THE MOUSE THAT ROARED: BHUTAN'S BUDDHIST APPROACH TO DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: The small, remote country of Bhutan is the only democratic, mixed market country in the world that is rooted constitutionally and culturally in Buddhist principles. As such, it provides an authentic basis for theoretical and empirical comparison between two distinct models of democracy and development (Western and Buddhist) that differ on important, first-order principles. This article illuminates the differences in philosophical assumptions and social theory between the two models, and documents how, in real world terms, Bhutan organizes and operates a political and economic system consistent with its Buddhist worldview. It considers whether Bhutan's unique pursuit of "Gross National Happiness" rather than Gross National Product as its ordering principle for policy can withstand the forces of globalization and what insights Bhutan might have to share with the rest of us about dilemmas facing Western democracies and the need to pursue development in a more holistic and sustainable way.

Introduction

Today, most sovereign states can fairly be described as "democracies" because they possess elected political leadership, majoritarian rule with protection of minority viewpoints and some measure of commitment to individual rights and equality under law. In the economic realm, most democracies possess economies in which the marketplace is the chief arbiter of economic exchange and that are, in turn, integrated in varying degrees into wider regional and global markets. Virtually all these polities and economies have as their underlying "operating system" liberal principles and values. The term "liberal" in this context is used in its traditional or essential meaning: promoting individual rights and liberties; constraining the scope of government by law; protecting private interests, such as property; and minimizing governmental restrictions on the free movement of goods, ideas and people. For some states these philosophical commitments are indigenous and longstanding, and for others they were imported later, often through colonization.

One decided exception to this model is the small remote country of Bhutan. Because of its Himalayan location, its centuries of closure to the outside world, and the good fortune of having avoided conquest or colonization by invading Tibetans, Mongols and Brits, when Bhutan emerged as a democratic state in the 21st century, it did so with its 1300-year-old belief and value system intact. The ideas of the European Enlightenment or later ideologies, such as Marxism or fascism, never penetrated Bhutan. Bhutan's philosophical beliefs and mores are overwhelmingly

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Buddhist, not Western and liberal in character (Mathou, 2008). Contemporary Bhutan is aware of Western ways and has recently incorporated many Western political and economic ideas into its constitution, laws and policies. Nonetheless, the *foundation* for its political, economic and cultural identity is unique: it is the only democratic, mixed market country in the world rooted constitutionally and culturally in *Mahāyāna* Buddhist principles and ethics. Does Bhutan's exceptionality matter? I think it does because it provides an authentic basis for theoretical and empirical comparison between two distinct models of democracy and development. Since Aristotle, comparison has been a powerful method for understanding societies' differences and similarities, appreciating both what is foreign and what is familiar. The comparative approach provides at the same time a realistic and relativistic view of one's own political and economic system and valuable knowledge of foreign systems (Parel, 2003 at p. 12). Such a comparison raises the following questions:

- How is the theory and practice of democracy and economic development different when founded on Buddhist principles rather than Western/Liberal/ "Enlightenment" principles?
- What is Bhutan's operational model of Buddhist democracy and development?
- Can Bhutan's unique system endure the forces of urbanization, modernization and globalization? And,
- Can Bhutan's model offer valuable insights to Western democracies in addressing contemporary political and economic challenges, such as inequality, political polarization and environmental sustainability?

I. How a Buddhist Approach to Democracy and Development is "Different": Distinctive Philosophical Foundations

To begin to answer the first question, that is, "How is the theory and practice of democracy and economic development different when founded on Buddhist principles rather than Western/Liberal/ 'Enlightenment' principles," the reader needs to appreciate the distinctive foundational principles of the two approaches. How they differ in their answers to the big philosophical questions: (1) how do things exist? (their basic ontology), (2) what is knowable? (their epistemology), and (3) what is our basic human nature? (their ethics). In the West, the longstanding and prevailing materialist/scientific/liberal social paradigm argues the following:

- Existence: a Cartesian duality exists between observer and observed, between and non-physical phenomena, such as mind, are not causally relevant.
- Knowledge: objective truth is knowable through third-person methods of science focused exclusively on the material world, what some call "foundationalism:" the rational, self-directed search for permanent and authoritative principles of human knowledge. In physical, natural and social

sciences, the goal is to uncover deterministic patterns of behavior. As such, scientific *facts* are necessarily separate from *values.*

- Human Nature: governed principally by reason and rationality, our actions are predominantly self-interested, and human behavior reflects the rational pursuit of one's preferences.

