

**The Buddhist Truth of Happiness  
Spirituality<sup>1</sup> and Development - the case of governance in  
Bhutan<sup>2</sup>**

*Diederik Prakke\**

**A telling anecdote**

‘Although my father is highly educated, he is very religious’. I hold this as a key quote from a young Bhutanese since I first visited Bhutan back in 1990. ‘Although my father is highly educated, he is very religious’. It’s concise and powerful like a mantra. The word *although* indicates that it is self-evident to the speaker that education and spirituality are opposites. His father knows about the universal law of gravity, but in meditation still magically pretends that he can learn to fly. Daddy has switched the light of logic on, but still reserves some dark corners to cherish a superstitious belief. The speaker seems embarrassed that education didn’t cure his father’s spiritual obsession. Or would he be proud that his father combines tradition and modernity? Possibly he secretly even adores that his daddy despises ‘Western indoctrination’, even though he masters the Western way of thinking.

In any case, the quote makes clear that modern life is not necessarily experienced as fundamentally spiritual, as it was in all traditional societies. In this paper I re-explore the *possibility and potential of creating spirituality-inspired*

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*societies*, that however build on the irreversible achievements of modernisation. I am struck how in Western Europe we attempt to be neutral in terms of religion (over-aware of the past wrongs of colonialism and aggressive conversion) and therefore are silent, in our professional life, about what really inspires us. We take out the heart of the working place. This approach employs and addresses mainly the brain, paying less attention to the body and the soul, and is therefore not spiritual (which is about joining body, speech and mind). Thus our approach is actually *everything but* neutral, but spreads a materialistic worldview, that has become the dominant, impoverished global paradigm of our world today.

And I am frustrated to see (after I personally stumbled across Buddhism and was taken by surprise by its profundity) how most Bhutanese have no clue about the jewel they hold in the palm of their hands. I can accept that people choose to disregard spirituality, setting other priorities in their lives. But I feel thwarted that a clumsy and shallow presentation of Buddhism puts off open-minded Bhutanese who are actually in search of the very inspiration, meaning and fulfilment that Buddhism can help you find<sup>3</sup>.

#### **Contents of this paper**

I hope this paper serves a dual (not dualistic) purpose:

1. In general: To promote that people take genuine spirituality as the basis, path and purpose of development, rather than as a 'specialism' to be protected, conserved, ignored or disposed of.
2. In particular: To support a profound and unleashed Buddhist approach to governance in Bhutan. While in line with the deeper nature and aspirations of Bhutan, I believe this vision nonetheless differs in crucial respects from practice until date.

So this paper is about the potential relevance of spirituality to development, and how this differs from the presently

dominant global business and governance culture. In order to bring this about, I first highlight the way my view differs from the general direction and background of the GNH debate so far. I write the present document so that the reader can consider new perspectives, rather than proof myself right. I therefore provide limited evidence and both present the 'hard core' of my argument as well as 'side issues' that, if demonstrated wrong, would not undermine the central thesis of my discourse.

Next I finger-paint what spirituality is about and then discuss why I bring in particular Buddhism into the debate, at least for the case of Bhutan. To apply my view of spirituality I focus on a particular country, because I do not believe there is a 'one-size-fits-all' blue print to put spirituality centre-stage globally. I zoom in on Bhutan, because I believe this country has a vital and unique potential (and therefore a duty) in expounding this vision. I discuss the developmental challenges of Bhutan, as I see them. In meeting these challenges I envision a key function for spiritual paths (whether these be religious or secular) that give life meaning and purpose. I discuss how Buddhism may be a key to balanced development, rather than an awkward 'thingy' or some excess baggage being dragged along from the past. I conclude this paper with some proposals or dreams for applications. I brainstorm about what others and I can do in the coming years to enhance joy, liberation and wisdom in Bhutan.

#### **The way my view differs**

My conviction that Buddhism (or other traditions addressing the spiritual level) should be central to the GNH debate differentiates my paper from most contributions at the 2003 Seminar in Bhutan. In the mean time the 2005 Conference in Canada has taken a tremendous leap forward in acknowledging (and expressing) the central role of spirituality. This recognition should be further consolidated (and its implications carried through) to let the GNH discourse contribute true alternatives to what is currently mainstream

development. Below I highlight differences between the first international conference and my own vision, noting that the rerouting I advocate is in many respects in progress<sup>4</sup>.

1. A large number of early contributions<sup>5</sup> focussed on (pseudo-) *scientifically measuring GNH*, by putting it into a (single) formula. If done too quickly and mechanically, this quantifying approach trims GNH down into an amalgamation of statistical hocus-pocus, cutting off the possibility of any real re-orientation, thus strangling any chance of true transformation. Hastily limiting GNH-*ing* into an amateur counting exercise risks to entirely lose what I find refreshing and inspiring about the concept.

I do see the need to quantify individual aspects beyond the GDP, as focussed information forces policy-makers to wake up to facts they traditionally turn a blind eye on. Yet simple-minded abracadabra lures you into falling asleep, relying on an autopilot with a disturbing track record. Fortunately the Canadian Conference has meanwhile convincingly bypassed and shut the door to such short-sighted quick fixes. Nevertheless the *larger* challenge ahead of us remains to allow the spiritual dimension in work and governance on its own terms. If done skilfully and properly this would prove to even the most hardcore sceptics that spirituality in a true sense is neither arbitrary, nor wishy washy or impractical. It is in this area that I focus my contribution.

2. That summons me to share a first hint of what I believe 'doing things spiritually' means in practical terms. It isn't a matter of throwing the boring accounts and singing hallelujah all day long in an empty office. It means two things to me: That we see and approach each other and the world as essentially spiritual, rather than as *brains* and *matter* respectively. That implies the same result-orientedness and fun we hopefully already have, but adds a profound sense of connectedness. And secondly it means that we employ and

train our intuition just as much as we currently engage and develop our intellect.

We will discover that the heart is indeed subjective (in the sense that its observations appear in our heart), but that its messages are in no way arbitrary. Currently most societies deny or underestimate how decisive a role intuition plays. By not developing the heart, most people do not systematically separate between genuine observation and projection, between accurate sensing and mental garbage (which is a twisted replay of past experiences of the observer, rather than a reflection of qualities of the observed). Paradoxically the end result of this situation is that subconscious prejudices secretly continue to dominate our decisions and behaviour, without ever being disciplined or checked.

3. Another chunk of 2003 papers discussed *subjective self-assessments of happiness*. By emphasising the subjectivity of fleeting emotions such papers seem to suggest that there is nothing objective and value-free about inner psychological and spiritual development. And self-assessment data give you nice details on the moods of the day in society (something populist politicians have a sense for already), but non on your target. Taking subjective self-assessment data as the basis of GNH policy-making is like driving a car merely by looking in the rear-view mirror. You adjust your course based on the volume and duration of applause, rather than on progress towards your aim. Even in democratic institutions a true leader is not the one who follows public opinion blindfolded, but a person who influences it in the direction of her Vision<sup>6</sup>. ‘Satisfaction’ is nice-to-know information to assess your room-for-manoeuvre, but it doesn’t make daring choices about the society you want to help create.

To my understanding it is crucial to recognise and acknowledge that lasting happiness is rooted in a foundation that can be nurtured, and that is in no way shaken by the craze of the day. And I am not saying that happiness-research

data are irrelevant to 'spiritual policy-making', but I point out that such information cannot replace a vision.

