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HAPPY NATIONS

Let me begin with a quote by my king:

“Today, Gross National Happiness has come to mean so many things to so many people. But to me it signifies simply ‘development with values’. Thus for my nation today, GNH is the bridge between the fundamental values of kindness, equality and humanity and the necessary pursuit of economic growth. GNH acts as our national conscience guiding us towards making wise decisions for a better future.”

What is GNH? It is a holistic approach balancing the mind and the body with the conviction that man is bound by nature to search for existence. In 1972, the fourth Bhutanese king, Jigme Singay Wangchuck, ascended the throne at a young age – and looked around for development models for his country. Realising that the single most common desire of every human being was happiness, he propounded the idea that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.” We have walked this path for past 40 years. It is a challenge, and we know we will make mistakes and fall, but we will rise again and walk the path until we get there.

For the past four decades, government policy and plans have been based on the four GNH pillars: equitable socio-economic development, cultural preservation and promotion, environmental conservation, and good governance. These have been further elaborated into nine domains: psychological well-being, standard of living, health, culture, education, community vitality, good governance, time use, and ecological integration. Based on the 2010 survey, the early results indicate that no Bhutanese is completely happy. On average people are deprived in six of nine domains. How does this result help us? Among other things, it will help us evaluate, monitor, set goals, build national consciousness and involve people in mindful development planning and practices.

If we do not learn in schools what nature is, how shall we appreciate and mindfully consider the protection of

ecology? If we do not learn the effects of harmful substances, smoking and junk food, how can we expect to be healthy? If we are ignorant about what causes climate change, how can we help save the Earth? If we do not learn politics, how can we make informed choices about voting and develop a healthy democracy and government? If we do not learn about our culture, how can we serve our community and the world? Therefore, we have begun the process of teaching and practicing GNH in schools, which we all know will have a multiplying and far reaching effect.

I will not conclude that Bhutan has achieved GNH, yet, and we gain many aspirations through the initiations of so many countries who are trying to pursue similar paths. On 19 July, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously resolved, without a vote, that happiness is a standalone goal and a holistic approach to development. Our prime minister thus happily concluded, “Happiness is now accepted by the international community as a timeless, common vision that binds all humanity, rich and poor.”

The world is crumbling under the devastating impacts of climate change – it is felt everywhere with earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, pollution, species extinction, inequalities, terror, financial insecurity and entrenched poverty. Greatly pained by such changes, my prime minister, our GNH teacher, holds the deepest and longest dream to build a GNH Centre in Bhutan – a beacon for a common consciousness for sustainable living. He wants to create a GNH Centre that fully embodies and models the principles of GNH in every aspect of its design, function, activity and human interaction – manifesting simple and sustainable living in harmony with nature and other beings, and teaching and demonstrating both to our own citizens and to international visitors how to bring GNH values and practices fully into their daily work, life, community, country and world. It will be a beacon for our nation and, we hope, for those far beyond Bhutan’s borders.