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Aligning Spirituality and Development: The Role of Buddhism in Bhutan's Gross National Happiness

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Abstract:

The Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, originating from Bhutan, emphasize holistic development over mere economic growth, drawing inspiration from Buddhist philosophy. This paper explores the intrinsic relationship between Buddhism and GNH, revealing how Buddhist principles shape Bhutan's unique development paradigm. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, focusing on suffering, its causes, cessation, and the path to cessation, closely align with GNH's pillars and principles. Buddhist teachings emphasizes interconnectedness, compassion, and mindfulness, guiding policies aimed at fostering genuine happiness and collective well-being. The study uses secondary data. Through an analysis of Buddhist ethics and values, this paper highlights the profound influence of spirituality on Bhutan's development model and the relevance of GNH as a pathway to sustainable progress. The impermanence philosophy of Buddhism resonates within GNH, promoting mindfulness, environmental conservation, and societal harmony. By adopting practices like meditation and ethical living, individuals can move towards inner peace and enlightenment, aligning with both Buddhist teachings and GNH goals. This fusion of ancient wisdom with contemporary well-being frameworks underscores the timeless relevance of Lord Buddha's teachings and their resonance with Bhutan's GNH philosophy.

Keywords: Gross National Happiness (GNH), Buddhism, Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, Spirituality, Well-being, Mindfulness, Impermanence, Bhutan.

Introduction

The Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework that originated from the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, has garnered international attention as a holistic approach to development, standing in contrast to conventional economic indicators such as Gross

Domestic Product (GDP). Bhutan has always prioritized the well-being and happiness of its people over economic growth since the dawn of its modern civilization. Bhutan has adopted GNH as its developmental philosophy as the nation feels that GNH is a powerful tool with a holistic approach to development and progress but, at the heart of GNH lies a deep-seated connection with Buddhist philosophy, reflecting Bhutan's cultural and spiritual heritage. As Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, and Wangdi (2012) assert, GNH was first introduced by the fourth King of Bhutan in the 1970s as a means to prioritize well-being and sustainable development over mere economic growth.

This chapter attempts to explore the intrinsic relationship between Buddhism and GNH, elucidating how Buddhist principles shape Bhutan's unique development paradigm by aligning themselves very closely with the teachings of Buddha. Buddhist teachings, grounded in concepts of interconnectedness, compassion, and mindfulness, serve as the cornerstone of GNH, guiding policies and practices aimed at fostering genuine happiness and collective well-being (Thinley, 2011). Through an exploration of Buddhist ethics and values, this paper aims to shed light on the profound influence of spirituality on Bhutan's development model, highlighting the relevance of GNH as a pathway to sustainable progress and human flourishing.

Four Noble Truths and GNH

The cornerstone of Buddhist teachings, the Four Noble Truths, outline the nature of suffering, its causes, and the path to liberation. Lord Buddha during his first teaching shared the four ideas on life and living which nurtures the mindset of Bhutanese populace and throws a spotlight on the concept of GNH.

1. *Suffering - Life is marked by suffering, encompassing physical and mental pain, dissatisfaction, and impermanence.*

The first concept of the Four Noble Truths creates a strong base on life itself. It may sound a bit pessimistic to say that life is full of suffering, both mentally and physically, with so much dissatisfaction. However, it is important to remind oneself of the impermanence of these experiences. However, this concept is firstly practical, and has a very close link with happiness. Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) in his book, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* states that,

The Four Noble Truths are not just a philosophical concept but a practical guide to living a meaningful and fulfilling life. By understanding and practising these truths, one can free oneself from the cycle of suffering and find true happiness. (p.43)

Gross National Happiness (GNH) has a strong foundation in the concept of suffering. Only through a proper understanding of suffering, which is seen as the ultimate reality of life, can one move towards the path of happiness and a fulfilling life. From the four pillars of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the Preservation and Promotion of Culture teaches people to live a balanced life and practice mindfulness at all times. This approach aligns closely with looking at life more deeply and understanding its essence for happy and peaceful living. This pillar also recognizes the importance of preserving and promoting cultural values, traditions, and heritage, and most importantly it includes efforts to protect and nurture indigenous knowledge, arts, and crafts. The cessation of suffering is the outcome of a balanced life that is led by being mindful at all times.

