time, a perceived inability to 'escape' its clutches.

We also found some very interesting differences in the 'sense of happiness' experienced by men and women which reflect, among other things, the extent to which each gender seems prepared to forego current contentment for (projected) mid-long term happiness attainment.

We arrived at some of these findings by a very different route to that which underpins the academic social psychology data which informs the current rash of books and articles on the subject of happiness. Much of our material comes from projective work in which the 'just below the surface' mind tends to be active; for example in drawings and associative image selecting rather than discourse or quantitative research.

For example, one drawing by a very wealthy middle aged business owner (see [Figure 1](#)) reveals his perpetual, lurking sense of doom – an 'abyss' – into which he loses everything; wife, children, home, money and wherewithal and lies entrapped behind bars, on his own in a flat, with just a television for company, whilst a new, shadowy, male figure has usurped his place – yet, in conversation, he expressed little but contentment and a drive to succeed.

Similarly, another relatively wealthy small businessman, who spoke loudly of his success, illustrates a sense of threat and a strong need to protect his family and his wealth through his drawing of his 'home as a castle' into which he can retreat (see [Figure 2](#)).

In another drawing, an extremely wealthy female banker reveals how she has nightmare visions of clocks, time-tables and railway stations and her sense of missing the train – and her chance of motherhood – is almost unbearable (see [Figure 3](#)).

What we observed and explored in great detail – was the reality of the experience of happiness and its opposite – not what this experience 'adds to' or 'subtracts' from 'happiness', but what its true texture is. Our starting point was that, the better we understand the meaning of happiness, the greater our chances of 'being happy'.

As a society, we tend to focus on 'external' goals; money, status, possessions, so it seems natural to view happiness in the same way – as something to be acquired, possessed. Understanding 'happiness' as a state of being, to be developed 'internally', spiritually, in relation to others, does not come naturally to most of us in the affluent world.

Our research helped us to make sense of the current cultural obsession with happiness. Within society as a whole, there appears to be a growing perception that we are, finally, recognising the price we have paid for consumerism and the desperate race for material gain – and a corresponding acknowledgement of 'the poverty of affluence'. Although, as a culture, we have always paid lip service to the importance of family and spiritual values, in practice, our priorities and behaviour has often belied this professed belief. Now that most of us have more than sufficient for our needs, we are left with the question on our lips, 'What am I doing this for? If it does not make me happier, then why am I bothering?'

This sense of disillusionment with material goals is mirrored by economic research. Whilst research studies repeatedly conclude that the 'rich' are happier than the 'poor' – hardly a surprise – a paradox emerges that requires explanation. Affluent countries have not become much happier as they have become richer. Studies in this area do not always agree on the exact figures but, broadly, in countries where average incomes are somewhere between £13,000 and £25,000, additional income is not associated with extra happiness and, although real income per head in most 'developed' countries has more or less doubled in the last 30 years, perceived 'happiness' remains constant. (Layard 2005, Haiht 2006) There are generally two explanations offered for this finding. Firstly, it is claimed, Capitalism is adept at turning luxuries into necessities, bringing to 'everyman' the benefits once enjoyed by the elite. Secondly, people start to take for granted things they once coveted from afar. As a result, we become stuck on a treadmill; as we achieve a better standard of living, we no longer enjoy what we have and seek more. "Capitalism can make you well off. And it also leaves you free to be as unhappy as you choose."⁹ All of this has turned traditional economics, which assumes personal autonomy and a large degree of individual conscious choice, on its head. It emphasises, instead, habituation, competitiveness and social rivalry.

The world, it seems, is looking around for a different model: one that combines relative wealth with more humanistic values. It is difficult to find. There is a strong pressure on emerging markets, such as China, India and the Eastern bloc countries, to conform to a capitalist model of economic development. However, one country – Bhutan – appears to stand outside this race for economic growth at any price. And the world has pounced upon it, seeking the Holy Grail: a new way of being in, and connecting with, the world; a way of viewing material wealth in a balanced manner as a support for a wide range of human goals, rather than simply as a goal in itself.

BHUTAN: LIVING EVERYONE ELSE'S DREAM?

Seeking out 'The Land of the Thunder Dragon'

Bhutan is a tiny Himalayan Kingdom of about 600,000 people, sandwiched between two giants; China to the north and India to the south, virtually isolated from the world until the 1960s. It has been ruled by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, a greatly loved monarch, since he came to the throne as a teenager in 1974. Over time, the King has moved Bhutan from a medieval backwater towards the 21st Century, although it is still ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita income of just \$2 a day.

Most countries measure their success in terms of Gross National Product (GNP). Bhutan is different. It has developed a philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), developed by His Majesty the King since he came to the throne, which has directed government policy, including educational, economic and ecological development for the last thirty years. This philosophy celebrates happiness as the goal of every sentient being and starts from the principle that GNH is more important than GNP. Whilst it acknowledges that economic growth is important, this is always tempered by a development strategy known as 'The Four Pillars' which incorporates, the need for equitable and sustainable development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, the conservation of the natural environment and, as an overriding need to ensure appropriate development in these areas, good governance. Bhutan, essentially, views economic growth as one strand in the development of a happy and fulfilled society; it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. GNH is a brave vision in such a poor country and, in a world which has largely measured success in terms of economic strength, it is radical indeed.