4. Until the 2005 Conference there was little consistency between the various *environmental* best practices, *economic* and *cultural* reflections and innovations in *good governance* that made their way into the GNH debate. Though happy about such initiatives, I feared that they would completely scatter the discourse and 'hijack' the GNH-brand. As ransom the hijackers would require Mrs. GNH to learn Old Speak and worry away about everything that everybody else already worries about. After all, the most effective way to shipwreck a refreshing idea is not even to fight or ignore it, but to 'integrate' it into a misty multitude of vague and rusty ones. Be sure this would drown the GNH discourse in an underwater jungle, at best to be remembered with a pitying smile by a bunch of hardcore hippies. Even the most creative collection of brainwaves will not get mainstreamed into a comprehensive, undeniable and authoritative body of knowledge, unless there is a red thread through the heap of chops. And what do I propose to make that binding force? Of course I advocate as red thread that all contributions should have a vital spiritual dimension - which absolutely does not require that the GNH-debate should be orchestrated by any institutionalised religion<sup>7</sup>.

5. Until and inclusive the 2005 Conference *trendy concepts* like constitutional (multi-party, one-man-one-vote) democracy, decentralisation, (blindfolded, rule-based, professionalised) uniform justice, secular public administration, individual free choice, and free-market competition were hardly questioned and by implication accepted as *inherently universal ideals*<sup>8</sup>. They were (as customary) assumed to be by default superior ideologies, rather than simply potent strategies (which is the way I look at them). They were inferred to be inevitable and value-free principles, rather than valuable options that come in useful in certain cases. And they were regarded as untouchable

truths, rather than as factors to be weighed and balanced against other legitimate concerns.

At the risk of being deemed an ultra-conservative I like to make a strong appeal to carefully reflect whether (or at least when) such concepts are truly applicable. Whereas a therapist should fundamentally make his client heal himself, a surgeon should not take that approach. Similarly I believe doing justice is assisting parties to reconcile, rather than letting them throw dirt at each other. I hope to meet a friendly, inspiring human being at the counter in my municipality building, rather than a neutral robot. I value a mortgage advisor who assists me to choose my own bank, but I don't want my doctor to leave it to me to diagnose my disease and to pick the appropriate medicine. When you buy a car you're damn right to look at the price, but I trust you don't select your wife through public tender. In short: Let us ponder if our choices still make sense or if we are afflicted by an overdose of decentralisation fever, freedom myth, participation dogma, democracy hallucination, equality paranoia or regulation illusion<sup>9</sup>. For Bhutan such reflection seems particularly opportune as that country is in the process of adopting a Constitution, and the draft Constitution may not be entirely compatible with Buddhism<sup>10</sup>.

6. Some (but not all) papers that mention *Buddhism* refer to it as *cultural glue to mould a strong society*. In this perspective Buddhism is a means to make people accord to the establishment, rather than (as I prefer to conceive of it) as a tool for personal and social liberation and transformation.

7. At the same time most GNH-papers with a Buddhist slant approach *Buddhism merely as a philosophical and moral system* with do-it-yourself recipes for life. Morality and ethics are indeed included in the lower teachings of Buddhism, but I do not see that as the part with most immediate relevance to (Bhutan's) challenges. I believe many societies are longing for

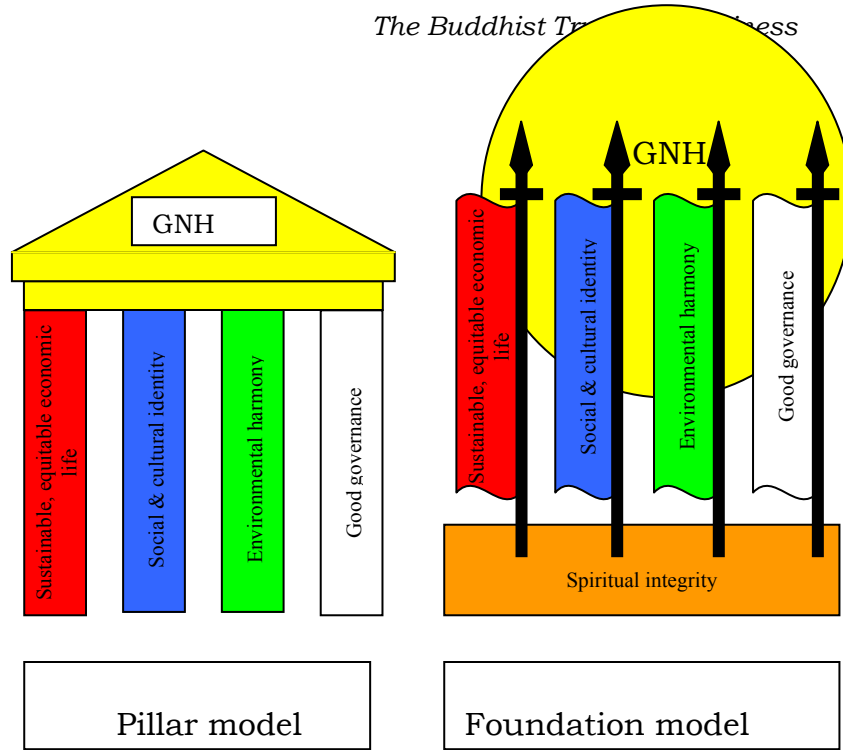
inspiration, insight, meaning and love that Buddhism is able to satisfy.

8. Many papers implicitly or explicitly refer to *culture and religion as a specific sector to be preserved*. In this view culture is a soft-sector next to e.g. health, agriculture or trade. I allot religion a much larger role, as the inspiration, the foundation, path and purpose of development. In my view spirituality can and should be taken as the foundation rather than as a segment of society. I'm not interested in just facilitating that monasteries and festivals are maintained, but that there is vision, inspiration and heart behind what people do. Besides, as I discuss later, the very intention to 'preserve' a living tradition kills and mummifies its life force<sup>11</sup>.

9. And most papers that focus on Buddhism refrain from applying this philosophy to the actual current society, but focus only on *personal spiritual development*. They refrain from expressing a humble, honest personal perception of what is positive and (especially of what is) negative in society, and coming up with recommendations to public or private actors. The 'Buddhist' papers deal rather with individual salvation than with creating enlightened society.

10. And finally, in looking at society, previous contributors have *avoided the sharp points*. They have stated quite a lot of what is awe-inspiring and tremendously good in Bhutan, but have not added the fundamental pains and sorrows of that country as well. In my view it is vital to fully acknowledge and touch the shadow that each person and nation has, simply because it is inseparable from the sunny-side, and because liberation can only be achieved by embracing one's shadow. I try to do this in a way that opens rather than closes hearts on all sides of the dividing lines. And I try to be neither arrogant nor aggressive, but begin to speak straight, simple, fearless, frank and without mothering or excuse.





In the section ‘Challenge of Bhutan’ I elaborate further on what I see as the shadow of Bhutan, but at this point it seems obligatory to note that it includes what is popularly referred to as ‘the Southern Bhutanese problem’<sup>12</sup>. Without belittling this problem in any way, I should say that I personally regard it as ‘only’ a (dramatic) manifestation of an integral but problematic aspect of Bhutanese society, which also surfaces through other tensions and challenges. The reason why I name this particular issue here is that I believe this subject has led to most tension and misunderstanding between ethnic Bhutanese and other people in this world<sup>13</sup>. Exploring ‘the Southern problem’ usually creates ‘cat-and-mouse’ dynamics in which one party accuses the others, and the defendant denies, ignores or indulges in counterattack. I hope to contribute to the healing of this very open wound within and outside Bhutan, by touching it in a way and at a forum where it is obvious and tangible to all parties that I

want nothing but good, and uphold a deep connection to Bhutan.

In analytical terms my most fundamental recommendation is to take spirituality as the foundation of the GNH discourse, rather than as a sector (as part of culture - see illustration<sup>14</sup>). The 'ReThinking' conference, based on Lyönpo Jigme Thinley's pivotal paper, took culture (presumably including spirituality) merely as a pillar of GNH<sup>15</sup>. The pillar model simultaneously over-estimates and under-estimates spirituality. It underrates spirituality in the sense that in truth it isn't just another area next to trade and agriculture. Spirituality is more than that, because it is the foundation of all enlightened action. And the pillar model overvalues spirituality in the sense that that model assigns it a 'private' domain. In many ways it is correct to only cherish spirituality as far as it leads to practical compassionate action. Religion isn't anything in itself unless it bears fruits in other areas of a person's life.

