

Dasho Karma Ura (DKU) in Dialogue with Ross MacDonald (RM)

Dasho.k.ura@gmail.com

RM: There has been a great deal of interest in Gross National Happiness as a philosophy that fundamentally challenges the economic fixations and material-mindedness of current development approaches. I wonder if we could begin by exploring what the notion of happiness actually means in a Buddhist culture. In part, this is because I have the sense that happiness in a Western understanding is reduced to a simple emotion – one of feeling good. But in a Buddhist sense and a Bhutanese sense, particularly relating to GNH, the notion seems deeper and more involved.

DKU: I think that happiness has both a non-self-transcendent quality and a self-transcendent quality and the latter has much to do with the good feeling that flows from fulfilling your social and sociological needs. Material goods are tremendously important to fulfil physical and physiological needs. We live in a world where in every society, there is a portion that is struggling with these material aspects of life, so we cannot deny them that. But economic growth which largely deals with material production also includes intangible, non-material things. Production of services, knowledge and human resources are examples of those important non-material things. What we know now tentatively is that in any given society, economic growth does not necessarily increase self-reported happiness over time. Using certain methodologies, we know that happiness does not simply increase with income. There is no pre-ordained condition that says you cannot increase happiness in this way, but if we look back historically we can see that it has not done so and we should ask ourselves why not? Could we use those goods in a better way? Could we design a qualitatively different kind of growth? There is nothing inherently that says that material goods cannot give you more happiness, but we can certainly make the economy work much better. At the physical level, we have climate change, so we clearly cannot continue to produce the same things we produce now in the same way or at the same rate. We cannot do it given the physical limitations of the earth, including its atmosphere to absorb harmful gases. There are problems backfiring against our attempts to satisfy our needs in this same way. But we can produce at a lesser level. We can reduce the size of global economy but to do that, we have to improve the distribution of those goods in a drastic way. So, a very radical idea of sharing is needed.

When we look at the satisfaction of social needs - that part does increase your self-reported happiness and it might not necessarily be linked to any material exchanges or transactions. Just as this conversation is not based on any material exchange, so the social nature of man means that you can make a person much happier and more secure by just being socially available to them at certain moments of need or crisis. If we can learn to share, I think we will be driven much less in an economic direction. Therefore, restoring the importance of social relationship to a much higher position may substitute for a lesser amount of material consumption and the desire for higher incomes.

RM: Well, certainly when you look at the Western psychological literature you find that if there is one overwhelming factor associated with self-reported happiness, it is being

embedded in a community and a set of intimate social relationships. A number of people have referred to this as a 'moral net'. As you observe, the opening up of Bhutan to globalisation and its economic processes, do you sense a diminishing of the strength of the types of social networks you were talking about and the commitment the average person seems to have towards maintaining healthy family, community and social relationships?

DKU: It is difficult to know because no precise measurement of this phenomenon has been undertaken at any two points in time, but there are trends that might be indicative like migration and urbanisation. There is likely to be a reduction in people's free time as we move towards more work and away from socialisation and leisure. But we can only make inferences. We know from demographic surveys that in some areas of Bhutan, especially in the vulnerable rural areas, there are fewer men than women and fewer young people compared with older people. The families living there look older and more feminised. This type of change may unleash a different type of living pattern in these areas. And on the other side, in the urban areas, many of the young men working there may have less opportunity for a social and cultural life in the urban settings. Urban life does not have the same rituals and obvious shared interests as the rural areas do with their long traditions. So, certainly there may be significant negative impacts on happiness in this movement of people from villages to towns. And we have not created, comparatively speaking, better urban area so far. Urban areas have all the tendencies of urban areas elsewhere, but masquerading as better places. That pretension reflected in media creates a second round of popular misperception.

Work done outside Bhutan would suggest that the sense of belonging and trust in relationships are important to happiness and at face value, you might be led to think that these things are lower in urban areas because life there is more atomistic. Urban people may not seem to have so many common interests but of course urban people have many issues in common by virtue of living together in urban areas. But social organisation is such that they do not come together to act in concert. The market mediates between them rather than direct cultural and social relationships. Migration and the corresponding deprivation of populations in the villages and the lack of social and cultural opportunities for youth may indicate a loss of collective spirit and energy. In the new urban areas, people are coming together only physically and not in other ways and this would suggest a lowering in certain aspects of happiness.

