

Happiness & Spirituality: How the Concept of Gross National Happiness Intertwines with Vajrayana Buddhism

Buddhism defines happiness as the state of mind that enjoys inner peace and is contented—a state of well-being that the great Indian Pandit Nagarjuna, in one of his compositions, explains thusly:

There is no treasure like contentment
Of all the types of wealth
It is the contentment
Which was told by the teacher of god and men
Which is the most supreme
Strive for contentment and should you achieve it
Even without material wealth
You will truly have found your fortune

The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has been widely promoted and discussed in recent years in Bhutan and has even caught the interest of intellectuals, social scientists, and politicians throughout the world. Seminars and conferences on GNH over the years have served to highlight the importance of catering to the social development of the nation, including spiritual wellbeing of our citizens as well as promotion and preservation of our unique culture. While conventional development models stress economic growth, the concept of GNH is based upon the premise that true and sustainable development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side and serves to complement and reinforce one another in a balanced manner.

Bhutan as the foremost proponent of this unique concept places sustainable economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion, and good governance as the foundation for bringing happiness into the lives of our people. Yet in our attempt to cater to the immediate socio-economic needs of the Bhutanese people, the roles of spirituality, religious practice, and faith in achieving happiness and well-being has been under emphasized in the vast discourse on GNH.

According to Buddhism, the cause of happiness is virtuous karma, the law of causality and delusion. Our entire experience of the outer physical world is a projection of our inner mind. Since it is a production of our karmic mind, the experience will exist as long as we remain in Samsara. Positive, virtuous and beneficial actions result in happiness in the present life and a higher rebirth in the next life. Unwholesome deeds or bad karma beget sufferings in this life and rebirth in the lower realms. Therefore, happiness can be achieved through acts of virtue and selflessness in this life. Buddha said in the *White Lotus Sutra*:

The external world is formed and created by karma
The inherent sentient beings are born from the seed of karma.

Thus, the four pillars of GNH can then be considered as conditions for attaining happiness and well-being of a nation by creation of good karma.

The definition of happiness for most people is based upon having physical comfort and fulfilling their needs and desires. These superficial and impermanent attainments can be brought about by the judicious

application of certain indicators of GNH. The other happiness, which is founded on the attainment of a deeper mental contentment, can only be brought about by applying oneself to spiritual practice. By recognizing that happiness is a 'skill,' a spiritual art, one can learn it.

The great Tibetan yogi Milarepa sang this song to Len Gom Repa, one of his foremost students:

He who has a thorough realization, at ease in the self-sustaining reality, is ever joyful.
He who is enslaved by his desires, insatiable and always longing, is ever sad.

Happiness, or the joyous state of mind, has always been a recurring metaphor in religious literature for yogic attainment. Milarepa, the great Tibetan Yogi, often sang about the joy of liberation and sublime bliss. It may surprise most people that these materially poor practitioners could be so happy even without the basic necessities and comforts. The answer may be that they have found complete contentment through practice of a unique humane value and principle—one that has no monetary cost and is open to all persons at all stage of their lives.