Cause of Suffering - The origin of suffering is craving and attachment, rooted in ignorance of the true nature of reality.

The second concept examines the causes of suffering. By understanding these causes, one can refrain from certain actions and protect oneself from suffering. The end of suffering is the beginning of happiness. By preserving and practicing the unique culture and traditions of Bhutan, as stated by one pillar of GNH, the people learn to set limits on their expectations and stay detached from materialistic possessions, leading to a conscious and meaningful life. The cause of suffering, as elucidated by Buddha and the Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy, lies in their shared emphasis on addressing the underlying mental and emotional factors that contribute to human discontentment and suffering. Both philosophies recognize that material wealth alone does not guarantee happiness and that true well-being comes from cultivating inner peace, compassion, and a sense of interconnectedness with others and the world. Both Buddha's teachings and the GNH philosophy recognize that material possessions and external conditions are insufficient for lasting happiness. Instead, they emphasize inner transformation and psychological well-being as key factors in achieving genuine happiness and fulfilment. Additionally, the cravings for sensual pleasure and material wealth and power represented by the Wheel of Life, are not permanent fixtures of human existence and doing good karmic acts will increase happiness and wellbeing (French 2002). Happiness exists in the absence of suffering, which has its roots in cravings, attachment, and ignorance. Hence,

the GNH philosophy keeps people grounded in religious beliefs, cultural values, and societal norms, ultimately leading to the attainment of happiness.

2. *Cessation of Suffering - Liberation from suffering is attainable by extinguishing craving and ignorance, leading to the state of Nirvana.*

Lord Buddha's teachings on the cessation of suffering through the extinguishing of craving and ignorance align very well with the GNH philosophy. As per Lord Buddha, Nirvana is a state of ultimate liberation from suffering, achieved through the elimination of desires and delusions. On the same note, the principles of GNH prioritize spiritual well-being and inner peace over material wealth and external success through one of its pillars: the Preservation and Promotion of Culture.

Lord Buddha, in his teaching stressed the importance of overcoming attachment to worldly desires and illusions because they are sources of all human suffering. To achieve inner peace and ultimately attain enlightenment, humans can reach this state by ceasing to crave materialistic things and by avoiding ignorance. Similarly, the GNH philosophy emphasizes the need for holistic well-being, including spiritual fulfilment and mental harmony, as essential components of happiness. According to Ura (2015) the GNH philosophy is based on the belief that true happiness comes from within oneself through self-awareness and inner transformation. This concept aligns closely with Lord Buddha's teachings on the path to Nirvana, which emphasize self-reflection, mindfulness, and the cultivation of wisdom to transcend suffering.

Furthermore, research and studies have shown that consistent mindfulness practice and meditation, as advocated by Lord Buddha and the Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy, can reduce levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. By focusing on inner peace and spiritual growth, individuals can experience a more profound sense of fulfilment and contentment, which aligns with the principles of GNH. The idea of liberation from suffering by extinguishing craving and ignorance, aligns with the GNH philosophy of Bhutan, which emphasizes spiritual well-being and inner peace as essential components of happiness. The path to Nirvana, achieved through self-awareness, mindfulness, and wisdom, can bring individuals a state of lasting contentment and fulfillment, in harmony with themselves and the world around them.

3. *Path to the Cessation of Suffering - The Noble Eightfold Path, consisting of right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and*

concentration, serves as a practical guide for overcoming suffering and attaining enlightenment.