As for the natural world, duality prevails here as well; humans are above and apart from the natural environment and, through reason and science, should assert their dominion and control over it. These are the common foundations from which modern liberal democracy and capitalism have grown. In Buddhism, the philosophical assumptions underlying social theory are significantly different:

- Existence: subject and object are "non-dual" and all reality is interdependent and impermanent. This assertion is the opposite of the Cartesian separation of subject and object and material realism. Moreover, individual selves lack an essential and enduring nature and are reducible to other material and non-material elements. This doctrine of the "no-self" (*anātman*) is common to all schools of Buddhism. One can refer to selves in keeping with worldly conventions, but ultimately the self is a fiction. Further, under the type of Buddhism practiced in Bhutan, all phenomena, including the elements that make up the self, are ultimately "empty" (*śūnya*) of inherent, independent existence. Nothing exists as a fixed entity from its own side. Although things appear to our senses as permanent, things do not *exist* in the way that they *appear*. Instead, on examination, all phenomena—ourselves, others, and objects—are "dependent arising," i.e., they come into existence dependent on other things: their parts, their causes, and the minds that perceive them. Failing to recognize the way things exist and grasping at them as enduring is the fundamental mistake (ignorance) that leads to suffering according to Buddhism.
- Knowledge: no objective knowledge is independent of the mind of the perceiver. All phenomena are merely appearances to mind. In the *Madhyamaka* (Sanskrit for *Middle Way*) interpretation that predominates in Bhutan and Tibet, all phenomena are merely imputed by mind and have no existence from their own side. Objects, and the minds that perceive them, are mutually dependent. Things come into existence dependent on the interplay between sensory signals and the sense organs and mental powers of the perceiver. Reality then is interpretive, and the notion of fixed, objective reality is an impossibility. Given that everything ultimately is lacks or is empty of a fixed inherent existence, all other forms of knowledge are provisional or "conventional" truths. It is important to note, however, that our conventional notions of reality *a form of truth* in that they can help us function in the world and, when used correctly can lead individuals to a realization of the truth of emptiness, the source of liberation from suffering. Because they perform practical and soteriological functions, Buddhist

epistemology has developed a sophisticated literature regarding what constitutes "reliable forms of knowledge," (*pramāṇas*), which are generally the product of our direct perceptions or logically drawn inferences.

- Behaviorally, all sentient beings possess the inherent quality to be a fully enlightened being by removing deluded views about the nature of reality and, therefore, are worthy of our respect, non-harm, and ideally kindness and compassion. This is the *Mahāyāna* doctrine of our "Buddha nature."

Social and economic environments, therefore, should establish the conditions for individuals to realize their essential, interdependent nature through ethical conduct, contemplation and meditation. Social policies should emphasize cohesion and equality and the creation of a peaceful, disciplined society that supports individual growth and development (Harvey, 2000 at p. 109).

As for the natural world, Buddhism's environmental ethics do not see humans above or apart from other living things. Although the human realm is advantageous in providing the conditions for spiritual advancement, humans are not superior to other living things, and our relationship to the natural world is one that should recognize the interdependence of all things and act with care to promote harmony with nature.

To summarize then on the differences between liberalism and Buddhism on the nature of self and reality: for liberalism, objects and self are real and material and for Buddhism objects and self are only conventionally real, but ultimately empty of inherent existence. For liberals, human nature is essentially self-interested or selfish, whereas for Buddhists it is altruistic and perfectible even if temporarily clouded by the delusion of self-grasping ignorance. And, regarding the pursuit of "happiness," in the West happiness equates with either hedonic pleasure or eudemonia (the satisfaction of living a moral existence), whereas in Buddhism these are considered lesser forms of happiness and only conducive conditions for the higher form of happiness which is found internally, by training the mind in virtue, compassion and developing wisdom (of the true nature of reality).