The second conference made the step from merely reflecting on what GNH may mean, to practising it. In this sense the 'ReThinking Development' conference joined heaven and earth, and went beyond dreaming about heaven alone. With this paper, however, I call people to regularly take a step aside while taking this forward leap. I do not want to be an obstacle to actually *doing* something, but I do want to keep the question alive *where* (and *how*) we are going. If we forget that, we might as well continue the good old common road to development (and/or to an environmental holocaust).

Or, to put it more bluntly: I am by far more afraid that the GNH discourse will become too instrumental than that it will stay *too vague and unpractical*. I am more afraid and alert of a debate that throws about facts and figures to conceal the absence of a View or the confidence to express it. The debate will not become vague if spirituality is powerfully pronounced as the foundation. On the contrary, the debate may become

vague if it continues beating around the bush in terms of spirituality. Then the discourse falls back to swimming on dry land, increasing the urge and neurosis that it should show tangible, measurable results to be taken serious by the 'real' world. If we don't dare to connect to the spiritual stream that is always present in society... *then* we might indeed continue wasting lots of time, hibernating on statistics in the outskirts of the 'real' world. So let's be proud and humble in declaring that GNH is about creating an enlightened society on (in the case of Bhutan) the foundation of Buddhism.

	Observed in other papers	The shift this paper advocates
GNH is about	Measuring more than money	Taking spirituality at it own terms
GNH should gather	Innovations in huge fields	... if rooted in spirituality
Happiness is	A subjective experience	Being in accord with the truth
Advance GNH by	Using self-assessment data	Making daring choices
Western values are	Universal ideals	Potent & applicable in many cases
Buddhism is	A glue to maintain society	A tool to liberate
Buddhism offers	A moral system	Inspiration, insight, meaning & love
Culture is about	Imposing a binding factor	Multiple roads to the soul
Spirituality is	A (sub-) sector	The foundation, path and purpose
Use spirituality to	Reflect on individuals	Reflect on individuals and society
In Bhutan reflections	Avoid sharp points	Integrate shadow with love
Debate should now	Share practical paths	Keep questioning what we aim for
Debate should	Engage and train the brain	... as well as the heart
Discourse risk	Being unworldly	Cowardice, not daring to radiate

### **Spirituality and development**

As stated above the current dominant worldview is deeply non-spiritual – so much so that few of us have any clue at all of how profoundly different (yet more practical, accurate and effective) a mystical vision would be. Our materialistic outlook is unique in history, while we mistakenly take it to be self-evident and imperative. Below I like to finger-paint what the world may look like if we redevelop (but now knowingly) what is called a ‘sacred outlook’. I will attempt to sketch how radically different we may perceive and therefore relate to reality. Or, to put it differently, I will point out how little actual reality there is to the mental constructions that we normally *call* reality<sup>16</sup>. Unless we open our minds and allow ourselves to reconnect to a larger and livelier picture, we will remain, to put it in the words of a Buddhist master, oblivious of the ‘cosmic orgasm’ going on all around us. We miss so much of what makes life worth living, also missing out on that what can make our actions powerful, accurate and dignified.

So first (before discussing what to do about it) the challenge to sketch what perceptions we cut ourselves off from. I love one of the scenes of the Monty Python movie ‘The Meaning of Life’. An upper-class British gathering is conversing over high tea, when Death enters the room. He tells them that they will all die in minutes, but they do not see him and only vaguely catch his message. After a moment of disorientation, the get-together starts chattering about the subject of death. They discuss how absolutely impossible and imprudent it would be to die just now, and joke how absurdly inappropriate it would be. Who would do the dishes, and take their poodle out for a stroll?

Death warns again, and the party keeps on ignoring the reality of it. Then Death takes them away, and they turn into shadows. But the most brilliant (astounding) feature of the movie is that they just keep on yapping away! Really, they are so completely self-absorbed, immune and cut off of *actual* reality, that they even manage to miss their very own death! It is both hilarious and outrageous.

What this story aims to hint at is how the facts and figures we normally cast our minds on are but drops in the ocean. The bigger picture is spiritual: unknowing and absence of control. It's not so much that our mental constructions and reasonings are faulty - but they acknowledge only a tiny slice of reality. So let's keep on making development policies, strategies, and plans and define objectively verifiable indicators. But in the mean time let's not forget that these efforts only perform a supporting role in a much, much larger play.

We may collect poststamps, watch football and follow the Dow Jones, but there's something cooking behind all that. To 'be spiritual' we don't need to stick to limiting dogma's, lull ourselves to sleep with reassuring illusions, throw ourselves undignified at the feet of a master, swim with dolphins, or half-close our eyes to seem holy. But we can humbly and simply open up to a much bigger sense of surprise and appreciation, acknowledging that institutionalised religion is just one possibility to be spiritual. What I'm trying to say is that we all deserve to experience ourselves as partaking in a dance that extends so much beyond the minutes of our weekly meeting, beyond our laptop screen or what have you.

In our society we are shy to see and proclaim that we are embedded in a spiritual context. In trying to conform to the 'no-nonsense' norm, we withhold *ourselves* a deeper sense of connection. We limit ourselves to a materialistic worldview. This, however, also has a bearing on what we do, and on the decisions we take. In other words, materialism has a *social* impact as well, next to the purely *individual* consequences.

#### **Two examples of short-sighted decisions**

I was perplexed to understand that in France symbols of religion are now forbidden in schools and public offices. That seems like throwing away your child with the dirty bath water. The French wanted to promote Muslim integration and fight gender suppression in the name of Islam, but apparently

found a truly targeted intervention too confrontational. That would imply explicitly having a value system, a conviction you stand for. So the Western solution is to take the whole heart out, not only the cancer. However, I believe we can only offer true tolerance and freedom of faith and religion, if we embrace our own belief without embarrassment, if we have one. In the name of religion horrendous crimes have been committed, but this has not stained or contaminated the heart of the human longing to dedicate himself to that what is good.

Another example of decision-making from too narrow a perspective comes from my own country. Our current immigration policy compels second generation immigrants to choose to maintain only one nationality. I see such a rule as a sign of being disconnected from reality, from actual psychological and spirituality reality. There may be valid arguments to take a stronger stand to limit asylum seeking, and I am not against implementing tough and unpopular measures as such. Yet this denies that people can only become whole by integrating the background they come from. A person can only be truly Dutch, if he also values his non-Dutch roots. Likewise a person can only be truly unbiased and beyond sectarian favouritism in the spiritual realm, if he connects to the tradition (or individual path) written in his destiny. Not seeing such 'hidden' truths is a dust particle of proof that the life force in our society is in ashes (ashes from which luckily new life is designed to appear).

Reflecting on examples of short-sighted decisions that result from not recognising reality (see box<sup>17</sup>) I conclude that the Western split between life (and more in particular work) and spirituality is unfortunate, if not catastrophic. Of course people are free not to have a connection with any religion or meaning-giving dimension at all, but people who do should be encouraged (and at least feel free) to engage that inspiration in their life and work. If you take the 'spiritual' dimension away, what remains is intellectual speculation and materialism. In trying not to impose any philosophy, development co-operation and science currently preach that the material world is all there is. You may separate state and church, but you shouldn't separate work and spirituality.

