

**Keynote Address by Hon'ble Lyonchhen Jigmi Y. Thinley,
Prime Minister of Bhutan
at the World HRD Congress 2010 Mumbai, 12 February, 2010.**

Gross National Happiness (GNH): An alternative Paradigm for Development

Having served earlier in various capacities in government as a human resource manager, founder Secretary of the Royal Civil Service Commission and then as the head of the education system, I remain convinced that as the most powerful element, human resource conditions the behaviour, strengths and weaknesses of an organization. As such, I have always maintained my interest in HRD and hence my thanks to Dr. Bhatia and the organizers for their kind invitation to this prestigious Congress. Quite clearly, the wealth of an organization is, more than anything else, its human resource and the challenge of organizations is to attract, build, motivate and retain the best talent in an increasingly competitive and mobile society. This becomes ever more difficult in an era when such noble values as organizational loyalty are rare.

On the larger scale, the future of a country is likewise, shaped by the way a country invests in the development of its HR. As in the case of all countries, and especially as a developing country, Bhutan too has grand visions and aspirations. We have therefore, invested heavily in HRD from the early stages of our development process and continue to do so. In turn, we hope to become an IT enabled knowledge based society to build a wholly green and sustainable economy within which pursuit of happiness will be the conscious goal of every citizen.

This brings me to the subject of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the development indicator that has guided Bhutan's development process since the early 70s. I have been asked to speak on it by the organizers together with the changes in the GNH context since the establishment of democracy. As some of you know, I have spoken on this subject before and risk being found repetitive on some scores. But some things are worth repeating. In so doing, I shall try to explain what is wrong with our way of life and present the argument for the *consideration of GNH as an alternative development paradigm mainly from the governance point of view.*

There is a growing number of people all over the world who acknowledge that ours is a sad story of how material wealth has been mistaken as the measure of human happiness. Under the dictum of GDP, used wrongly as an indicator of society's development, the primary purpose in life is to earn more to spend more so as to consume more. When such are the main aspirations, the finer and nobler human values are being compromised by the baser instinct of greed that is within all of us. And so family, community and relationships that form the very core and basis of society are collapsing and with these, the very integrity and capacity of earth to support life is diminishing. Poverty, war, disease and abnormally frequent natural catastrophes that are the twists and turns of an ailing planet plague us.

Yet, while millions live in hunger, inadequate shelter and despair, others in the millions, live to experience the hollowness of life amid excessive affluence. Few among us can look forward to retirement and blissful calm at the end of our stressful life. Who among us, for instance, is certain that, as in the past before the advent of consumerism, we will age in grace and dignity and receive the affection of our younger generations? Even as we rejoice in the longer life modern medicine gives us, we dread the paradox of a prolonged winter of indignities and loneliness on the fringes of society.

In our obsession with economic growth, we are over producing everything at the cost of over extraction of the limited natural resources. What we cannot eat, wear, flaunt or store, we consign to waste. And as the mounting problems of hazardous waste, environmental pollution and rapid depletion of natural resources and loss of bio diversity sap the earth of its ability to sustain life, many among us comfort ourselves with cynicism and skepticism about climate change among other alarm bells.

Ecological footprint analysis which measures the integrity of our environment, compares earth's biologically productive capacity (includes resources such as cropland, forest, pasture and fisheries, as well as land to absorb CO₂) with the resources consumed or demanded. According to this measure, global ecological footprint was roughly half of the earth's regenerative capacity in 1960. By the mid 1980s, it crossed the critical threshold. And in 2005, it was estimated that we needed over 1.3 planets to meet our demands, pointing to the fact that demand exceeded supply by 30%. This means that we have consumed our share and are now well into the act of actually depriving the future generations of their share of natural resources and by equal measure, their chances of survival. The Living Planet Report 2008, states that, "If we continue with business as usual, by the early 2030's we will need two planets to keep up with humanity's demand for goods and services."

In my own country, there are vivid signs of climate change. Not the least of these is the withdrawal of the Himalayan glaciers that are the sources of our river systems. At the current rate of global warming, all of the glaciers in the Himalayas could disappear in the not too distant future after having devastated life and property along our valleys by Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) from the bursting of lakes which cannot contain the excessive glacial melt water. But these would pale to insignificance in comparison to the consequences on life in the vast Indian subcontinent, China and the Mekong Delta region. What if the great Yangtze, the Ganges and the Mekong were to stop flowing just as many other rivers around the world might? Many of Bhutan's rivers are already becoming a trickle in the winter months.

What kind of environment will we bequeath to posterity? How can mankind survive in a world without natural resources and an environment that is poisonous and inhospitable? Are there options? Just as the dark future is of our own making, it is within the genius of mankind to make it bright and hopeful. But we need to understand the truth that our way of life is hurtling us toward self destruction in more ways than one. We need to change and mend our ways.