Not surprisingly, liberalism, the dominant Western ideology founded on these beliefs, is designed to maximally satisfy the wants of individuals defined increasingly over time in material terms. The pursuit of happiness was the pervasive concern of almost all thinkers of the European Enlightenment. Happiness was conceived in largely individual terms and focused on reconciling short-term calculations of pleasure and pain with more enduring states of inner satisfaction with one's life. Although the good life was thought of as more than mere material wealth, over time the moral dimensions (sentiments) gave way to wealth as the expedient measure of personal and national progress. Short of harming others, individuals should be free to define for themselves what constitutes a good and happy life. Government should provide a framework for personal freedom and the exercise of individual rights and liberties while maintaining an orderly society and market that provide equal opportunity for all. The appropriate scope of governmental intervention in the life and property of individuals in the service of social order and justice typically is the primary subject of debate among liberal theorists and practitioners. Today's liberal-

democratic political and economic systems, policies and practices remain rooted in these underlying Enlightenment philosophical tenets.

A Buddhist vision of politics and economics shares many features with liberalism such as egalitarianism, humanism and rationalism, but because of its distinctive philosophical foundation, differs in important respects. The next section looks at what Buddha taught about politics and economics, drawn from the *sutras* (teachings) and the *viñaya* (instructions for the order of monks and nuns, the *sangha*).

II. Buddha on Politics

What are the essential elements of Buddha's normative vision for politics? Buddha saw politics not as an end but as an instrument that could either provide favorable conditions or create harmful obstructions for individuals' spiritual advancement. Buddha recognized that government is necessary to provide social order and welfare and that its values, content and processes should be consistent with the *dharma* (universal principles). A political system so organized could minimize the manifest forms of suffering for all members of society—especially for the least fortunate whose visible suffering is greatest—and play a positive role in an individual's attainment of higher forms of well-being. Although the primary goal of Buddha's teachings is individual transformation, at the same time the teachings acknowledge the interdependence of the individual with society, polity and economy. Buddha's teachings sought to mediate these relationships in a constructive manner.

What does it mean to say that political practices must be consistent with the *dharma*? A fundamental principle of the *dharma* relevant to politics is the equality and dignity of all individuals. Buddha stressed that all human beings have an inherent worth and capacity for enlightenment (Buddha nature). In contrast to the prevailing Brahmin teachings, Buddha rejected the caste system and argued that virtues were distributed equally, not hierarchically, across society. Likewise, the *dharma* applies equally to everyone regardless of class, social status or economic circumstance. Because citizen and ruler alike are equal under the law of *dharma*, worldly institutions should reflect this basic truth.

Buddha's teachings also reflect the principle of equality when he prescribes that monarchy should be based on popular consent and should be conducted in consultation with the governed. Democracy, however, is the form of government where equality is paramount, and Buddha's own political creation, the *sangha*, is governed strictly on equality. Buddha also calls for equality before the law in his advice that monarchs must be just and even-handed in the application of justice and in the ordained community's application of the rules for admission, participation, administration and adjudication. Because of the equality and ultimate goodness of every individual (and because they all suffer), Buddha taught that they are each worthy of our compassion and, at a minimum, should not be harmed by the state. Non-violence or non-harm is a natural corollary to Buddha's teachings on the equality of human potential. Perhaps the most direct example of this principle to politics is Buddha's repeated admonition that a righteous ruler must follow the ethical precepts of no killing, no stealing, no lying etcetera. More affirmatively, the successful leader

must demonstrate compassion and care through the practices of kindness, non-harm, non-ill will, forbearance and conflict avoidance. Non-violence and equality are the bedrocks of Buddhist social justice, and good government requires moral and legal protection against the arbitrary use of power.