The concept of the Noble Eightfold Path, as discussed by Lord Buddha, offers a structured approach to navigating the challenges of life and achieving inner peace and enlightenment. This path, comprising elements such as right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, is designed to lead individuals towards the cessation of suffering. The Eightfold Path is the ongoing condition of obtaining increasing bliss and happiness (Gethin 2004; Snelling 1998). Through rigorous practice of Eightfold Path, human can achieve happiness. In the context of GNH philosophy, which prioritizes holistic well-being and societal harmony, the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path align closely with the values espoused by GNH. President of the Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research from Bhutan pointed out that the GNH framework stresses psychological well-being, community vitality, and cultural diversity as essential components of happiness. Similarly, these principles align with the teachings of the Noble Eightfold Path of Lord Buddha, emphasizing mental clarity, ethical conduct, and mindfulness in our daily activities. It was found that mindfulness-based interventions, such as those focused on cultivating mindfulness and concentration, were effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression (Journal of Clinical Psychology, 2017). Similarly, Dalai Lama (1998) in one of his books shares how human transform its inner self by practicing mindfulness and compassion and finally achieve happiness and well-being. It also aligns with the teaching of Lord Buddha and is very much a concept of GNH.

Impermanence

Impermanence is one of the basic truths that reinforces the idea and understanding of existence which is the core principle of Lord Buddha's teaching. Impermanence stresses the fleeting and dynamic nature of everything that exists including human life. The philosophy of impermanence in Buddhism aligns well with the GNH philosophy because both recognize the temporary nature of material existence and emphasize the importance of cultivating the right attitudes to promote the well-being of the masses. Buddhists believe that suffering also occurs through the selfish and mindless craving for sensual pleasure and material wealth and power by individual egos, which may cause evil deeds (Armstrong 2004; Batchelor 2010; Keown 2013; Leighton 2012; Mitchell 2008; Smith & Novak 2003). When people understand that all phenomena in life are subject to change and eventual extinction, they develop a sense of

detachment, acceptance, and mindfulness. This understanding ultimately reduces human suffering and promotes peace and happiness in life.

If we try and figure out the presence of impermanence in the GNH framework, we find it echoing in the domain of psychological well-being. This domain discusses the aspect of mindful practices, inculcating the sense of resilience and overall mental well-being. With a proper understanding of the impermanent nature of the world around them, people are motivated to prioritize values such as inner peace, satisfaction, and spiritual growth, leaving behind the pursuit of material possessions. When this change in people's outlook permeates their practical lives, it fosters genuine happiness, peace, and fulfillment. This essentially helps achieve the goal of GNH, which aims to foster the overall well-being of both people and society. Besides, Bhutan's focus on environmental conservation and sustainable development aligns closely with impermanence, it represents the fragile interdependence of the entire environmental ecosystem. Bhutan's emphasis on protecting and promoting natural vegetation in harmony reflects its unique relationship and reverence for all forms of life and the well-being of the entire planet. Similar perspective has been shared by Mahayana Buddhism, the Ultimate Truth of the universe is based on the non-duality of reality (Gethin 1998; Keown 2013; Leighton 2012; Williams, 2008), meaning that all in the universe is interconnected. Bhutan cultivates awareness of impermanence, follows the philosophies of interdependence and interconnectivity, and practices non-attachment. With this, Bhutan fosters communities filled with happiness rooted in country's spiritual values and a strong appreciation and acceptance of the transient nature of the material world around, and psychological wellbeing (as per the GNH philosophy) is defined as a citizen's spiritual level and employment of good karma (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 201b).

Conclusion

By adopting and practicing the ideas shared by Lord Buddha through the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, people across the globe can achieve inner peace and ethical conduct, aligning well with the goals of GNH. In essence, Mahayana Buddhist states that happiness and compassion arise from awareness of suffering in the self and in others (achieved by removing the distraction of immediate suffering and through education) (Givil 2015).

In essence, Buddhism relates to impermanence, signifying that everything in the universe is subject to change and decay. Next, clinging to impermanent possessions of the

world as one's own ignorance is the source of suffering. Therefore, understanding impermanence frees one from worldly desires. GNH promotes a balanced life and educates people on the importance of a mindful approach to both the materialistic and spiritual realms of life.

Through daily practices such as meditation, ethical living, and mindfulness, people can progress toward the cessation of suffering and achieve enlightenment. The integration of ancient Buddhist wisdom with contemporary well-being frameworks highlights the timeless relevance of Lord Buddha's teachings and their alignment with Bhutan's GNH philosophy. This integration fosters a more harmonious and fulfilling existence for individuals and societies alike.

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