

# Educating for Gross National Happiness

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Bhutan is small country in the Himalayas that has rejected consumerism and the unregulated development that has caused so much environmental damage and suffering around the world. I remember seeing a segment on Bhutan on "Sixty Minutes" several years ago about Gross Nation Happiness (GNH) being their official national goal rather than GDP. Ever since then I had been fascinated with the nation and I was overjoyed when I was invited to take part in a workshop implementing GNH in their schools.

The workshop began on December 7, 2009, and included two addresses by the Prime Minister, Lyonchhen Jimi Thinley. He is charismatic leader who impressed everyone with his intelligence, passion, and vision. In his opening address, he outlined his government's conception of GNH:

- GNH is not a "feel-good" term but something that must come "from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds."
- GNH is a "development path that judiciously balances sustainable and equitable development with environmental conservation, good governance, and the dynamism and wisdom of our profound and ancient culture."
- Bhutan has developed a "GNH index that measures key conditions of wellbeing like physical and mental health, community vital-

ity, work-life balance, living standards, civic engagement, and the ecological integrity on which the whole human endeavor depends." Bhutan protects 72% of its forest from development which allows the country to absorb three times as much carbon as it produces.

The Prime Minister impressed on the audience the urgency of the situation since Bhutan is rapidly modernizing and with that comes the possibility that it will be consumed by the negative impact of globalization. We were asked to work with the Bhutanese participants to develop practical strategies that could be implemented in the schools. He also noted that workshop itself was being run on sustainable principles with food coming from local sources. He asked the local participants to walk or take public transportation to the workshop.

The next morning we began our work. There were 24 international participants coming from 16 countries and 28 Bhutanese. There were principals or representatives from several holistically orientated schools located in Nepal, Canada, the United States, Thailand, India, and Italy. Also attending were academics working in the areas of contemplative, holistic, indigenous, and environmental education. The Bhutanese participants included government officials, teacher educators, writers, monks, and students. UNICEF supported the project with funding and the participation of several of its representatives. We sat in two concentric circles with the inner circle sitting on cushions and the outer circle seated in chairs. The workshop was led by a professional facilitator, Ivy Ang.

I found the first couple of days challenging. We discussed the vision and its implementation. Ulti-



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mately we developed a vision statement that described what a GNH-focused Butanese educational system might look like and proposed goals designed to insure success.

Bhutan's entire educational system will effectively cultivate GNH principles and values, including deep critical and creative thinking, ecological literacy, practice of the country's profound, ancient wisdom and culture, contemplative learning, a holistic understanding of the world, genuine care for nature and for others, competency to deal effectively with the modern world, preparation for right livelihood, and informed civic engagement.

We were impressed how quickly the government responded to our suggestions. At the end of each day the facilitator and her assistants would meet with the education minister and other officials to review the results of the workshops and the next day we would see several of our suggestions immediately included in the proceedings. The Prime Minister was also informed of the day's work and it appears that he reviewed all the proposals that went forward. This was quite different from most governments that usually take months to respond to input.

After this initial "big picture" work, we broke out in small groups to develop suggestions for week-long workshops that are to be held for all 540 principals in Bhutan early in 2010 to discuss how they can implement GNH in the schools. Our small groups focused on critical thinking/analytical thinking; eco-literacy; community and national service; the ambience of the classroom and the school; alternative approaches to assessment; sports; non-formal education; mindfulness; and the history, science, language, and arts curricula.

One most impressive features of the workshop were the contributions of high school students. Two students were full members of the participant group and other student observers contributed in the breakout sessions. These students were articulate and not afraid to voice their concerns about the education system. One of their main concerns was the current emphasis on final exams and they recommended that as an "alternative to exams, students

could be graded on class participation, completion of assignments, and independent projects."

After the workshop was over, the Prime Minister was interviewed by one of the observers, Silver Donald Cameron (2009), who writes for the *Chronicle Herald* in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In the interview the Prime Minister said

"I would like to see an educational system quite different from the conventional factory, where children are just turned out to become economic animals, thinking only for themselves," he said. "I would like to see graduates that are more [AUTH: ? "humane"] human beings, with human values, [who] give importance to relationships, [who] are eco-literate, contemplative, analytical.

I would like graduates who know that success in life is a state of being when you can come home at the end of the day satisfied with what you have done, realizing that you are a happy individual not only because you have found happiness for yourself, but because you have given happiness, in this one day's work, to your spouse, to your family, to your neighbours — and to the world at large.

Gandhi (1980, 138) wrote:

A proper and all round development of the mind, therefore, can take place only when it proceeds *pari passu* with the education of the physical and spiritual faculties of the child. They constitute an indivisible whole. According to this theory, therefore, it would be a gross fallacy to suppose that they can be developed piecemeal or independently of one another.

Most education departments around the world focus on the intellect while committing the "gross fallacy" that the physical and spiritual faculties of the child can be ignored. As a result, we have education that disconnects children from their spiritual life, the earth, and the cosmos. In contrast, Bhutan offers an inspiring holistic vision of education.

Ronald Colman of GPI Atlantic is now organizing a systematic evaluation of the Bhutan initiative. Although this project is in its infancy, I hope that countries in the industrialized world might rethink their

emphasis on testing and preparing students to “compete in the global economy” and, instead, give serious consideration the holistic, sustainable model of education being developed in Bhutan. The world needs desperately needs education that fosters wholeness rather than schooling that disconnects.

### References

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