A third feature of Buddha's political teachings is a tolerance for different political configurations and a pragmatic and non-doctrinaire ("liberal" in this sense) approach to political questions. Rather than overtly endorsing a particular form of government, Buddha, in befriending and advising republics and monarchs alike, implies that good governance can take more than one form but must allow for the maximization of individual happiness of its citizens (defined in a way that goes beyond mere sensual enjoyment) and that minimizes their suffering, allowing them to cultivate compassion, patience, generosity, meditative concentration and wisdom while discouraging greed, hatred and ignorance. Buddha did not *explicitly* advocate for a single form of government, and, at one level, recognized that different types of regimes could be considered legitimate if the spirit of the ruler and the ruled was in accordance with the *dharma*. Buddha's encouragement of the *sangha* to modify the *viñaya* to keep up with changing needs is yet another example of his flexible, adaptable approach to politics. Nonetheless, Buddha indicates a preference for democratic and representative forms of government. In the *sutras* and the *viñaya*, Buddha endorses democratic principles such as citizen participation and free expression of opinion; deliberation, consultation, consensus building, voting and respect for popular consent; transparency via face-to-face meetings and public debate; and the primacy of the rule of law and limited government. We see these predilections in Buddha's endorsement of republican principles and the incorporation of democratic principles into the rules governing Buddha's own *sangha*. Buddha's teachings are directly relevant to contemporary politics and are compatible with the governance of a modern democratic state. Buddha's political thinking parallels Western liberal thought with its emphasis on equal rights, protection against tyranny via equality before the law and participatory and deliberative governance.

The most important distinction between "*dharmic*" democracy and liberal democracy is Buddhism's emphasis on one's individual *duties* to others as much as one's individual *rights*, duties that exceed compliance with the law. Where liberal democracy has little to say about the moral qualities of what constitutes good governance beyond the values of equality of opportunity and protection of individual liberty and instead focuses on the *process* of good governance not the *substance* (Garfield, 2001), *dharmic* democracy delineates a clear duty of care owed to others and, as will be discussed in the section on Buddhist economics, to the natural world as well. Fundamentally, in *dharmic* democracy individuals have a duty not only to avoid abridging other's freedoms, but to strive to develop a sense of universal responsibility and concern for all human beings and the natural world in the form of positive virtues of patience, compassion, generosity and non-harm. Although this duty is everyone's responsibility, political institutions and their leaders should reflect these principles, and policy should encourage their inculcation and practice. The emphasis on duties as well as rights follows directly from Buddhism's underlying ontology of no-self and a theory of causation that maintains our lives are not separate but deeply interdependent.

III. Buddhist and Liberal Economics

Buddhist economics differs from liberal models on several important dimensions. Most fundamentally, liberal market economics views the material world as real and permanent and the source of all happiness, and Buddhist economics sees material reality as impermanent and, if treated wisely, the source of lesser happiness and a prerequisite to higher forms of well-being. Liberal economics is concerned with satisfying the needs and wants of the self, and Buddhist economics is a means to assist individuals in transcending the self and controlling the negative emotions underlying our untamed desires through the development of moderation and contentment.

Buddha's approach to economics begins with "right view," understanding the true nature of our existence, and "right livelihood," practicing Buddha's instruction on work, material acquisition and consumption. Once one recognizes the ultimate impermanence and insubstantiality of ourselves and all phenomena, one understands that material things are not the source of true happiness and clinging to them will only perpetuate our suffering. Working with our mind to reduce and eventually eliminate this misperception will diminish and eventually extinguish our suffering, including the suffering arising from grasping at ever more material desires. So, Buddhist economics cannot endorse the mainstream economic view that maximization of production and consumption of material goods and services driven by unbridled individual desires is the appropriate economic goal. In Buddhist economics, the uncontrolled pursuit of desires leads not only to individual suffering, but it also promotes ill-will, inequality and environmental degradation, not the maximization of societal well-being. The goal of Buddhist economics is to provide material security and economic stability for individuals and society and sustainable growth. Fulfillment of basic needs and pursuit of material comfort and wealth are encouraged for laypeople. In Buddhism, the acquisition of material goods is a necessary means of satisfying basic needs and securing the resources essential to pursuing and fulfilling a different vision of well-being that at its pinnacle is spiritual, not material.