However, the policy is not just a vision. Bhutan has achieved remarkable results across the board in terms of its cultural, ecological, educational and development aims. Three thousand kilometres of roads and hundreds of suspension bridges have been built and most parts of Bhutan are now served with electricity and telecoms. However, the most impressive achievement in Bhutan's development is its social infrastructure. Both health and educational services are provided free; infant mortality has plummeted and life expectancy soared from 38 years in 1960 to 66 years in 2001 (Stefan Priesner 2001). In 1998 more than 100,000 students, enrolled in some 300 schools, benefited from formal education. The primary enrolment rate exceeds 70% and literacy rates have grown from 17% to 47.5% in the last two decades. Bhutan is also committed to the preservation of its environment and sustainable development. The country is carbon negative and, following a 1995 resolution of the National Assembly, at least 72% of the country will be kept under forest cover in perpetuity.

Until recently, Bhutan was a little known Himalayan country, barely on the international radar. Not any more. As the developed world reassesses its values and there is growing disillusionment with wealth as a primary goal, so 'happiness' is being offered up as the new global alternative.

And then the developed world discovered that Bhutan got there first. As a result, Bhutan has, over the last few years, become an international flagship for 'Happiness' as academics, economists and journalists proclaim it as a 'Shangri-la' in our troubled world – for example, this copy from the Amicus website:

Preserving the Shangri-La:

Amidst our icy world of techno-frenzy, the warm and peaceful image of Shangri-La captivates our hearts – a fairytale kingdom, where compassion and wisdom are that against which all things are measured...It turns out that this is the very real country of Bhutan. Nestled in the mighty Himalayas...innocence in our world...Imagine the last redwood forest, the last American Indian tribe...imagine the last "Shangri-La" (www.amicusfoundation.org/amicus-2/about-bhutan-gross-national-happiness)

Bhutan is not an obvious trailblazer. It is somewhat bemused by a world that has ignored it for centuries and is now, suddenly, flocking to its door seeking the holy grail of happiness and wellbeing. Over the last few years, as 'Happiness' has increasingly been hailed across the world as a panacea, an antidote to endemic materialism, as earnest academics at international conferences debate the meaning of happiness, as they decide whether it can be measured, whether it can be taught, whether governments are responsible for providing it, Bhutan has looked on. And now the spotlight is on Bhutan. What everyone wants to know is, 'Does Bhutan really hold the key to unlocking 'Happiness'? And if so, how do we get hold of it?

But are these really the questions to ask? Is this not another consumerist raid – buying happiness as we would a pound of flour from Sainsbury's? Understanding why 'Happiness' is so important to the Bhutanese and what they really mean by it seems, to me, to be a more fruitful starting point. I wanted to see how GNH works in practice, so I decided to try and find out.

Recruitment: Bhutanese Style

Last September I visited Bhutan with the intention of carrying out some initial research. I wanted to understand the philosophy behind GNH, how this translates into social and economic policy and the effect it is having on the Bhutanese people. I also wanted to find out whether any aspects of GNH could be relevant to the UK. For instance, can happiness be viewed as a 'commodity', transferable across borders and cultures, as many academics seem to believe, or has it grown out of Bhutan's unique geo-political and social environment? Do attempts to measure happiness have any real meaning or are we merely trying to reduce the indefinable into something comfortable and familiar?

Coming from the UK where political 'spin' is a way of life, my first shock was the openness and accessibility of the Bhutanese government. Bhutan has the reputation of being suspicious of outsiders, of carefully guarding its privacy, of limiting tourism and of fiercely guarding its traditions. My experience was very different. Idly trawling the internet, trying to work out how I should approach the research, I came across a list of phone, fax and email contacts for all of the government ministers in Bhutan. I was rather taken aback by this and initially doubted if it was a genuine website but, in a fit of bravado, I faxed the Prime Minister of Bhutan asking if I could meet with him. The next day I received an email direct from the Prime Minister acknowledging my fax and letting me know that he had asked his colleague, His Excellency Minister Jigme Thinley – the ex-Prime Minister and the 'architect' of Gross National Happiness – to meet with me. I was delighted. I had read a number of papers by Jigme Thinley on GNH and knew he would be an extremely valuable contact. Encouraged, I approached the Vice Chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan and the (Research) Centre for Bhutan Studies. I also contacted the Queen, through her publisher in India. All of the people I contacted in Bhutan replied and helped me to set up a series of interviews on 12th and 13th of September, the only days I would be in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. 'Recruitment' of ministers, minor royals, academics and Board Directors in Bhutan seemed like a doddle compared with convening a group of dog owners in Brighton.

In mid-September, I arrived in Thimphu, the capital, bearing six Harrods Christmas puddings and three large tins of Harrods shortbread biscuit; panic buys after my flight from Heathrow had been called. At the last minute I had remembered that it is customary in Bhutan to exchange gifts when you meet! The extremely heavy gifts had accompanied me and my partner on our circuitous journey via Singapore, Sydney, Melbourne (where we fought off over-zealous customs officials keen to dissect the Christmas puddings), Bangkok (they narrowly missing the coup) and Delhi (excess baggage charge) to Thimphu, their final destination. By which time I wished they had been blown up in Heathrow as suspected terrorist devices. I'll never complain about having to get respondent incentives from the bank in future.

Thimphu airport, at 2,300 metres, is clean, calm and modern. The air is thin at such a high altitude. And things work. There is a sense of order; of people dealing with each other with dignity and respect; characteristics that were noticeable throughout our stay in Bhutan. Our guide, Sheruv, greeted us in impeccable English, dressed in a tartan gho: a knee length robe, finished off with long woolly sock and highly polished shoes; the national dress. All government employees are required to wear a gho when on duty. Sheruv was our guide for the ten days we were in Bhutan. He was solicitous to a fault; anticipating our needs, dutifully chauffeuring us through long days, always smiling.