Until this point I indicated how spirituality is the larger picture, and how this view may yield more comprehensive and wise decisions. That is a somewhat ephemeral and far-fetched argument to pay attention to spirituality (it is indeed an example of spiritual reasoning itself). But there are also more mundane, obvious and socially pressing reasons to pay attention to spirituality. One of them is its potential to address the frustration and despair expressed in terrorism, crime and social disintegration. People turn to destructive conduct only if they can't find meaning and a dignified position in society. They turn to radical deeds in a desperate attempt to escape from the sense of futility and deathlike evenness that comes from having no self-respect or hope to climb the social ladder. The hardest terrorists are people whose material situation is bearable, but who have no sense of dignity and purpose. People scarred by childhood sorrows and a deprivation of love, care and meaning. People without access to 'the American dream', who are doomed to stay second or third rank world citizens regardless of what they do.

And those who cause most social problems long for meaning most. The more sensitive a person is<sup>18</sup>, or the more desperate a person's perspective, the larger the chance that he turns to drugs or crime. Of course I won't suggest that establishing churches and temples is the fast track to halt crime and terrorism. But I do see an increasing need for positive identity and meaning in a world that seems to be merging into a uniform global village. Whereas superficially religion seems at the root of many conflicts, I believe spirituality has much more potential to healing them. I dare say that fundamentally the challenge of our century is a spiritual challenge. It is a challenge of meaning, identity, and connectedness. Accepting spirituality as the central challenge does not mean we have to run into the slums and back streets of this world with a Bible, Koran or Buddha statue in our hands. But it does

imply that we identify with people on all sides of the divides we have created in this world, as spiritual beings.

We are not just *allowed* to integrate spirituality back into our lives, we *simply cannot afford not to* do it. The very idea of separation at the level of the individual is based on a misunderstanding. Since a few decades there is global support for the idea that basic education is a fundamental human right. Nowadays *not* sending your children to school is much more criticised than imposing over a decade of intensive indoctrination ('Dumbing them down' as John Taylor Gatto calls it). How different do we look at spirituality and religious upbringing! When I tell friends about the traditional Tibetan way to raise a Tulku (a person recognised as reincarnation of a realised teacher), they're likely to be disapproving how that system of tutoring 'imposes choices on the child'. And sceptical of the actuality that this method has proven to produce incredible wisdom, social engagement and inner freedom.

I do not particularly wish to idealise East over West (or tradition over modernity), but I do like to point at contemporary biases that have become so common and dominant that we fail to notice their relativity. Whereas we are (luckily) wary of religious fanaticism, we seem insensitive to the much more disastrous results of materialism. Should we not regard spiritual integrity at least as much as a fundamental human right (and parental duty) as basic education?

### **Why Buddhism?**

Above I have advocated revaluing religion. But why zoom in on Buddhism in particular and why connect it to the GNH debate? Buddhism has much to say (and even more to offer in terms of experience to those who practice it) about happiness. It says that knowing and living the truth, *is* true happiness. The happiness that Buddhism seeks does not depend on the subjective and passing experience of psychological ups and



downs (as measured in self-assessment research on happiness). In final instance it also doesn't look at outer phenomena (such as economic growth, environmental protection, or education levels) to assess development. Buddhism looks at the spiritual development of people and society, expressed as wisdom and love<sup>19</sup>, which is an absolutely objective fact, even though it occurs inside people and may therefore not be unambiguously perceptible to the untrained eye.

So I bring in Buddhism because it points at truth, *the* truth, which is at the same time the basis for true and stable happiness. We often talk of 'Buddhist' truth, but actually truth is merely truth, regardless of the denomination of the path you walked to find it. So that's why I put 'Buddhist' in the title of this paper in quotes. You may have come by air to Halifax, but that doesn't make Halifax an aeroplane. You may get to see the truth through Buddhism, but the truth itself isn't Buddhist. Just like the law of gravity isn't a Western truth, the luminous essence of mind is the truth, rather than a Buddhist version of it.

Probably other religions and wisdom traditions point in the same direction, and I focus on Buddhism in first instance simply because it is obviously intimately interrelated with Bhutan. In fact I personally believe that Bhutan's significance to the world at large lies in its Buddhist heritage and tradition.<sup>20</sup> As far as I am concerned it's great that Bhutan also houses Hindus, Christians and increasing numbers of non-religious folks, but to the larger world I believe Bhutan's contribution lies in being a Vajrayana Buddhist Kingdom. The country is soaked for centuries in Buddhism, and even those who do not consciously know (or misconceive) its philosophy, are profoundly affected by it.

Buddhism is of interest also because it pre-eminently offers non-religious paths for inner development. More than many other religions, one can study and practice Buddhism without

accepting any dogma. If humanity has secularised and become suspicious of obscure beliefs, Buddhism is a relatively 'well-digestable' way to reconnect to basic spirituality. Whereas Buddhism has at times undoubtedly served to maintain feudal societies and social injustice, it also has an impressive tradition of proclaiming truth in an uncompromising manner. This feature again is of particular interest to Bhutan, where culture and tradition make certain issues hard to debate open-mindedly. When proven to belong to a genuine Buddhist tradition, however, the Bhutanese accept and take pride in their 'crazy wisdom' Saints, who act as 'Fierce Destroyer of Illusion' (a title of a recently deceased Buddhist master who lived for years in Bhutan)<sup>21</sup>.

And last but not least, I bring in Buddhism because I have become a Buddhist. When I first visited Bhutan I loved to see the ceremonies, regarding them as an exotic, animistic and naive relic of the past. Back in the Netherlands I visited some of the many small Buddhist groups, increasingly impressed by their wisdom, which (at least sometimes) went beyond holding on to groovy flower-power hippie dreams. At some point in 1991 I was completely captivated, ashamed and shocked reading a book by the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. His book gave a sharp description of the functioning of the human mind, in which I found all my personal secrets displayed, whereas I had assumed that a Tibetan meditator would only have some sweet and moralistic advice to the backward herdsman in the valley below his cave<sup>22</sup>.

Participating in the second GNH conference was exciting and gratifying for me, as it brought together Bhutan and (Shambhala) Buddhism, which are two key elements of my life. The conference created a ground (or Mandala) that allowed the Bhutanese participants to experience what our world can look like if we take unbiased spirituality as our point of departure. For years in Bhutan I tried in vain to get friends excited about the possibility of a modern spiritual

society, as I intuited it. But attempting to share that heart-vision felt like trying to show a blind friend through a narrow window a distant mountaintop. My vision met with vacant looks and seldom seemed to land. This second GNH conference, however, simply dropped a sizeable bunch of Bhutanese right on that mountaintop. And they visibly enjoyed it, whether or not aware how much deliberate preparation underpinned the natural spontaneity of the conference.

### **Challenge of Bhutan**

Of age Bhutan is a religion-drenched society, yet currently I sense an increasing tension, in which Buddhism often emerges as a conservative force rather than as a transformative boost to development. A better understanding and personal experience of Buddhism may reconcile the artificial contradiction between boldness and brightness of the educated generation on the one hand, and spiritual integrity on the other hand. In fact I believe that embracing Buddhism may be a key medicine to transform the latent tensions present in societies like the nation of Bhutan.

At this very moment, however, many young Bhutanese loose interest in Buddhism, because on the superficial level that they get to see Buddhism ignores the questions of their modern life. You could almost say that an educated Bhutanese who still adheres to old traditions must be kidding himself. If you just see some superstitious rituals and hear sweet moralistic teachings, be honest, how impressed can you truly be? You must be trying to hold on to some illusion of grandeur and nationalistic superiority, if you maintain that *that* is better than anything imported from the West.