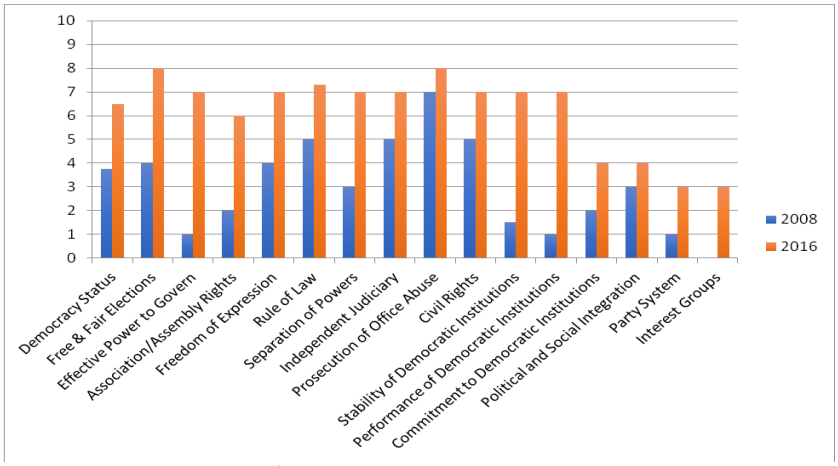
Both individuals and the state have a duty to protect and promote the welfare of all citizens. Poverty is the primary threat to individual and societal advancement and providing sufficiency in the four material requisites (food, clothing, shelter and health care) for all is the first purpose of a political-economic system. Beyond this baseline, however, Buddha suggests that policies should be designed to provide for other social needs such as education, time with family and friends, participation in a community and meaningful work. Because Buddhism sees our highest goal as spiritual attainment through moral virtue, mental concentration and the development of wisdom, the economy's ultimate purpose is *not* to provide enlightenment or happiness—that is the individual's responsibility—but instead to provide the conditions conducive for individuals to satisfy their higher aspirations for meaning by helping them meet their material needs. The state must also prevent economic injustice, eliminate corruption and protect the environment and consumers from exploitation. Buddha encouraged productive work and saw employment as essential to meeting both our material and

moral needs. Buddha recommended the acquisition of wealth and material prosperity through industry, frugality, entrepreneurship and resourcefulness, but he also advocated for values such as concern and care for others, non-harm, generosity and, eventually, non-attachment to wealth given its impermanence and inability to provide lasting happiness. Finally, for Buddhists, it follows that increasing output and consumption is not necessarily an accurate measure of improvements in the well-being of society or its members. Measuring societal well-being as synonymous with expansion of GDP is flawed and must be replaced with more holistic metrics that consider a much broader range of factors important to human flourishing and that consider the quality and sustainability of growth. Like Buddha's thoughts on politics, his economic teachings do not mandate a single economic system but are broadly compatible with a mixed market economy.

IV. The Reflection of Buddha's Social Teachings in Bhutan's Democracy and Economy

Two decades ago, Bhutan opened to the outside world and created a mixed market economy directed toward the pursuit of greater Gross National Happiness (GNH) for its citizens, not merely an expansion of Gross National Product (GNP). A mere ten years ago, Bhutan underwent a political transformation: transitioning from a monarchy to a constitutional democracy. Bhutan has quickly transitioned from an essentially authoritarian system of government to a recognizable democracy with uniquely Buddhist and Bhutanese features. Below, is brief snapshot of Bhutan's progress to date. Politically, the legal and institutional basis for democracy has taken root in Bhutan. Most state institutions associated with democratic governance are performing well, especially the Parliament, Judiciary and independent constitutional agencies. Non-state actors such as the press, civil society organizations and political parties which are also critical to democracy, are at an early stage of development and may need to increase their capacities to play a significant role in Bhutan in coming years. A statistical comparison illustrates the overall progress that Bhutan has made in transitioning to democracy and, as they say, saves a thousand words. Graph #1 reflects Bhutan's aggregated transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system of government as well as Bhutan's performance across 15 specific variables related to particular elements of democratic consolidation. Recognizing that no one sure method measures democracy and democratization, the graph below gives a credible landscape view of the process.

Graph #1. Bhutan's Transition to Democracy 2008, 2016.



Source: BTI, 2008, 2016.[1]

While Bhutan's democracy is far from perfect or as well rooted as many older democracies, in ten short years it has made remarkable strides in transitioning into a functioning democracy.