The first two days in Thimphu were a manic whirl of interviews. For my first interview – with His Excellency Minister Jigme Thinley – I was escorted by guards through Trashi Choe Dzong, an imposing complex of monasteries, chapels and offices, originally built in 1216 and currently housing civil officials and monks, to reach the Minister's offices. I waited in an ante-chamber, clutching my mini-disc player, feeling nervous. Rather belatedly, and naively, I wondered if the Minister spoke English. After a short wait, I was ushered into a large, formal room; a clash of competing colours and designs, with ornate carving around the ceiling and photos of the King and the Crown Prince sitting alongside large painted mandalas on the walls. The Minister was sitting at one end of the room on a bench, wearing a gho, with an orange shawl over his shoulder, denoting high rank. He offered me a cup of tea. He was charming, witty, very hospitable and spoke English better than most native English speakers. He was also hugely knowledgeable and generous of his time. At the end of an hour and a half, he graciously accepted the Christmas pudding I offered him and, in return, he handed me a beautiful photographic book of Bhutan. He had written the foreword to the book and now signed it, 'To Sheila, wishing you much happiness. Jigme'.

The rest of the interviewees were equally welcoming and articulate. I visited The Vice Chancellor Dasho Zangley Dukpa and his colleagues at the Royal University of Bhutan, followed by discussions with researchers at the Centre for Bhutan studies. I interviewed Chime Paden, the Director General of the Taranya Foundation, a non profit organisation working in rural Bhutan, and met with other academics, local businessmen and a member of the royal family.

The people I talked with were invariably helpful and informative, but this was Thimphu, the capital, and these were all well educated people. As well as interviewing those who had prominent positions, I was also keen to interact with the general public (see [Figure 4](#)).

In practice this was quite difficult. As a tourist in Bhutan, you are allocated a guide and it is their job to accompany you everywhere. It is difficult to be spontaneous. It was not possible to set up any interviews before I arrived and contact with local people was limited but, as we travelled, I attempted a process of rolling research, talking with people as and when I could. We travelled east across the country by car stopping at Punakha and at the Phobjikha valley where the black-necked cranes spend the winter. Then on to Trongsa and to Jakar, chosen as the site for a monastery in 1549 because a big white bird flew up and settled on a hill – which was taken as a propitious omen.

Although Bhutan is a tiny country, it is very difficult to traverse. To call Bhutan mountainous is like calling Everest a hill. Roads snake around precipitous bends, hour upon hour, until you reel with the unendingness of it all. And each bend reveals wonderful sweeping valleys dotted with traditional houses looking vaguely like Swiss chalets, or snow-capped peaks nestled in fluffy clouds. Bhutan is stunningly beautiful and unspoilt. There are areas, to the north and east, where even the roads have not yet reached. I wondered if people in the furthest reaches of Bhutan had ever heard of Gross National Happiness.

Gross National Happiness in Action

So what did I want from my trip to Bhutan? Well, to start with, I wanted to understand what GNH means to those who formulate social, economic and political policy. Perhaps more importantly, I wanted to know what it meant to those who are at the receiving end of these policies? Are they perceptibly happier than people in the UK? And if they looked happier, did that mean that they felt happier? How would I be able to tell? Most important of all, I wanted to know, assuming they were happy, why they were happy – how did it happen? What generated their happiness? What does 'Happiness' really

mean? Would I recognise it, as many Bhutanese claim, by looking into people's eyes? Were the Bhutanese really immune to the seductive powers of consumerism? Or was it simply that they had not yet been sufficiently exposed to it?

And, of course, I wanted to know what we, in the UK, might learn that would help us to be happier? I felt ill equipped for the task.

One issue that is very contentious within the 'Happiness arena' – and which is perhaps worth flagging at this stage – is whether GNH can be expected to deliver a 'happy' population or whether its role is, more modestly, to provide the enabling conditions for happiness, i.e. it is the responsibility of the individual to create their own happiness, provided the environment is conducive to this. GNH is sometimes dismissed as 'over idealistic' on the grounds that it cannot offer 'happiness' on a plate, but this has never been the Bhutanese interpretation of GNH, as Minister Jigme Thinley explained:

"One has to be very clear that what the Government has committed to is, since happiness is the aspiration, the ultimate hope of every citizen in the country, it becomes the responsibility of the state to facilitate the pursuit of happiness and the government's responsibility is to create an enabling environment, nothing more."

During the course of my reading, interviews and whilst meeting and talking to people I met along the way, a number of themes emerged which appeared, to me, to feed into the happiness 'pot'; themes which seemed to predispose people to be 'happy'. I do not offer these up as 'solutions to finding happiness', but merely as areas to reflect on, particularly in relation to our own culture. Many of them are values or relationships or 'certainties' that we, in the West, have lost over recent decades. Others are very different ways of viewing the world which are alien to many of us in the West.

The Unique Geo-Political Conditions of Bhutan

Stefan Priesner, in his paper, 'Gross National Happiness – Bhutan's Vision of Development and its challenges', presented at the 2001 GNH conference in Thimphu, presents a very lucid and comprehensive overview of the historical and psychological factors that led to the development of GNH. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this historical perspective in detail. However, in essence, he argues that the major reason for Bhutan's smooth and successful development has been that it possessed a powerful vision, which evolved from the country's unique historical, geopolitical and sociological circumstances. These factors determined, to a large extent, the subsequent development of GNH. He claims that GNH, in spite of its seemingly recent origin, is a popularisation of a distinctly Bhutanese perspective which can be traced through the country's development and is based on a Buddhist and feudal set of values.