RM: I have been interested being here and listening to those who are keen to employ standardised measures of happiness and to do so as fast as possible. I wonder about the extent to which the introduction of arithmetical, quantitative measurements can actually represent a diminishing of an existing cultural perception of what appropriate progress and development entails. It seems to me for example, that Buddhist understandings of the world are very precise in identifying the roots causes of suffering, the essential modes of happy living and so forth, and I wonder if there is a conflict between these essential, intuitive, experiential understandings of what happiness means and a Westernised objective, standardised system of measurement. Is there a danger that in employing these too centrally you might move away from traditional Buddhist interpretations as an authoritative source of perspective?

DKU: No. I think we have to align our indicators and our traditional understandings of existence. We have to align them so that the worry that you raise does not happen. Any indicators must be built in the context of a Buddhist way of life and be sympathetic to Bhutanese aspirations. But finding out whether aggregating individual preferences to know what is Bhutanese aspirations is itself a methodological problem. First, one must be able to imagine the society you would like to have. This is the pre-requisite for the

development of any indicators. If you do not do this, you will end up reinforcing the present predicament in another guise. GNH then is about imagining the future and the course of appropriate development and then taking the path to that imagined future. So, GNH is not really an arithmetical exercise, derived from indicators, it is about developing a vision that is in concert with all the deeply thinking members of society. If the future we want is somewhere different from where the present path is going to take us, then we need to have many instruments to navigate wisely. But all of these indicators are only short-distance navigation tools. The tools have to be agreed to for common use by the society. This means you have to persuade people to agree that the tools are appropriate and then, they can help deliver us to our destination. That is the function of indicators I think.

But as you know most indicators that are currently available either deal with basic human development – income, health, longevity, education, basic literacy etc – or they deal with economic development – like measures of GDP. These latter ones come from a time when material production was considered essential to our conception of the future. To produce was important and to measure annual production baselines was correspondingly important. But these are incomplete measures. We have the HPI (the Happy Planet Index) which takes into account the levels of self reported happiness and combines it with income. It is heavily weighted by ecological footprint, so it is a partial measure of sustainable development. But there is a need for a deeper assessment of development that directly gives much greater space to happiness defined in a broader way. All other indicators tend to be inadequate from the point of view of happiness. Eventually I think that maybe all nations will converge on three sets of central indicators. First, one set of indicators for economy and its various aspects—consumption, distribution, and conversion rate from natural resource etc.; the second set of indicators for happiness and well being, and third one, indicating our ethics which can bring all these elements together. We have to weigh both consumption and happiness in the light of ethics.

As a criterion for society, the amount of happiness is a good first step indicator because if the prevalence of happiness is high it generally means that something is going right. But we know that happiness is only one of the important ends humanity seeks - one that has been largely ignored - but it is certainly not the only one. There are other ends, chief among them being a sense of justice or ethics. So, we have to achieve happiness in a fair way and with balanced consumption and to find the best way forward, we will have to scope both of these things within an ethical framework. Of course, it would be very good to have an indicator that would measure all of these things. It would be good to have indicators which do not treat the progress of society separately on a consumption dimension, a happiness dimension and an ethical dimension. When you see a society that is happy but it is tending towards unethical actions or an individual finding happiness but in a very unethical manner, there ought to be some sort of an adjustment downward in the hedonic value of that happiness. I think we will finally come to that understanding but in the meantime, positive change must include happiness as one of our key criteria. Unfortunately, there are not many governments looking at these issues with much urgency today. There are teachers and psychologists doing so, but happiness should be at the centre of public policy decisions and policy-makers should be much more keenly engaged with it. But the allocation of funding for building up such criteria as against the annual production of national account statistics is very lop-sided. This in itself demonstrates that our understanding of these issues is not nearly deep enough.