The ultimate goal of government in Bhutan is the equitable and beneficial management and development of outer circumstance that promotes a conscious inner search for happiness. Democracy is considered best means for that end, if designed with care to avoid the concentration of power and the effects of avarice while promoting civic virtues. The Bhutanese political system and its constitution share many similarities with those found in the West. It has a constitutional democracy and a parliamentary system, with the monarchy representing the state and retaining some political powers. Among the chief similarities with Western constitutional democracies are characteristics such as separation of powers into legislative, executive and judicial functions; independence of Constitutional officers; rule of law and judicial independence; legal protection of individual rights; provisions for civil society and political parties and regular popular elections. Bhutan's democracy differs from most in the West in its explicit normative content. Its constitution articulates the values and goals of the GNH state to include: equity, fairness, compassion, justice, peace, environmental sustainability, the guarantee of health care and education, and cultural and spiritual fulfilment. While these values are compatible with Western values, they are of a distinctive Buddhist origin. Because of the Buddhist belief that happiness lies in mastery of the mind by the individual, public policies must not institutionalize ignorance, delusions such as greed, hatred and aggression.

[1] The data are taken from two detailed longitudinal studies in the Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI), which analyze and evaluate, on a ten-point scale, to what extent 129 developing countries are steering social change toward democracy. Available online at http://www.bti-project.org/en/index/

While Bhutan's democracy is far from perfect or as well rooted as many older democracies, in ten short years it has made remarkable strides in transitioning into a functioning democracy. In the economic realm, Bhutan's pursuit of Gross National Happiness through a more open, mixed market economy has been remarkably successful. Across many domains of gross national happiness—standard of living, education and health—Bhutan has made significant progress and has done so with policies consistent with Buddhist principles that emphasize equality, poverty eradication, full employment, provision of essential human needs and protection of the natural environment. For example, gross national income per capita in purchasing power parity terms increased from US $3591 in 2000 to US $7176 in 2014; poverty levels fell from 23.2% in 2007 to 12.7% in 2012; expected years of schooling for children entering school increased from 7.6 years in 2000 to 12.6 years in 2014; and, life expectancy rose from 52.4 years to 69.5 years during that period (UNDP, 2015). Despite rapid growth, Bhutan remains carbon negative and over 72% of the country's land area is covered in natural forests (up from 66% in 2000) (UNFAO, 2016). The World Bank Survey of Bhutan concluded, "The Kingdom of Bhutan is considered a development success story with decreasing poverty and improvements in human development indicators" (World Bank, 2016). Reflecting these trends, the GNH Survey reported that overall national happiness was measurably if modestly on the rise in Bhutan from 2010 to 2015. The GNH Happiness Index for the population increased nearly 2% when all domains were accounted for equally.

V. Can the Bhutanese Model of Democracy and Development Endure?

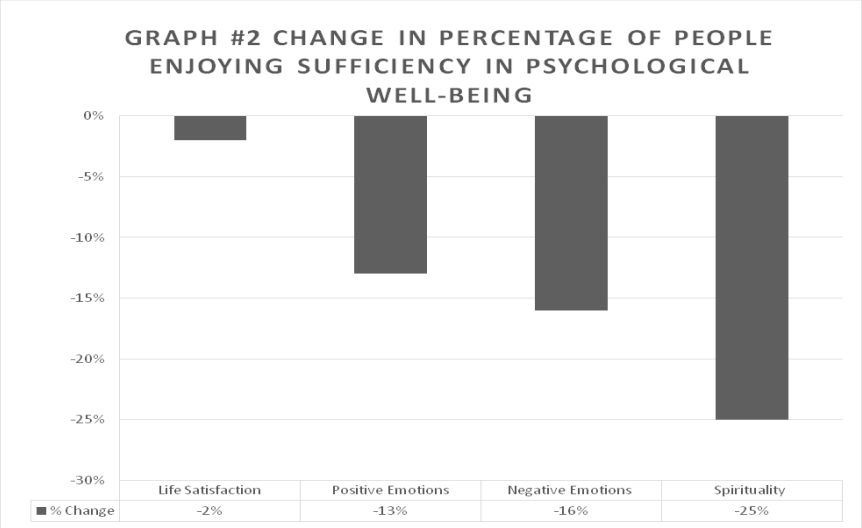
Bhutan is not Shangri-la, it is a real place with real people who have real problems. Among the immediate issues facing the country are political challenges such as maintaining citizen participation in the democratic process; strengthening political parties without creating undue political fragmentation, polarization or corruption; and avoiding elite capture of the democratic process by an educated or urban subset of the population. In the economic sphere, Bhutan confronts the challenges of youth unemployment and drug use; unbalanced economic development between regions of the country and within sectors of the economy; high poverty levels in rural areas; and a lagging regulatory system in fields like media, bankruptcy and foreign direct investment. In the social sphere, Bhutan is attempting to cope with the stresses of providing social services to a rapidly urbanizing population without slighting the needs of rural majority, expanding tertiary education and guaranteeing equal access to it, strengthening civil society and increasing the representation of women in positions of authority.