According to Priesner and others, there are a number of historical factors which have contributed to the development of GNH. The fact that Bhutan was the last physically isolated state in the modern world, the only political entity that was almost totally ignored by the world for so long has undoubtedly had an effect in two key ways.

Firstly, Bhutan had little point of comparison with other countries. Layard (2005) and others have suggested that those of us who live in 'capitalist' countries are driven by rivalry, competitiveness and habituation. Assuming that this is the case, then there is little possibility of material competitiveness when others have no more than you, as was true throughout Bhutan. Consequently, these factors could not be activated. Instead, circumstances would favour a more co-operative way of living. The true test, of course, is when you can see what others have and, by comparison, what you have not.

Secondly, Bhutan has not experienced the ravages of over-development common in many developing countries, in part because it was too poor to develop in the pre-1970s. Bhutan started its development process very late and could see for itself the effects of colonialism and too rapid structural and economic development in other parts of the world. As Minister Jigme Thinley explained:

"Bhutan started its development process at a time when there was growing consciousness in the developing countries about what they had lost – about the values they had compromised in the process of development and economic growth. So, while many developing countries started with a sense of shame about their own culture...we began with a tremendous sense of pride in our culture and we decided in 1961 that, even as we developed and modernised, we would do so on our own terms, within the framework of our own value system."

One consequence is that Bhutan is still largely unspoilt, with 26% of the land designated as national parks and protected areas and tremendous diversity of plants, animals and ecosystems. And, it is important to remember that 85% of the population still live in rural areas, where contact with the outside world – and with the concept of GNH – is fairly rare.

We met Tashi in a handicraft centre. She was bubbly, bright, training to be a teacher of handicrafts. She comes from Merak, in the East of Bhutan. I asked her how often she visited her home. "I haven't been back for a year", she replied. "It takes six and a half days to get there, four days on buses and two and a half walking."

The distance, as the crow flies, is about 70 miles. How relevant, I wondered, is GNH in Merak, with no electricity, no newspapers, where life continues as it has for centuries?

The Bhutanese, I was repeatedly told, have a tremendous sense of pride in their culture, which could not be said for many small developing nations. So where did this sense of pride come from? Priesner argues that it grew out of a combination of 'topographical barriers' – it was near impossible for Bhutan to be invaded and colonised – and the self reinforcing social values provided by the Bhutanese state, supported by the almost total absence of outside contact – an isolation which was self imposed. Priesner believes that this resulted in an incomparably stronger sense of identity than in western societies and, furthermore, he believes this sense of identity is the primary reason for the survival of GNH to date.

This sense of 'belonging' and self-worth, which does not come across as arrogance or self-aggrandisement, is very evident when meeting with Bhutanese people across the social spectrum and could be considered an important contribution to wellbeing and happiness. "We don't have anything to prove to anyone and don't have to be answerable to anybody. That's how we do it, you know", says a smiling Chime Paden.

Last, but by no means least, the Buddhist philosophy has contributed to the development of GNH. This is so important, that it is dealt with separately below.

Mahayana Buddhism: Happiness as a Goal

Bhutan has a strong tradition of Mahayana Buddhism which holds that the combined belief of its followers will eventually be great enough to encompass all of humanity and bear it to salvation. However, it is artificial to separate the Bhutanese culture from Buddhism, because they are two faces of the same coin – even this suggests greater differentiation than exists. Mahayana Buddhism defines Bhutanese culture and it is visible in every aspect of Bhutanese life. It is both a system of philosophy and a code of morality. It explicitly defines happiness as a goal of every sentient being. Unlike the West, there is less emphasis on the individual and more emphasis on society. There is a belief that consciousness persists in an unbroken stream from life-time to life-time. Actions have consequences which affect us all and there is connection between all beings. Such beliefs encourage co-operative behaviour, thinking of others, focusing outside oneself. In this sense, the individual can feel that they have a role, that they can make a contribution, as part of the greater whole.

In Jakar, central Bhutan, gaggles of children gather around, offering us sweets, practicing their English. They are confident but scrupulously polite, displaying the natural self-assurance that was common in the Bhutanese people we met. When I describe this situation to Tshering Tashi, an academic, he attributes it to Bhutan's spiritual roots. "To me happiness is about maintaining culture and integrity. In London, I felt the lack of spirituality."

Constancy and Change

There are many paradoxes in Bhutan and, as an outsider, it is often difficult to make sense of what you see or hear. For instance, we were told that, as Buddhists, the Bhutanese do not fish in their rivers, although they are abundant with fish. However, they import – and presumably eat – fish from India by the lorry load and on my return to the UK, I noticed a three page spread in the travel section of the Times on...fishing in Bhutan!

On a more metaphysical level, I found it hard to understand the relationship between the very strong attachment to tradition and the equally strong acceptance of change, which seemed to permeate the Bhutanese culture. The King is revered in Bhutan in a way that is difficult for us to understand. We, in the West, are fixated on the belief in democracy as the superior political model whereas Bhutan, historically, has worked as a 'Dorjithegpa' (Prakke 2001). This is a model in which there is a hierarchy of wisdom. The teacher is revered and acceptance of tradition and devotion to a teacher leads to enlightenment. As Diederik Prakke explains it,

"In this view, it was naturally accepted that blessings come from above, and the thought of democracy (making 'high' accountable to 'low') would therefore be a repulsive idea – worse than eating excreta." (Prakke, 2001)

The King is absolute ruler, father figure, friend (every Bhutanese is entitled to an audience with him) and, perhaps paradoxically, he is also the force behind Bhutan's entry into the modern world; he has championed, even forced, democratic processes, often against the wishes of his subjects. Many outsiders would see this relationship between the King and his subjects as feudal -and certainly there is great disquiet about The King's recent announcement that he will step down in favour of his son and that power will be further devolved – but the Bhutanese revere their King. The 30 years of the King's rule have provided peace, continuity, stability, security and measurable development for the Bhutanese people; a sense of identity, of knowing where they stand and what they can contribute. Repeatedly I was told that the wisdom and stability of the King's rule has provided and sustained the foundations of GNH.