RM: In a curious way, although we do not in developed countries as yet assess happiness, let alone ethics in useful ways, the whole philosophical structure of the

market is premised upon its being directed towards these outcomes. Utilitarianism provides the basis for believing that a growing economy is always just because it promotes more free expression and choice - which for rational pleasure-seeking individuals, is the basis for happiness. But in-built in that is a tendency to see happiness as pleasure and indeed it is defined as that in utility theory. It is most heartening to hear your qualifications that it has to be taken in the context of its inter-relationship with other dimensions and it seems to suggest that the real challenge GNH poses for the rest of the world is fundamentally an ethical one - one that challenges our immaturity and failure to develop the moral maturity that could genuinely spread happiness. As GNH moves beyond the boundaries of Bhutan and beyond the cultural boundaries of Buddhism, do you think that the underlying ethical challenge is sufficiently understood in those countries that still adhere to a narrow pleasure-based definition of what happiness involves?

DKU: I think pleasure felt as a response to some external stimuli - hedonic pleasure in other words - can come from both right and wrong sources. Even the Utilitarians distinguished these, and this reflects the fact that there is not only a hedonic form of happiness but also a reflective and transcendent happiness. This kind of happiness has to be cultivated much more and be concerned with things beyond the stimulus and response mechanisms of pleasure and the level of sensory input. Some reflection is already re-entering in the realm of culture and institutions because some things that are regarded as sources of pleasure in one society seem not to generate pleasure in other ones. One of the aspects involved here is the need to cultivate reflection so that we can properly evaluate the source of sensory inputs and then formulate proper responses in the realm of pleasure to displeasure. You can cultivate this, but at the moment happiness is quite mechanically based in simple stimulus-response relationships and there is little reflection. That for instance is the advertising method of producing pleasure. It is purely mechanical. But at the other extreme you also have the fact that you can achieve happiness and its physiological correlates without such external inputs and that is obtained through a technique of contemplation or meditation. There is nothing religious about this technique. Lastly, there is also an association made in Buddhism between happiness and a self-transcendent compassion. All ethical acts of compassion, although they may cause immediate suffering on the part of the compassionate person, on reflection are felt as tremendous sources of joy, energy, equanimity and so forth. Again then, we need to train in these reflective ways to experience full happiness.

But these are remote issues at the moment. They will become relevant once public policies begin to pay serious attention to happiness. At the moment it all still seems strange and remote. Once public policy and public discourse see happiness in the light of negative and positive ethical values, many things governments do become open to change. In the course of time, these changes may affect many ways by which we make decisions. The laws we pass will be affected, the social sciences will have to change, cost-benefit analysis will change, rates of return calculation will change, management principles will change, human resource development will change too. As the importance of happiness grows, it may have a very profound impact just as national accounting gradually had a pervasive effect on the methods and procedures for developing and costing economic factors.

As regards applying Buddhist ethics to the 21st century Bhutan, not only abroad, it is considered laughable in many quarters. The social and cultural context, they argue, are different from the period between 2500 to 800 years ago when Buddhism was at its height. The Western thinkers, who have influenced us all, believe in the idea of linear progress, with minor interruptions. On the whole, there is a belief in perpetual change

driving innovations and innovations driving change - indeed the process constantly produces new needs instead of limiting their needs. There may be linear scientific progress but there is hardly such a thing in terms of ethics. History does not show any irreversible upward shift in practice of ethics over time between one generation and the next. It does not show practice of virtue improving secularly. The Western thinkers also believed that the progress was related to the pursuing reason and objective knowledge.

Buddhism on the other hand does not seem to view that the march of time brings progress in an inexorable way. It can go either up or down depending on causality and responsibility we generate. How it defines progress is as an inward journey towards realization of the true nature of mind. Objective knowledge and belief in scientific proof are not the main routes towards knowledge of the true nature of mind. The mind itself has to observe its working. Introspection is the main tool. In brief, the purpose is to relieve ourselves of all the encrusting obfuscations, and clarify ourselves intellectually through analysis and through meditation and other practice so much that the ethical nature present in us can be found. Now, there is slow and rapid techniques depending on the different paths. The progress Buddhism conceived was discovery of the ethical nature of the mind, or consciousness. The concept of progress was ethical progress. It was not utopian, it was possible, through various techniques of introspection and awareness.