The central issue is how can we reduce production and consumption levels to stay within the limits of biologically productive capacity of the planet? How can we ensure that in so doing, we will not lower the level of well being? This raises the need for an understanding of the true and real meaning of development, wealth or prosperity in relation to happiness as the key to developing a holistic model with an index to set human society on a sustainable and meaningful path.

GNH is a proposition for such a change.

We, in Bhutan, believe that happiness is the single most important desire of all citizens and must, therefore, be the purpose of development. To this end, Bhutan's development has been guided for several decades by the philosophy of GNH which goes beyond the sustainable development concept to actually relate development to contentment and happiness. Conceived by our fourth King, it is based on the belief that happiness can best be achieved through development that balances the needs of the body with those of the mind within a stable and sustainable environment. It stresses that material enrichment must not lead to spiritual impoverishment and that it must address emotional, psychological and spiritual needs of the individual. Above all, GNH requires that the endeavour of government must be to create conditions that would enable its citizens to pursue happiness. Even our Constitution holds the state as having the responsibility of promoting GNH as an arbiter of public policies and plans. This responsibility of the royal government is undertaken through a four-pronged strategy, popularly referred to as the four pillars of GNH. All development policies and programmes of the kingdom must serve to strengthen these four pillars. These are:

I. Equitable and Sustainable Socio-economic Development: This pillar comprises the indicators of education, health and living standards. It represents mainly those aspects of development which include both the real and imagined needs of the body in the broadest sense. Government delivery of the related services and opportunities are to be guided and regulated by the two conditions of sustainability and equity.

The first condition of sustainability prescribes the moral responsibility of each generation to ensure that development is pursued to benefit not only the present but future generations as well. This consideration questions the nature and purpose of economic growth and supports research findings which dispel the fallacious belief that having more after meeting basic needs results in more happiness. It urges moderation of consumption and scaling down our way of life on the basis of real need. It cautions against the cancerous nature of mindless and limitless economic growth to raise GDP.

The second condition of equity requires that all actions of the state are aimed at and carried out, to benefit equally, all sections of society. This is particularly challenging in a country with forbidding geographic features, scattered population and the resultant high cost of service delivery. This further raises our understanding that material suffering in the world is not because of scarcity of food, shelter, clothing and medicine but because of lack of moral persuasion for equity and the will to share through a more just and efficient distribution arrangement. Recent actions and programmes in the public domain are:

- A minimum programme aimed at alleviating rural poverty and closing the gap between the rich and poor by giving social and economic empowerment through motorable access to every village cluster, electricity for every home, adequately staffed and equipped government hospital in every district, universal primary education, mobile phone connectivity and safe drinking water supply to every village. All these are to be accomplished by the year 2013, which is when the term of my government ends. Without these socially and economically enabling services, political empowerment through the ballot is more an illusion exploited by the manipulative politicians and interest groups.
- A programme, well under way, to promote Bhutan as a green economy which, in addition to hydropower and promotion of Bhutan as an organic brand, will make the country a world-class service hub for education, health, hospitality, finance and IT services within a clean, stable and peaceful environment supported by a good human resource base.
- Promotion of Bhutan as an eco literate society for which actions are being initiated to augment our school curricula to promote GNH values in schools and institutions all of which are to become zero-waste, green campuses.

- We are now in the process of taking policy action that will require the construction industry to employ green technology and practices.

II. Preservation and Promotion of Culture: In its widest sense, this pillar holds up the non tangible and finer values of human society which include a dynamic set of beliefs, expressions, practices and manifestations for the true advancement of civilization. This, in fact, is the main driver of GNH. It is the cultural frame within which our psychological and emotional needs are addressed and the moral and ethical bases for our thoughts and actions established. This pillar is measured against the indicators of cultural resilience, time use and balance, community vitality and psychological well being.

Culture, unfortunately, has been a principal victim of the corrosive effect of consumerist ethics. Striving against nuclearization of family; the challenge of single parenting; and the shame of edging out the old to the fringes of society, we are determined to save, revive and nourish the traditions and practices (*such as tsechus and family chokus*) that bond families and keep communities thriving. We treasure the extended family network as the natural and most sustainable form of social safety net to provide for emotional, economic and social needs and support that even the richest countries are unable to provide through artificial state managed welfare systems. In the ultimate analysis, happiness is about relationships more than anything else. It is about caring and sharing and being able to moderate one's desire and craving. Happiness abounds when relationships grow. We think true wealth has to do more with relational wealth and social strengths than material accumulation. Some of our recent successes in addition to maintaining our unique identity are:

- The designation of Bhutan as the host country for the BIMSTEC center for Cultural Industry.
- A Bhutanese film industry that has completely edged out both Holly and Bolly-Wood exports in movie theaters.
- A media corpus that is growing and expanding in an enabling climate.
- A growing talent pool of writers and publishers in English and Dzongkha (national language).