Compare this picture with our own view of our leaders in the UK. They are besmirched with sleaze, suspicion, accusations of incompetence and so forth. In the face of this, most of us – as reflected in Campbell Keegan research in the UK – feel a sense of personal and political powerlessness which contributes to a sense of unhappiness. As journalist Minette Marris describes the current socio-political climate in the UK, "It makes one feel like an unpaid extra in the drama of life ¹⁰."

But, if attachment to tradition was all that Bhutan had achieved, then it would become a fossilised society and it is far from that. It also has a very conscious and active approach to change. The Bhutanese are immensely proud of their culture and determined to maintain it but, at the same time, they are selecting those aspects of Western culture which, they feel, will be of benefit. They are well aware of the potential pitfalls; the difficulties inherent in trying to retain their unique culture whilst modernising their country. But they are pragmatists, not the dreamers of Shangri La myth that some outsiders make them out to be.

"When people romanticise Bhutan – the lost Shangri La, the last Himalayan Buddhist Kingdom – I say, 'Give us a break'. I know they mean well, but I'm quite tired of it. We're a country that has had to evolve over the centuries using its survival skills and adopting a pragmatic approach to everything"

(Chime Paden, Director General of the Tarayana Foundation)

There is also a strong sense of accepting – even welcoming – change, as part of natural evolution. 'Modernisation', I am repeatedly told, is a dynamic process. This is a truism of Buddhist thinking.

"Our culture has to be dynamic. Any culture that is not dynamic has its own death...We are fortunate in the sense that we are adapting, we are not transplanting. We take what goes well with our thinking. Bhutan has no option. It is survival."

(Dasho Zangley Dukpa, Vice Chancellor of the University)

Chime Paden reinforces this thought.

"We are taught from toddlers about the impermanence of everything. We are taught that change is the only thing that is permanent. You have to constantly change, everything is changing. Who you are now is different from who you were 24 hours ago, because you have accumulated information, your total processes have moved on. It is a guiding philosophy."

This adaptability is apparent in Bhutan's approach to education. Most school subjects are taught in English. As His Excellency Minister Jigme Thinley explained:

"Can you imagine a small, poor country like Bhutan having to write its own text books in the national language? We would be 30–40 years behind....[English] is not the national language of one country, not even yours!"

Education standards are high and able students are sponsored to attend universities around the world – obviously being English speakers helps. Fluent English is commonplace in Bhutan, at least in urban areas.

This approach to change and pride in Bhutanese culture – combined with strong continuity and fluent English – enables Bhutan to 'punch above its weight' in the UN; to stand side by side with other UN countries, without a sense of being 'second best'. It has also contributed to the Bhutanese sense of self-determination, an important constituent of happiness.

Social Cohesion

In Bhutan, the ties of family are still binding – though this is changing in urban areas, as I discuss below. Social controls are strong, but so is social support. Traditionally, grandmothers looked after their grandchildren, reinforcing family and cultural values.

"You do still feel that the child is not just raised by you, but is raised by everyone around you...Because you think if you are the only one they (children) are answerable to, then God help you. They know they are accountable to the entire community" (Chime Paden).

Sexual attitudes are relatively liberal. Unmarried mothers are accepted into, and supported by, the community itself. In fact, social networks provide

many of the social services that, in the UK are provided by the state and in doing so, they reinforce social responsibility; including a sense of being needed and loved.

I talked with Sheruv, our guide, about this. He recalled, with nostalgia, his seven kilometre walk to school as a child, come rain or shine. "I loved it. We had such fun walking over the hills and playing". In the UK, a 14K hike to school and back would be regarded as child abuse. What makes the difference? "You felt safe. There was community. Belonging", explained Sheruv.

The difference with Western culture is striking. In the West, the individual is elevated, regarded as separate from community and, in a sense, this offers the illusion of power and autonomy but, paradoxically, there also comes a sense of isolation and powerlessness. In the UK, the breakdown of the family, social migration, loss of identity in urban areas and a general feeling of threat within many communities are all well documented and, it is claimed by many, are the source of decay in society. This may or may not be the case, but in our research within the UK, they were certainly cited as the cause of unhappiness, fear and uncertainty.

Health and Fitness: A Mountain before Breakfast

I do not want to reduce happiness to a treadmill, but it is important to acknowledge that you cannot live in Bhutan without being fit. People walk. And walk. They climb mountains because they have to. Many villages are built at high levels or on the sides of mountains. And the Bhutanese have a very healthy, mainly vegetarian, diet. If we are to believe the many studies that indicate that exercise is an effective anti-dote to depression, then it is little wonder that the Bhutanese are happy.

THE BHUTANESE IDYLL: DREAM VS REALITY?