Above I claim that Buddhism presents potential solutions, but I haven't discussed to which problems. So let me share some personal perceptions on Bhutan's current assets and challenges, on the understanding that these are impressions and conclusions rather than judgements. My views change over time, and I will not even try to prove myself right. I just

offer the reader food for thought, informing you of how Bhutan comes across to a certain Dutch Buddhist. This particular guy lived in the Himalayan Kingdom for most of the nineteen-nineties, and is still connected to Bhutan through a Bhutanese lady, with whom he cares for their two children.<sup>23</sup>

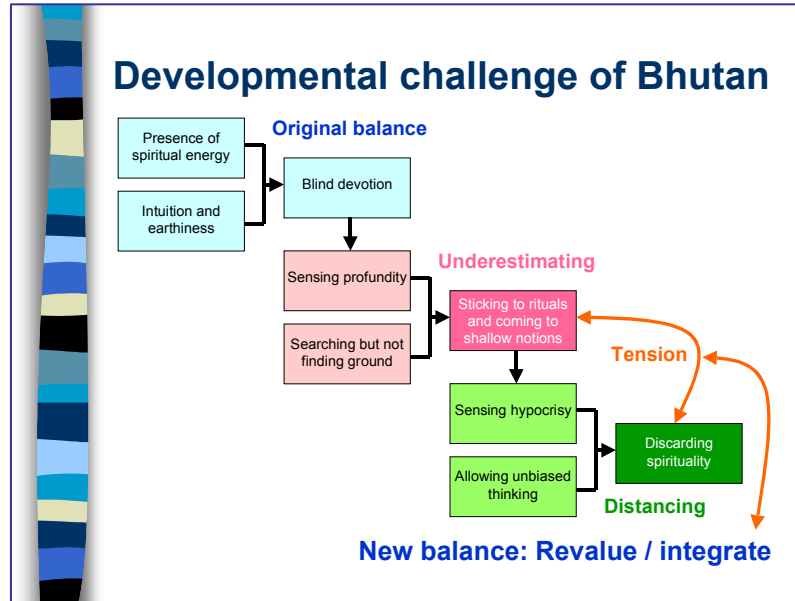
What I see as the key challenge for Bhutan is to overcome its particular way of hierarchically binding people: Children to their parents and subjects to the nation-state. To put it in Vajrayana language: Based on ignorance every society has its own style of torturing and mutilating its children, which is karmically passed down from generation to generation. Of course this happens next to passing down the best of life and love. Or rather than co-emerging: The life force and the poison are intermingled. Today, you can't accept one if you don't accept the other. You don't accept Bhutan if you don't accept its shadow. But you can have an aspiration of purifying, cleansing. In Bhutan children are often seen as property of their parents - both by the parents and by the children themselves. The message of basic goodness and the news of liberation can sink in much deeper. In the future I hope that the care Bhutanese children will give to their ageing parents, and the gratitude citizens will feel towards their rulers, no longer has any trace of obligation, but becomes an act of total freedom.

And then back to Buddhism, which in my view should be spreading just this message. In Bhutan it strikes me how little both laymen (including government servants) and many monks and nuns know about Buddhism. Some of them know quite a bit about the daily rituals and the local natural deities. And many have a deep devotion for their revered incarnate lama's. Although this may be called 'blind-faith', I do not look down at it at all, specially when the devotees are still deeply rooted in Bhutan's traditional rural culture. As a Jesuit Father said about the Bhutanese 'I don't try to convert, because they live in the Holy Spirit'. Or in the words of a Bhutanese lama 'They are so pure in their innocence'.

Buddhism is in its core not an intellectual affair, but a matter of a completely open heart. So this 'blind faith' is congruent with what the Buddhist teachings attempt to help you develop.

Yet for the younger, educated generation it usually doesn't work the same way. People of that generation have developed their intellect, their curiosity. If their questions about Buddhism or their questions about life are not responded to by Buddhism, they are bound to loose interest. To many youngsters Buddhism is no more than a cultural form (see endnote iii). I then feel sorry that they do not enjoy the fruit of a tree so close to them, but actually I do not consider this as a problem. Let them search fulfilment in their lives through other means. Let them watch sports on TV without the illusion that it is something spiritual, or let them practice sports, which can actually lead to spiritual experiences. At least that is no worse than anybody else on this planet wasting his or her life.

I first see a *problem* when young people *search* but cannot find a truly satisfying *purpose* in life, or when people try to conserve Bhutan's Buddhist heritage in an *unskilful*, at times doctrinaire manner. The latter is unfortunately what I see happening, with the best intentions. I see it happening when people actually still sense that there is *something* worth preserving to Buddhism, but when they do not know exactly what it is.



The mechanism seems to work like this. Karma attended primary school and learned to pray, yet intellectually he doesn't know what this is all about. However, he feels connected and inspired and wants his children to experience this too. He feels frustrated because something in Buddhism is dear to him, but he cannot let his enthusiasm spark to his very own children. It's like Karma's children do not long to eat his best medicine, and so he starts trying to shuffle it down their throats. As long as Karma can't explain and prove to his kids what exactly is so great about Buddhism (and he can't as long as he doesn't precisely know for himself), his only option is forcing.

But generally this will be counterproductive, because his children experience him as needlessly intruding. Even if they yield temporarily to his power, Karma's approach sows resistance for the future. The problem is not that the medicine isn't good enough. The problem is that as long as Karma himself doesn't quite know what *exactly* is so good

about it, he can't rouse genuine curiosity. Or compare it to a jacket passed down through generations. If the jacket is too tight, but re-tailoring is not allowed, the next generation will put it aside. This generation will shop for a new jacket, but is in for bad buy as nobody is clear about what exactly wasn't OK about the old coat.

To my perception (and to my dismay) this happens a lot in the area of culture, tradition and Buddhism in Bhutan. The younger generation doesn't automatically adopt old conventions. In response the older generation feels disrespected, and starts pushing for obedience and compliance, using the best arguments they guess may constitute the heart of Buddhism. Yet here blind-faith becomes a problem. Whereas the Buddha ran away from home to achieve liberation from suffering, attachment and untruthfulness, the uneducated interpretation of Buddhism has it that being a good citizen is a matter of doing what you are told to do. In this case the attempt is to use Buddhism to draw people together socially, rather than to liberate them and empower individuals to take their own innate freedom. In short, tradition becomes empty and oppressive, rather than warm, personal and liberating.

In a slightly better case, Buddhism is not misused to make you abide by the rules, but is misrepresented as a self-improvement project. 'Just try a little harder and you will become a Buddha'. Rather than saying that you already possess basic goodness (as Buddhism teaches in truth) the Buddha is then said to accept you if you admit your sins, bow down and try harder to be nice. You are still denied your Kingdom, are still encouraged to become other than who you are already, thus making you prone to disappointment.

And to mention another common misunderstanding: Buddhism is not a love-and-light approach either. Nor does Buddhism propose living a slow motion version of reality, promoting that you glide through this world with half-closed

eyes. In fact tantra is said to go faster, rather than slower, than the desperate chaos of samsara. Much like Freud in the West, it is said in tantric Buddhism that you should 'kill your father', which stands for going your own way, free from the fetters of expectations and reward.

If Buddhism is reduced into an attempt to suffocate and make you predictable<sup>24</sup>, it is no wonder that people start to look elsewhere for fulfilment in their lives (which, as I said before, is not the basic problem). The problem I mentioned comes when modern searchers don't find true happiness elsewhere. Some find another religion and are happy with it: Great. But others try alcohol, drugs, sex or machismo, craving for satisfaction. The most sensitive among them have to take an extra dose, because they see through their own deception, and can't cover up that deep down they know they didn't find it yet. And they have no clue that there is an answer much bigger and much closer to them than they expect. Because to them the Buddhist lama's on their thrones don't seem very near, nor are the moralistic stories of their teachers and parents very appealing<sup>25</sup>. And to me *that* is a problem, an ironic problem. Young boisterous people roaming in a Golden Palace looking for gold (meaning), but finding none because the gold is covered by a thin layer of moralistic narrow-minded 'Buddhist' dust...