In my larger work,[2] I argue that there are three critical challenges facing Bhutan, these are: (1) maintaining its national happiness, in a Buddhist sense, in the face of greater openness to the forces of commercialization and globalization; (2) transferring its long-held beliefs and ethical ideals from the current leadership generation to the

[2] Redacted for purposes of anonymity

next; and, (3) ensuring minority rights while maintaining a sense of national unity so important to a small nation with larger and more powerful neighbors. Here, I highlight the first of those challenges: maintaining spiritual well-being while improving material welfare from greater openness to the forces of globalization.

Despite Bhutan's laudable achievements, there is a shadow over this otherwise sunny picture. The latest 2015 Gross National Happiness Survey shows a significant decline in the country's spiritual wellbeing relative to the first, 2010 Survey. Although Bhutan is better off materially, it is another question to ask whether these changes have made its citizens happier in the Bhutanese Buddhist understanding of the concept of happiness as control over and improvement of one's mind. To explore this question requires an analysis of a subset of the results contained in the 2010 and 2015 GNH surveys—the data in the domain of "Psychological Wellbeing." Despite its Western and secular terminology, "psychological wellbeing" probes the populations' internal state, or happiness in the Buddhist meaning of the term. A more accurate term for this domain would be "quality of mind." If one focuses on the survey measurements that track psychological wellbeing, happiness in the Buddhist meaning of the term, the trend nationally is downward. Bhutan's material and social progress has coincided with a decline in its mental wellbeing and its deeper sense of happiness. During the period 2010 to 2015, the domain of "Psychological Wellbeing" suffered statistically significant declines in the percentage of the population achieving sufficiency in each indicator; Life Satisfaction, Positive Emotions, Spirituality and Freedom from Negative Emotions as seen in Graph #2.



Source: Provisional Findings of the 2015 GNH Survey

Whether this trend will inevitably continue or will stabilize or even reverse itself in response to Bhutan's policy initiatives, is an open but essential question. Bhutan is a

small and improbable country sandwiched between the two largest populations in the world in India and China. In the local vernacular, the Bhutanese describe their state as a "yam between two boulders." Bhutan's existence has always depended on its unique identity and culture, which is overwhelmingly Buddhist. If Bhutan loses its Buddhist values and its spiritual well-being in the process of modernization, there is little left that makes Bhutan and its one million citizens a uniquely sovereign entity.

VI. What Does Bhutanese Buddhist Democracy and Development Counsel the West?

Bhutan is a world apart from large, Western democracies and Bhutan makes no pretention of counseling others on how to govern themselves. Bhutan is pursuing the right form of governance for Bhutan. Still, the Bhutanese case offers a unique approach to democracy and development and may hold lessons for modern democracies struggling with issues of political polarization and distrust of government, economic inequality and environmental sustainability. The concluding section of this article extracts some policy "advice" from Bhutan's model and notes its deeper meaning for social theory generally.

Bhutan's Buddhist economic development policy recommends the following economic principles and priorities within the context of a mixed market economy:

- Guaranteeing the *essential* needs of all individuals in society including food, shelter, health care and education;
- Eliminating poverty and depravation because it is a denial of personal dignity and a source of social instability;
- Reducing unemployment through the promotion of meaningful work for all and ensuring the rights of both employers and employees;
- Protecting property rights and supporting individual initiative while also emphasizing equality and avoiding extreme concentrations of wealth;
- Encouraging generosity and discouraging avarice through public policy; and,
- Protecting the environment and commonweal by fully capturing the social and environmental costs of production.

These guidelines and concerns are not too different from what one might find in some modern welfare state democracies.