All of these factors seem to be contributing to a society which appears – from reading existing literature, from talking to the Bhutanese people and with leaders within government, education, social services and business as well as observing policy in practice – to be reasonably or very 'happy'. Certainly crude indicators suggest that this is so. In a recent population and housing census in Bhutan, people were asked the question, 'Are you very happy, just happy or not very happy¹¹?' 45.2% claimed to be 'very happy', 52% said they were 'happy' and 3% were 'not very happy' But it is difficult to interpret this data or even to know if we all share the same meaning of the term, 'happiness'. Before addressing the issue of measuring happiness, it is worth examining the changes that are taking place in Bhutan; changes that call into question whether Bhutan really has the secret of happiness or whether it is simply that they have not yet been sufficiently exposed to the greed and acquisitiveness of the West.

Whilst the themes we explored above sound very positive and healthy, there are indications that all is not well. It is not that easy to control the influences of the outside world. Bhutan may be streets ahead of most developed countries in terms of balancing its ecological, social and development policies, but modernisation has its price.

"Here in Bhutan we live in a very fragile ecosystem... Located in these high Himalayas we are able to see the impact of our actions on the environment and how it lashes back at us. And yet, however much we try, there are difficulties. Roads have to be built. There are actions that we are taking which are harmful to our environment."

(His Excellency Minister Jigme Thinley)

And Bhutan, of course, is not immune to the damage caused by the wider world. Global warming means that water from rapidly melting glaciers pours into lakes in mountainous northern Bhutan. As Jigme Thinley explains:

"The walls of these lakes are not strong. The devastation that could be caused if the topmost lakes were to burst – and the chain reaction that would take place – could result in our valleys being completely wiped out."

It is ironic that, whilst the world elevates Bhutan as an ecological paragon – perhaps to salve its own uneasy conscience – it is simultaneously destroying that which it professes to so admire.

There is widespread belief amongst the Bhutanese that it is possible to absorb what is useful from the West without undermining Bhutanese culture. This can come across as complacency; most Bhutanese believe that their historical culture is so strong that nothing can shake it.

"I'm not particularly worried (that Bhutan will be contaminated by the outside world). We should experience different thinking and, in doing that, we will come to appreciate our own culture. I do believe our values are strong"

(Jigme Thinley)

However there are those who do not see the integration of East and West in such a positive light. Some dissenters claim that GNH has become an academic concept – a mantra which is losing any real meaning when, in the past, it has always been a living, guiding principle. Some go so far as to claim that GNH had become Gross National Hypocrisy, as the original vision is becoming diluted. One academic described this as:

"Bhutan is saddled with the GNH term. It has been hijacked by the rest of the world. It is already being eroded – the poor are getting poorer and the rich richer. The social divide is growing. How can you have a commercial society and Buddhism? You can't promote free enterprise and competition and still talk about GNH... Foreigners respond to GNH by either slavishly following it or ridiculing it. Neither is appropriate. I'm not very optimistic about GNH but I think it has a chance."

These critics argue that GNH is an intellectual concept, concocted by the King and Ministers in Thimphu, unfamiliar to most Bhutanese. But perhaps it does not matter that the majority of the population – the 85% who live in remote areas – have never heard of the term GNH, provided the spirit of GNH is alive and well in the way in which it acts as a principle for social development?

Others are less extreme in their views, but are still cautious about the casual use of the term GNH which, they feel, has grown out of traditional Bhutanese culture and values. It is a way of life, rather than a 'mission statement' or an 'add on' to social policy. They fear the term might trivialise the true meaning of Gross National Happiness. As Dasho Zangley Dukpa, Vice Chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan puts it:

"To me, a GNH person is highly spiritual, dedicated, committed to his work, loyal to the organisation, self disciplined, concerned with others. Wholeness, I would prefer to call it. At the back of our minds is always GNH. How can we produce a GNH graduate? But to say GNH all the time... sometimes when you use certain terms quite frequently, they get fossilised and diminished. So I would rarely say it. It is a frame of mind."

Anecdotally, it is claimed that signs of cultural erosion have been present for some time, although there has been little or no research carried out to

explore these areas. Increased social mobility – as people move from the land to the towns – means weaker family ties, in a culture where family underpins social order. There are reports of vandalism and drug taking in Thimphu, the capital. Allegedly there is a growing gulf between different sectors of society. As the Bhutan Times editorial says,

“We are already seeing a yawning gap between the rich and the poor even in our most urban towns...Poverty is an issue that needs to be tackled post haste. Otherwise GNH will remain just a concept. It should be all embracing and touch the lives of those who can express more for much less.”¹²

Unemployment is also an issue as improved education delivers highly skilled young people into limited employment opportunities.

Television and the internet only arrived in 1999, but they are changing patterns of traditional life in ways that are only too familiar.

“Even in my village, until two years ago, we didn’t have electricity. We go there for the annual puja and usually in the evening after dinner, people gather together and dance. Last year everyone was glued to the TV!...We are all being exposed to lots of other values and sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between what might be harmful and what might be useful”.

(Tashi Choden, the Centre for Bhutan Studies)

And then Bhutan has teenagers, with mobile phones, who have grown up with television and the internet and have had different influences than their parents – especially in urban areas. Western fashion, music and attitudes have permeated. Thimphu now has 7 discos. These outside influences are challenging traditional Bhutanese life, for better and worse it is too early to say for sure which way it will go.

“I don’t know as we haven’t really carried out any studies to see, but it seems that the crime rate has increased, especially amongst youngsters, since television has arrived. And then things like fashion outlook and what you want now, ideas and perceptions about what a young person should do...In the past you would listen to what the family says and be guided.”

(Tashi Choden)

These changes are putting pressure on Bhutan’s resources. Traditionally, problems were dealt with within the family. Now there is a greater expectation of outside help.