The tension I perceive underlying society in Bhutan is not particularly something to be afraid or exceedingly ashamed of. However, its consequences can sometimes be far-reaching (more Buddhist understanding could e.g. have limited and reduced suffering in Southern Bhutan). But according to Buddhism the root cause of suffering is basic unawareness (an unfortunate misunderstanding) rather than original sin. The challenge is to look at it and accept it honestly without deception or denial. In Bhutan this is extra challenging, because people are generally very bonded to their society and government. Even a dispassionate open-ended question can be interpreted as an attack. However, especially if Bhutan



takes the challenge of setting a shining example (which is not the same as setting a 'model') to other societies (which I believe Bhutan should), it is important to address these shadows.

And that brings me to a final possibility that Buddhism may hold for Bhutan. The basic practice of *shiné* (or *shamatha*) meditation is exactly designed to bring about the kind of equanimity that is needed here. *Shiné*, peaceful abiding, is about looking at what goes on in your mind (and in the world) without judgement, but with tremendous curiosity and softness, willing to bear witness and be surprised at any moment. More *shiné* may in the long run make topics that are now highly loaded more readily debatable. Bearing witness in a dispassionate (to the facts) yet loving (to the people) way ultimately heals more than aggressively pressing for acknowledgement and change from the outside.

On my wife I have seen the double blessing the Buddha Dharma stores for the Bhutanese. While for years she took my interest in Buddhism for an escapist cult for frustrated Westerners, at some point she decided to participate in a retreat. She had never doubted being a Buddhist in heart and bones, but wasn't impressed with for example intellectual deliberations about the non-existence of ego. Practising *shiné* meditation for a month(!) she experienced a path to develop her own mind, and at the same time deepened her ties with her own cultural background. So now both of us share this positive frustration/inspiration that most Bhutanese seem to unknowingly crave for a treasure that's right in the palm of their hands. So I sincerely wish Bhutan and the Bhutanese many healing and opening experiences, through Buddhism or any other means at hand.

### **Dreams**

Below I share dreams I have for myself, and dreams I hope may sprout in the minds of Bhutanese (be they in government service or working in the private sector). I used to be afraid to share such thoughts, believing it might be perceived as a

foreigner trying to push an external agenda onto Bhutan. But my experience is that the more roundabout I present my ideas, the more resistance I raise. In that case people sense I have some further ideas which I hold back. That 'secrecy' may raise more suspicion and irritation than the thoughts themselves. So on this note I feel free to brainstorm straightforwardly on what may be done to face the challenges described above.

When our family returns to live in Bhutan probably in a year from now, we will be curious to see whether we can be of help. No stronger: I will be dying to see whether I can reach and benefit anybody with the burning believes that are closest to my heart.

However, some developments that we would love to contribute to are already taking shape. I rejoice very much in the production of the movie 'Travellers and Magicians' cast recently by a boisterous lama (Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche) in Bhutan. And at the ReThinking Conference I was delighted by the movie 'The Words of My Perfect Teacher', which is a movie about him. Moreover, I heard that one of his brothers (Garab Dorji Rinpoche) has established meditation centres in a number of Bhutanese towns where lay-people come to practice, whereas otherwise meditation is often only practised by monks in Bhutan. And at the moment I first drafted this paper I was looking forward to hear how the visit of the Dutch rock group Bløf to Bhutan turned out. I don't know the band well, but have sung a beautiful ballad of theirs in a music school band that I joined some years ago to become more fully alive myself. And that is what the spiritual dimension simply comes down to: Ways and means to help and hearten people to come alive<sup>26</sup>.

Below I summarise some ideas in a table (with some fragmented comments below it). The telegram-style of the table illustrates that it is about dreams rather than about solid plans. Dreams for which I hope to meet with enthusiasm

and further ideas during and after the Conference. If we develop plans that depend on establishing networks (and possibly fund raising), *this is the time* to start preparations.

<p>Brainstorm – Private</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More Travellers, lay-meditation and Bløf</li> <li>• Series at schools and monasteries</li> <li>• Retreats for laymen / government staff</li> <li>• Youth camps</li> <li>• Prison visits with meditation instruction</li> <li>• Practice evenings and Dharma classes</li> <li>• (Private) monastic curricula enrichment</li> <li>• Inter-religious exchange</li> <li>• Songs and poems in training &amp; workshops</li> <li>• Participate in government brainstorm...</li> </ul>	<p>Brainstorm – Public</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekly opening meditation and prayer</li> <li>• Meditation before meetings</li> <li>• Study groups</li> <li>• Workshops on applications</li> <li>• Twist in debate on sensitive issues</li> <li>• Dualistic democratic system?</li> <li>• Nationality law?</li> <li>• Seek more direct guidance from (and dialogue with) Buddhist teachers</li> <li>• School and institute curricula review...</li> </ul>		
<p>Example: Curricula review – What</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current</li> <li>• Experience</li> <li>• Good boys &amp; girls</li> <li>• Eternal values</li> <li>• Happy ever after</li> <li>• Conditionally OK</li> <li>• Asceticism</li> <li>• Power and magic</li> </ul> </td> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future</li> <li>• Experience!</li> <li>• First liberate</li> <li>• Change</li> <li>• Dance</li> <li>• Basic goodness</li> <li>• Middle way</li> <li>• Magic as reality</li> </ul> </td> </tr> </table>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current</li> <li>• Experience</li> <li>• Good boys &amp; girls</li> <li>• Eternal values</li> <li>• Happy ever after</li> <li>• Conditionally OK</li> <li>• Asceticism</li> <li>• Power and magic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future</li> <li>• Experience!</li> <li>• First liberate</li> <li>• Change</li> <li>• Dance</li> <li>• Basic goodness</li> <li>• Middle way</li> <li>• Magic as reality</li> </ul>	<p>Example: Curricula review – How</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation: Decide with whom</li> <li>• Workshops: Decide what to strife for</li> <li>• Woking groups: Develop how</li> <li>• Tests and feedback system</li> <li>• Teachers’ training</li> <li>• Implementation and continuous learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current</li> <li>• Experience</li> <li>• Good boys &amp; girls</li> <li>• Eternal values</li> <li>• Happy ever after</li> <li>• Conditionally OK</li> <li>• Asceticism</li> <li>• Power and magic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future</li> <li>• Experience!</li> <li>• First liberate</li> <li>• Change</li> <li>• Dance</li> <li>• Basic goodness</li> <li>• Middle way</li> <li>• Magic as reality</li> </ul>		

The Upper-left box (‘Brainstorm – Private’) lists ideas of possible activities I may support or undertake personally, or in collaboration with organisations and individuals<sup>27</sup>. The

'Brainstorm – Public' (to the right) suggests measures that the government of Bhutan may undertake to revive Buddhism as a living experience and basis of its own functioning. When suggesting 'meditation' as week opening (in government offices) or before meetings, I think in the first place once again of formless '*shiné*' practice, because it is highly experiential and does not require faith. Provided that free will isn't tempered with, daily meditation practices, retreats, rituals and for example talking circles could enrich the development of adults and children, adding the levels of Buddhist teachings that I indicated are currently obscure to the average Bhutanese.

Under 'application workshops' I list some topics that may be debated freely after the personal practice of meditation starts to take definite effect on people. So I list automatic results that I expect to flourish, rather than plans I propose striving for. Although the fruit is desirable, I do not suggest mimicking the leaves and the flower to get to the crop. We may just wait to see what sprouts spontaneously some time after we sow the seed.