III. Conservation of the Environment: Having spoken of the two pillars of the material and spiritual kind, the third pillar represents the dynamic space in which we live. It is within the natural environment that the mind and body receive nourishment. Our way of life should thus be conditioned by nature. But believing in our supremacy over all forms of life, we have shown little respect for the laws of nature. Of late however, saner voices appear to pave the

way albeit, ever so slowly, for man and nature to abide in harmony. For Bhutan, a highly vulnerable mountain ecology, the integrity of the environment is an everyday concern. But measures taken at home to conserve the environment are not enough. Recent actions taken in the legal and policy domains are:

- A constitutional requirement that our country must always have a minimum forest cover of 60%. However, our forest cover is actually more than 72% with 51% of our land falling under parks and protected nature reserves.
- A voluntary pledge to the international community that Bhutan will always remain carbon negative, meaning that its carbon sequestration capacity will exceed the amount of GHGs it releases, thereby serving as a global carbon sink.
- A tourism policy that will continue to emphasize high quality and **low** impact (volume) while promoting a major expansion with a greater spread of its benefits.
- Promotion of Bhutan as an organic brand, whereby all agricultural produces originating in Bhutan will be free of chemical contamination to cater to the Indian market that will emerge very quickly.
- Generation of green hydropower that exceeds domestic demand to supply mainly neighbouring India to fuel its amazing growth.

IV. Promotion of Good Governance: The role of this pillar is pivotal in that it provides the strength for the other pillars to hold up the architecture of Happiness. The success with which one pursues and finds happiness has much to do with justice, freedom, peace, security and access to basic services. These are the functions of governments which can be best fulfilled within a democratic culture where the citizens are capable of exercising the power of the vote with responsibility to not only bring honest and competent leaders to public office but to hold them accountable and remove them in a perfectly orderly manner.

This pillar has received the highest priority of our former King since the time of His Coronation in 1974. Deeply convinced that the fate of Bhutan must not depend on the accident of birth, He worked methodically against popular will to transfer the absolute powers of the ruler to the people. In so doing, he stands as a rare leader who has worked hard to distance and separate Himself from the source of power and having succeeded, abdicated the throne at the age of 53. Some notable developments in strengthening this pillar are:

- Establishment of Bhutan as the youngest democracy in the world in 2008, with the first democratically elected government having assumed the privilege to serve on a platform of justice, equity and change with continuity.
- Commitment of the government to the principles of transparency, accountability and responsiveness and ensuring full independence in the functioning of the constitutional oversight mechanisms and arrangements for check and balance.
- Strengthening, deepening and diversifying of relations and cooperation with India being given the highest priority. To this end, I am happy to inform that we can already declare success given the spirit of friendship that prevails between our two countries and as our peoples, from the highest level to the common citizen, see mutual benefit in a future that is intertwined.
- A conscious pursuit to establish a resilient democratic culture within, government, party, institutions and society at large to ensure that the faith of the people in democracy is firmly established, and that the people should never be compelled to consider other undemocratic alternatives.

These four pillars and their nine indicators are measured through an index that comprises 72 variables each of which is given equal weight and can be aggregated into a single indicator to reveal a more truthful and reliable assessment of Bhutan's progress and well being.

We have now begun piloting a screening process by our planning commission, which requires that every policy, programme and project is assessed in terms of its negative, positive or neutral GNH value.

Having spoken of the need to move away from the dangerously unsustainable way of life as promoted by the macroeconomic structure founded on GDP indicator, I have presented a case for the consideration of an alternative development paradigm. Equally, I have humbly suggested that there might be virtue in considering the GNH inspired development model that has been in use for over three decades in Bhutan.

I am certain that this august gathering of the stewards of the most vital natural resource from across the world takes the subject of sustainability very seriously as it must.

Looking at human resource on a larger and complete scale, and not as working economic animals, but as human beings, it is our moral responsibility to be concerned about their common need for happiness beyond material incentives. The focus of leaders and human resource managers ought to be to bring out the best of human nature and quality in people. The nature of our companies, institutions or governments must be of the human kind which

value and promote enabling conditions for happiness for their members for the realization of the limitless potential of the human individual - so that not only will she/he become more productive but be motivated and inspired to add quality and meaning to products and the way in which such products are made. In a way the Marshall plan for human resource development that Professor Ulrich presented this morning conveyed these points quite powerfully. I believe it is the possibility of attaining happiness in an organization or a country that gives people the sense of security, pride and confidence to make them productive employees and good citizens.

Tashi Delek !