RM: I was thinking while you were talking of an interview I heard on the radio where someone was talking to a representative from the Vatican. They were talking about Mother Theresa's fast-track towards sainthood and the representative was asked why she was being advanced so quickly. His answer was interesting because he said that it was, of course, in part because of her works with the poor and her great compassion. But he added the main thing was that she found joy in her sacrifices. So it fits with what you have just been saying. Some remarkable people can combine happiness with compassion and generosity spontaneously, but for the majority of people I think it requires a supportive culture that can help guide us by pointing to a destination and sets of practices that allow us to avoid becoming stuck in unreflective dead-ends. Do you see Bhutanese culture as being a central, if not the central aspect of facilitating GNH and moving it towards its potential?

DKU: I don't see people as being engrossed in selfishness in a conscious way but the structural environment is such that we get enfolded within our own existence as the avenues of wider engagement and the opportunities for participation with others get closed. That happens socially and structurally and not necessarily by individual choice. People tend to emphasise autonomy, but one is always part of a structural environment and that influences how far you can go with the idea of autonomy. We can underline independent thought but even by the time we are born we are already part of a certain community, a particular history, religion and economy. Culture may be important for a place like Bhutan as a late comer to globalisation, but there are more similarities than dissimilarities among the peoples of the world. We Bhutanese have embraced democracy; we have embraced markets and technology so we live now in a heterogeneous culture, a living crucible where many influences are coming together. This is not like the isolated culture it was in the past. There are few places like that in the world now. So, we cannot convey GNH on the platform of its cultural correlates with happiness alone. In fact, GNH has to be neutral to culture. I think that culture, like religion, should be playing a supporting role in the understanding and communication of GNH and that the universals that are important to all people in the world should be underlined and made more prominent. So, GNH may have grown in the context of Bhutanese culture but now it has to transcend it. If GNH is nectar, then it must now be drunk from many cups and not just a Bhutanese cup.

RM: Bhutan is moving towards democracy as the fourth King largely abdicates much of the power the position formerly involved. Do you see this as posing significant new challenges for the way GNH is explained and translated into policy? Is the move to democracy more of a threat or more of a facilitator in achieving national happiness?

DKU: Personally, I do not see any threat because the extent to which GNH is undertaken depends on the people of Bhutan as well as our public officials. These will be the same people under democracy as they are now under the current dispensation. However, our direction can be influenced by the representatives of public voice because this voice will be made much more pronounced under democracy. There is the possibility that at a certain stage people may demand a lot more goods in the hope that these are going to contribute to their happiness. This is a classic mistake – the fantasy of goods delivering your happiness. Democracy can sometimes bring this tendency much more upfront and a new middle class is generally aligned with more materialistic values. We tend to call them democratic values but they are really materialistic values. So, democracy may unleash these latent desires and all we can do is confront this in an enlightened way. His Majesty the King has given people more power in the hope that the citizens of Bhutan will use it wisely and remain enlightened. This is His hope and it is our dream too. So, if GNH is debated constantly, if it is used as a lens through which we can look at the world, we will be empowered. Its influence will spread in schools, in public life, and through prolonged public discussion and constant reiteration our understanding will develop. Every time we discuss it, we progress. If we dream of the right things, I believe the culture of happiness can be maintained. But this requires so much self-restraint as once we have achieved an adequate level of material comfort, we have to decide collectively how much more we need and what is the right amount to live. This is always historically and culturally contingent. I hope that Bhutanese people will have the courage and wisdom to decide this ethically because then we will be at our happiest and there will be less need to apply unreasonable rules. At the global level, there are a lot of rules that must now be necessarily made and they must be enforced because as we know, although we live in the same world and drink the same water and breathe the same air, we deny the collectivity of life. It is important that we move to embrace a willing ethical change and a global compassion. For now, there is this false conception that one nation can be secure while the rest go down and that is a very dangerous conception.