Take for example the debate on sensitive issues, such as e.g. the significance of Dodup Rinpoche to Bhutan, or the Southern Bhutanese (refugee) issue. So far I observe that discussions on issues like these, generally lead to cat-and-mouse-play dynamics. One party becomes the prosecutor, the other the defendant who denies all charges. Once the debate takes such a dualistic turn it is generally no longer fruitful. It is then more about proving oneself right and over-powering the other party, than about respect and acceptance. It is no longer truly open and people dig themselves in rather than try to shift perspectives and look from new angles. Debate then arrives at a deadlock that isn't quickly overcome by trying harder to be nice and flexible. Personally I usually do not manage to stay impartial amidst a fire with others who get entangled in the heat of debate. Therefore the best may

simply be to leave those issues alone to ripen, simply acknowledging that they *are* there.

Under the bullets 'Dualistic democratic system?' and 'Nationality law?' I refer to questions that I do not pretend I have easy answers to. Bhutan is in the process of approving a groundbreaking new constitution, choosing to adopt a dualistic multi-party system. Multi-party democracy is, among others, a system aiming to reduce the changes of abuse of power by ill-intended politicians. I do not have an easy and absolute alternative, but I find this a remarkable and short-sighted choice for a Vajrayana Kingdom (see also 'The way my view differs' and its endnotes). In the West it is common to try solving motivational issues through checks and balances in *systems*, and by making leaders *answerable to large constituencies*. In other words the standard approach of the West is to reduce the chance of abuse of power by using the relatively stable, educated mass as an anchor.

In contrast, in a Vajrayana Kingdom, I could equally well imagine paying explicit attention to whether leaders make themselves *sub-ordinate to spiritual guidance*, or form parties with a clear spiritual identity<sup>28</sup>. Just like a Tulku who refuses to be enthroned can be regarded as rejecting responsibility, the adoption of multi-party democracy may be viewed as 'dumping' responsibility on the population. 'Bottom-up participation' can be an excuse for the King and government not to present a Vision. At least it clearly 'bets' on control from below, rather than on guidance from the top. Implicitly it tends to discard the possibility and relevance of strengthening true(!) spiritual guidance of individuals and governments<sup>29</sup>. In contrast (or in addition?) I suggest practising and speaking more about spirituality and linking it to the day-to-day work of the government. Bhutan may draw more on its Buddhist teachers seeking both guidance and dialogue.

In the lower two boxes I elaborate on the last option I mentioned in the brainstorm: The possibility of reviewing the

curricula of schools and institutes on Buddhist contents. Taking advantage of international experiences in this regard, the education sector in Bhutan could develop a curriculum that engages body and speech as much as it currently employs (conceptual) mind. And, to honour the principle of 'practice what you preach' similar initiatives could be developed within the civil service.

The left of these two boxes wonders in what respect the emphasis and key messages may shift (presenting a comparison), whereas the right box suggests steps in a participatory process of such a review. In terms of giving education a Buddhist colour, I believe the rituals (such as morning prayers) can well be maintained. This is the reason why both the 'Current' and 'Future' columns in the 'What' list start with the words 'experience'. I am not suggesting that the tea of Buddhism can be drunk without any cup, so the experience (which in final instance is more important than the philosophy) needs to be conveyed as per a particular cultural tradition. It is only in the underlying messages that I suggest changes, e.g. from accepting people if they are good citizens, to an unconditional recognition of the basic good nature of all beings (see the concepts in the 'Current' and 'Future' columns). Changes that pay heed to my belief that true spirituality can simultaneously completely embrace the wisdom, scepticism and curiosity of modernity, and be very orthodox and uncompromising in keeping the essence of Vajrayana Buddhism.

### **Dedication**

I look forward to exchanging further ideas (particularly on how I may contribute to the above dreams). To be truthful to my own call to stand up for one's spiritual connection, I like to end this paper with a supplication.

The ones who are Nobly born as Mukpo clan,  
Who defeat the eclipse of the Great Eastern Sun,  
And sharpen the blade of primordial presence,

They are victorious over all their enemies, the forces of materialism.  
They see the Tiger Lion Garuda Dragon Vision,  
They are fearless in the midst of barbarian arrogance,  
They tame the untameable beings,  
They inspire the savages of the setting Sun,  
Into the sophistication of the Great Eastern Sun;  
I pay homage to the Sakyong *and* the Sakyong Wangmo.

Radiating confidence, peaceful  
Illuminating the Way of discipline,  
Eternal ruler of the three worlds,  
May the Great Eastern Sun be victorious!

Ki ki, so so!

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the term 'spirituality' more often than the term 'religion'. With spirituality I refer to personal experiences (be they spontaneous or cultivated) of inspiration and connectedness. It is about showering (if not drowning) yourself in the understanding that all beings deserve to be loved unconditionally. These are experiences that everybody has access to, regardless of whether one practices any religion. Religion on the other hand has a connotation of being linked to an institution, in fact usually an organisation that outlines ethical rules to its members. Moreover, in religion the follower opens himself to the blessings of (a) God or elders on the path, and in 'exchange' normally commits his life to a particular way of service.

Whereas spirituality can exist without religion, and (sadly enough) religion without spirituality, it seems that one only experiences the full power if the two are combined. One may for example, regardless of whether (and if so which) religion one follows, benefit from meditation, but to benefit fully from the insights and blessings that earlier masters hand down to us, one has to devote oneself to them

(which often implies 'officially' becoming a Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist).

Interestingly enough such dedication is not required to obtain love and acceptance for who you are in essence. Dedication is not a compensation for being fundamentally not-OK (left alone that it is a trick to buy God(s) over and thus ensure yourself a seat in heaven). It is merely a pre-condition to take full advantage from the path that God or the elders show (and which they earned through their complete dedication). Rather than a repayment to the giver, religion requires you to 'pay forward' (to the rest of human kind and the world).

To me, organisations that maintain power over their followers by instilling fear and dependence exploit and abuse feelings of guilt, inadequacy and superstition. Often such organisations prescribe tight norms and adamant values that deter relaxation and (physical) joy, whereas I believe that taking delight in this life is 'mandatory'. If we don't dare to embrace the good that comes to us (even if it is because we see others suffer), then what example do we set to our children? Unless we ourselves gratefully celebrate the good we get, our life example will invite future generations ad infinitum to live for others rather than for themselves.

<sup>2</sup> In the 'tradition' of my 1999 paper 'Placing the Hamburger in the Mandala', the present paper could also be named 'A HappyMeal with ema', with ema being the Dzongkha word for the ever popular chuilli's in Bhutan (see the headers). Whereas 'The Hamburger' dealt with not fearing modernisation, 'The HappyMeal' elaborates more on how to base a society on Buddhism.

<sup>3</sup> In a 1998 debate on good governance a young Bhutanese claimed that Buddhism needn't be taught in Bhutan, because it was 'ingrained' in its people. I fully subscribe to the 'ingrained' part of the statement, but not to the conclusion that Buddhism can therefore be left implicit in Bhutan today. Yes, the essence of Buddhism is deeply ingrained (or karmically sown) in the minds of all Bhutanese



through centuries of uncorrupted devotion and intense meditation practice. But even so this profound and precious seed needs to be nurtured, especially in a time of pungent transformation. In fact, *because* the seed is so rare and good, it would be a shame to waste it, and in my view this hard-earned, fortunate karmic condition calls for extra careful tending. Even though the seed is perfect and potent, I believe it is also as fragile as a rich and abundant rainforest, full of vitality and health. Once the forest is uprooted and the topsoil eroded, this rich jungle nonetheless turns into a desert...

<sup>4</sup> The Preface to the 2003 conference papers (published in *Gross National Happiness and Development*, Karma Ura & Karma Galay, CBS, 2004, ISBN 99936-14-19-x) notes that 'the concept meant different things to different participants' (which I accept as a fact). But it goes on to claim that 'Mainly this was a matter of emphasis', and I believe that that assertion is courteous wishful thinking. Whereas I am happy that all interpretations were welcome until date, I believe that it is imperative and vital that leaders of the discourse as well as leaders who take inspiration from it, make deliberate choices about their View. Without a View the debate is a loose collection of grains of sand, with a View it can be a runway to liberation (or a highway deeper into confusion, if the View is dualistic).