“We don’t really have trained manpower or the institutions to combat these problems, even counselling. We have one, maybe two psychiatrists (in the country)”, explains Tashi.

Two hours tough climbing and we reach the Tiger’s Nest monastery, which clings improbably to the side of a cliff, 900 metres above the Paro valley. We enter an ancient world. Monks in burgundy robes sit cross legged on the floor chanting prayers from old scriptures and beating drums. Then, in a corner, I spot a gaggle of teenage monks, furtively texting on their mobile phones. One wears a tee-shirt which reads, in English:

“I am not totally useless. I can be used as a bad example”.

The Bhutanese government is well aware of the dangers and is actively addressing them, but some Bhutanese express concern that this is the beginning of a slippery slope; that it is impossible to combine Bhutanese and ‘Western’ values without loss of culture.

One dissenter insisted:

“People should be told, ‘Cut down on consumption or go abroad’. We should be removing impediments to happiness, removing the conditions that give rise to unhappiness; anger, greed, increased differentials between rich and poor.”

HAPPINESS: CAN IT BE MEASURED?

Historically ‘happiness’ has posed something of a problem for ‘Western’ academics. Arguably it has achieved so little attention from academics in the past because it is a ‘slippery’ concept. It cannot be easily defined, it is open to interpretation and, worst of all, how can it be adequately measured if it cannot even be pinned down? Consequently, the majority view was that it was best left unaddressed.

But, now that ‘happiness’ has achieved international status, it can no longer be ignored. Interestingly, modest, whimsical, little ‘happiness’ has been transformed into ‘The Science of Happiness’, perhaps to give it greater authority as a subject worthy of academic study. Academics, especially those outside Bhutan, are keen to establish exactly how ‘happy’ the Bhutanese are and there is strong pressure to establish a way of measuring it.

“I think, maybe, there is some pressure internationally, not so much inside...people now know more of it with the conferences, they want to know exactly what Bhutan is doing, whether people are happy all the time, things like that”

(Tashi Choden)

However, Bhutanese culture is, essentially, ‘qualitative’ and, for many people I talked to, the notion of measuring happiness was nonsense. “You can tell if someone is happy by looking into their eyes. We do not need to spend our meagre resources on measuring it”, says Chime Paden, Director General of the Tarayana Foundation. However, the pressure from outside Bhutan for quantification seems to be gathering force.

“What cannot be measured and what is ignored may turn out to be the most important but, nevertheless, internationally, globally, there is a very strong feeling that anything that cannot be measured, cannot be pursued – or is not worth pursuing...so now we are grappling with the challenge of coming up with measures.”

(Minister Jigme Thinley)

The Centre for Bhutan Studies, helped by overseas organisations, is working on developing indices of happiness, but there is a sense of uncharted territory; that this is an over-ambitious task, with no clear idea of the potential benefits. The people carrying out the research are very able, but they are not trained researchers and they are struggling with their lack of expertise. “I don’t know, really, once the index is developed, how much of an influence it will actually have”, says Tashi. And as Tashi talks about what they want to find out and how they will approach the research task, I get the impression that boosting their programme of qualitative research, aimed at identifying areas of need, would achieve more useful outcomes than attempting to define what is, perhaps, indefinable.

Even if Bhutan does manage to develop indices of happiness, the problem of capturing, measuring and comparing 'levels' of happiness in different countries does not go away. Because, of course, Bhutan is not the only place where 'happiness' indices are being developed, and often these indices are attempting to measure related, but slightly different, things. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has developed a Human Development Index and there are other related indices such as the Life Expectancy Index, the Gender-related development index, Happy Life Years measures (Veenhoven 2004). The next task then becomes correlating the various indices, in order to ascertain consistency. The Human Development Index, for example, shows a surprisingly low correlation with the level of happiness (Whitehouse & Winderl, 2004). So it is then necessary to explain the differences, which requires further academic work – and so on it goes. Probably these indices will throw some light on 'happiness' but is hard to avoid feeling that the original purpose of the exercise – the desire to understand and promote the conditions that enable happiness – has been lost in the abstraction.

FUTURE HAPPINESS: BHUTAN AND THE UK

So where does all this leave us? Well, there were some answers to the raft of questions I posed before I visited Bhutan, although I came away feeling that I had only scratched the surface. I was disappointed that I could not visit the remoter parts of Bhutan where the majority of the population live – this would have taken weeks so was simply not feasible. This meant that I could not gather any impressions of how people who lived in these cut off areas viewed 'happiness'; whether they believed the government's strategy of GNH was 'working' or, indeed, whether they had even heard of GNH.

My tentative conclusions, based on this initial research, are that, yes, Bhutan is making astonishing progress in managing to combine its Four Pillars of development and creating an environment which is enabling its citizens to achieve happiness. And, from my brief exposure to the people of Bhutan, I was hugely impressed by their integrity, pragmatism, determination and their apparent happiness. What was clear by the time I left the country was that Bhutan is in the throes of a unique social experiment; attempting to craft a new type of society; a marriage of spiritual and material, of traditional and modern. It is an ambitious task.

However, the key questions for Bhutan seem to be, 'Will it be able to develop, modernise, play its role in the modern world without losing its unique identity? Can it maintain its integrity, its value system?' If these values are lost then the underpinning of GNH is likely to disintegrate over time. Essentially, Bhutan does not really have a choice. As the Bhutanese are well aware, the country must modernise or decline. The question then becomes, what sort of modernity will that be?