In the political realm, Bhutan's *dharmic* democracy can be a basis for reconsidering the requisites for strong democracy and good governance in response to reduced popular participation in politics and eroding confidence in the integrity and efficiency of government. Buddhist democracy stresses the importance of equality of political access and avenues for political participation, not just through voting, but through active dialogue and deliberation in which all voices are heard in the political process. Bhutan, for example, has sought to provide for these opportunities through decentralization and direct democracy as well as allowing formal participation in representative democracy through political parties, elections and civil society. To avoid excluding the voices of ordinary citizens, which is the true meaning of

democracy, Bhutan has vigorously controlled through its laws, regulations and constitutional agencies the influence of money on the electoral process and the possibility that money and special interests could capture governmental institutions.

Dharmic democracy also emphasizes honesty and other virtues as measures of effective and legitimate government. Individual leaders and governmental organizations must uphold and reflect societies' aspirational values. Civic virtues are also part of the Western democratic tradition, but have lost their potency in recent years. Because of its emphasis on virtuous government (not just democracy for its own sake) and its instrumental understanding of politics, Buddhist democracy also underscores the importance of tolerance, civility and pragmatism in the *practice* of politics because politics is not the realm for pursuing ultimate truths. Buddhist social theory stresses the importance of seeking practical, non-doctrinaire solutions to contemporary political and social challenges. Politics is a means, not an end.

Relatedly, and perhaps most importantly, *dharmic* democracy underscores an individuals' social obligations and responsibilities for "others," not just the exercise of individual freedoms. Buddha's social formula gives greater emphasis to the duty of care we owe each other and our natural and social environments and points to a need to consciously weigh the balance between the independence and the interdependence of individuals in society.

At a deeper level, Bhutan's democracy and development model represents more than just an approach to governing that cautions about the possible excesses of political and economic liberalism. Buddhist philosophy, social theory and its expression in present day Bhutan also present an opportunity to rethink the deepest assumptions of Western social theory and practice by offering a different way of viewing ourselves, others and our relationship with our social and natural environments. This approach entails a fundamental reorientation of our perceptions, thoughts, emotions and actions that constitute a "revolutionary" understanding of reality, human nature, politics and economics. Unlike most revolutions, however, this one occurs not on the streets so much as within one's own mind.

A Buddhist social paradigm begins with the "truth" of the essential interdependence and impermanence of all reality, including ourselves (the no-self). It asserts a radical interdependence between individuals and between humans and their social and natural environments.The Buddhist ontology of interdependence, impermanence and no-self leads to a different starting point for the social/political/economic world and individual well-being. Whereas, the classical Western ontology is the underpinning for a politics of separateness and fear, captured most artfully in the work of Thomas Hobbes and tacitly accepted by all contractarian social theorists and an economics of perpetual growth in output and consumption driven by competition as first explained by Adam Smith, Buddhist ontology is the basis for a politics and economics of interdependence and, ultimately, what Buddhists call "fearlessness," that is, caring equally for others' welfare. The latter connotes that ultimately individuals have the potential of overcoming perceived duality and accepting the creative possibilities and moral responsibility of open-ended impermanence and interdependence.

According to Buddha, one's nature, when realized through training the mind, makes equanimity, unselfishness and cooperation our natural, underlying social disposition. Our political and economic systems should, therefore, reflect and support individuals in recognizing this fundamental truth. Because, in Buddhism, political and economic systems necessarily reflect the mentality of the individuals within them, the core of the work needed to recognize this more cooperative alternative is self-transformation, but government, society and markets can structure themselves consistent with this fundamental wisdom to provide supportive environments for the attainment of humans' true nature and lasting happiness.

In sum, Bhutan's Buddhist approach to politics and economics can be viewed as presenting us not with just additional policy options for our existing social paradigms, but a wholly different set of assumptions about oneself and one's relationship to others and all things. Buddhism recommends political and economic institutions and policies that comport with an ultimate ontological truth of interdependence and the ethical responsibilities a trainable mind entails. Einstein reminds us: "no problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it." A Buddhist approach to today's political and economic problems represents its deepest level an ancient, yet innovative, way of thinking about our social and natural worlds, our ethical responsibilities, and "ourselves." It is an approach that imposes greater responsibilities, but also promises greater rewards.

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