Bhutan is not a fairyland that we, in the 'developed' world can gaze upon with misty eyes; a representation of our lost innocence which we would like to preserve. The Bhutanese are courageously trying to forge a way of living which integrates the best of traditional and modern. Their attempts may or may not succeed, but they deserve our support and admiration, not our misguided attempts to preserve Bhutan in aspic for our own, rather dubious, gratification, patronisingly labelling it 'the last Shangri-la. Alternatively – and perhaps a worse fate – are the attempts to develop rigid and sterile structures for capturing and measuring 'happiness'; a quixotic quality, the essence of which is its fluidity and unpredictability.

And, finally, what of the rest of us? Of what relevance is Bhutan's experience to our own understanding of happiness here in the UK? What can we learn about how to promote an environment which will foster happiness, both as a nation and on an individual level?

It is clear that we cannot import GNH into our own culture as a 'job lot', because it has grown out of a very specific religious, geo-political and social context. However, an understanding and appreciation of developments in Bhutan could encourage us to re-think notions of happiness which are relevant to our own culture – trying our best to avoid the temptation to treat 'Happiness' as another consumer fad and fashion which can be added to our repertoire of social skills?

Compared to Bhutan we, in the UK, are more individualistic in our approach; the 'pursuit of happiness' is largely regarded as a personal concern. In general we do not expect the government to make us happy. In fact, most of us would be content if it succeeded in not making us 'unhappy'. Does this mean that we have nothing to learn from the Bhutanese? Are we better off searching out a book on 'How to be happy'?

Personally, I think there is much to learn from Bhutan. I start from the premise that the individual and society are inextricably linked; each is part of the other. Happiness has no boundaries; it can spread from the individual to society and back again. It is viral so it does not matter where we start. We can try to create the conditions which enable happiness at both an individual and a societal level.

So, what does this mean in practice? The more I think about it, the more I realise that we already know much of what Bhutan knows. The difference is that the Bhutanese choose to put their knowledge into practice. We choose, in the main, to ignore it. The conditions that enable happiness to flourish in Bhutan are not so different from those that foster happiness in the UK. They tend to centre around belonging and relationships. We are social creatures through and through. Here are some 'starter' themes – a trigger for the next stage of research maybe – or just food for thought:

- A sense of belonging and identity; of being part of and having a place in society, is a fundamental human need. This encompasses family ties, work relationships, a network of friends plus a sense of pride in our culture and values. It encourages us to look outside ourselves and contextualise our own needs and aspirations.
- This links in with responsibility and respect towards others and society in general; feeling as if we are contributing to something larger than ourselves. This includes shared responsibility for the young and the old in society.
- A sense of balance in life, between work, family and friends, and the belief that we have some degree of control over this
- A reasonably equitable distribution of wealth within society; huge disparities in wealth within societies fosters resentment and discord.
- An awareness of and respect for our environment and our inter-relationship/connection with it.
- A positive focus on life; appreciating what we have and living 'in the present'; inner directedness; a sense of spirituality (however we choose to define this), emphasising 'being' over 'having'
- An appreciation of money as a support for wider human goals rather than an end in itself
- Respect for those with greater wisdom and experience; an awareness of personal growth and learning
- Valuing tradition and welcoming change
- Fostering the conditions for happiness, rather than attempting to grasp it

And as I write these thoughts down, I feel as if I am drafting a 'Make yourself happy in 21 days. Satisfaction guaranteed' paperback, in spite of my

protestations to the contrary. The devil is in the detail. I guess we are all responsible, as individuals and as a society to accept or reject these truisms and to find ways to interpret them in our lives so that they help to foster the conditions which can promote greater happiness for ourselves and others.

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FOOTNOTES

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10. Sunday Times, December 24th, 2006
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NOTES & EXHIBITS

FIGURE 1

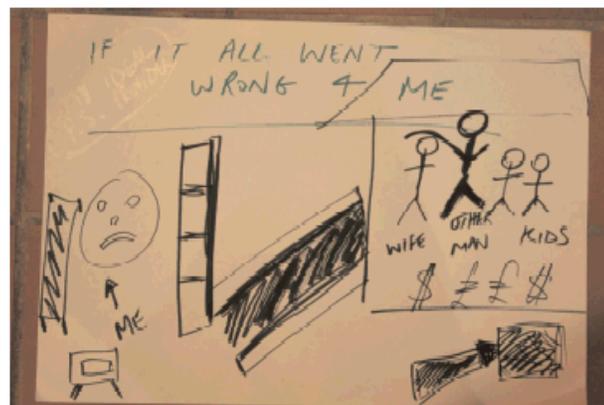


FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

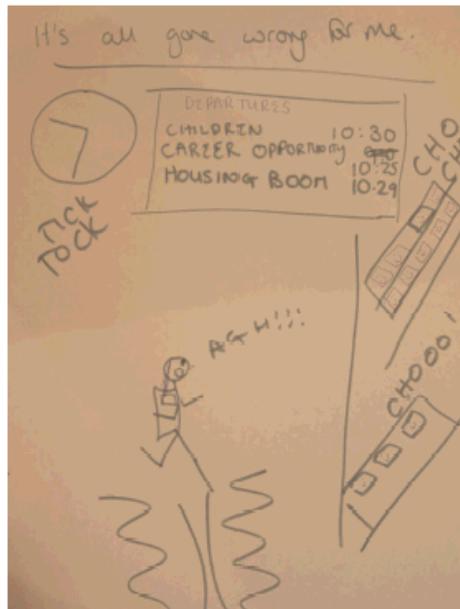


FIGURE 4: HIS EXCELLENCY MINISTER JIGME THINLEY AND ME



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