<sup>5</sup> Starting with 1998 and 1999 letters to the editor of Kuensel, Bhutan's National Newspaper

<sup>6</sup> In his electoral campaign Henry Truman, then low in the polls, commented something like 'Moses did not rely on the polls to lead his people through the Red Sea'. In other words: A leader first states his Vision and then looks for allies and supporters, rather than the other way around.

<sup>7</sup> With the latter remark I hope to even pacify a Conference participant who came to me to express that he opposes my proposal to re-link inspiration and work (which is not the same as re-marrying church and state). Irritatingly enough he introduced his

point by casually ‘verifying’ that I am what he called a ‘recent convert’ (with the connotation of being a naïve hallelujah freak). To use imagery this person is familiar with: He (knowingly or intuitively) attempted to blow me away (as a person) before fighting my view. Apart from hurting my ego, this exchange made me realise that it isn’t common knowledge that we have to be willing to change, to effect change. Simple as it sound: You have to change to change. In the mentioned manipulation my friend regarded fresh inspiration as an embarrassing stage, whereas I regard it as the saving grace for our planet. I hope I will still have the devotion of a ‘recent convert’ at the time I die.

<sup>8</sup> The below table (though still cryptic) gives some more details on specific inadequacies I see as inherent to the quoted concepts. (This does not make these approaches worthless, but just undermines their claim of universalism, just like a spoon is not a bad utensil because it doesn’t cut).

Concept	Shortcoming
Multi-party, one-man-one-vote democracy	Obviously in many countries democracy has prevented evil dictators from coming to power. In many (e.g. African) countries the (partial) imposition of parliamentary democracy is not the quickest and most secure road to better governance (though it is the only modality under which the US still dares to give allies a leg up into power). Bhutan is clamped between the world’s largest democracies, which have governments that are not only enticing.

Professionalised justice and in-court settlement	Quite implicitly modern justice takes away the job of doing justice (and reconciliation) from the people concerned. And worse: It wastes abundant time and money on professionals (prosecutors and defendants) whose job it is to put maximum blame on the other party. Though this is done in words that the people concerned hardly understand, it certainly does not lead to reconciliation – which I see as the true aim of a justice support system
Blindfolded, uniform justice	Refers to ‘Symbol of Justice’ (blindfolded Lady holding a scale). This system of justice rules out corrective interventions like the famous verdict of King Solomon, and more recently the ways Dzungda’s corrected erring citizens
Rule-based policy making and implementation	Refers to the conception that through systems (such as laws and rules) future mismanagement can be curbed. In real life it is much more useful to invest in the development of people, rather than attempting to steer them through rules.
Happiness as free choice	Some define poverty as lack of choice. At least it is important to question which choices we talk about. The lifestyle I choose influences others in time (effects of global warming) and space (purchase of child labour products, support to ambiguous regimes, pride boosting envy at the West)
Free market competition	This ideal often expresses a belief that the human mind is egoistic by nature, which is at best only part of the story. Money is only one motivator for people to give their best, and open tendering ignores the often positive aspect of stable, long-term and intimate relationships between clients and suppliers.

<sup>9</sup> The story of King Democratia (written by Godfried Bomans) illustrates the limitations of democracy in an amusing way. This King was born with a vacant brain. In fact, if you beat His Head with a spoon, It produced a beautiful gonging sound. But King Democratia loved his people, and genuinely wanted to serve them well. Whenever confronted with opposing views He distressed which view to adopt, because He knew enough to know that His Thoughts about such a dilemma were not dependable. Troubled by His Indecisiveness He consulted his councillor. When asked how the King should take decisions the councillor smiled. 'But that isn't difficult at all, Your Majesty' he replied. 'Just request one group to make their point and listen. Then send them away. You then summon the other group, listen to them and send them away as well!' With smug confidence the councillor smiled at King Democratia, with an air as if he had now settled the problem. When asked what else to do, the councillor replied that this was all, and that nothing else was needed. Confused and desperate The King then asked his councillor 'But which of he two parties then, should I agree with?' At that point the councillor's smile expanded into a malicious grin and with a twinkle in his eyes he bend over to The King and whispered in His Ear: 'The biggest'.

<sup>10</sup> I make some further brief remarks on this issue in the section 'Challenge of Bhutan' and in some endnotes. A more exhaustive discussion, however, would require a paper exclusively dedicated to the (one-sidedness of the) paradigms underlying current Western justice and governance concepts. I hope others will further elaborate on this issue, also because (as I mention in the main text) Bhutan is in the process of adopting a Constitution. The draft Constitution seems to rely (at least in part) on '*theistic*' (in the remarkable sense Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche used this term) conceptions that are incompatible with the '*nontheistic*' philosophy of Buddhism. Personally I also hope that (in the Constitution and especially in the debate around it) the View, considerations and choices behind the articles will become much more pronounced.

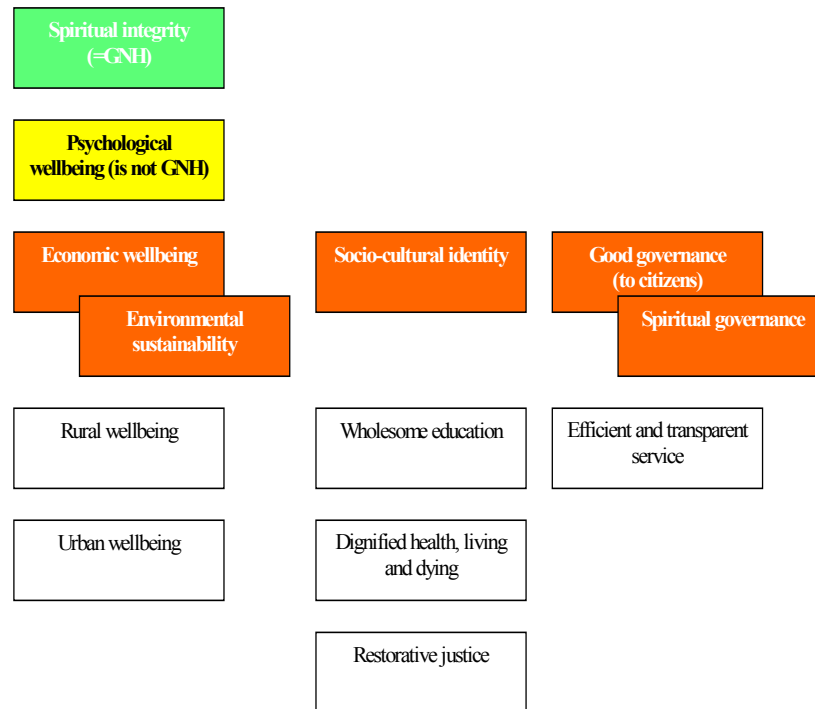
<sup>11</sup> At some stage I even felt Culture should be taken out as a GNH pillar altogether. I emphasise the tea (what is to be transmitted) over the cup (the particular tradition of transmission). Just the very label of 'Culture' puts many people in a narrow-minded and conservative 'preservation mood', which then easily transgresses into promoting and imposing one dominant sub-culture over others. Culture made it back on my personal radar-screen due to seeing the crucial importance of culture in my multi-cultural marriage. While my wife is more eloquent in English than in Dzongkha, she can only express her deepest emotions in the latter language. She almost becomes a different self when she speaks her first language. The language of her infancy evidently connects her to her identity in a way that nothing else can. So I acknowledge Cultural (and Social) identity as a pillar in the sense that everybody should be encouraged to connect and take pride in his or her own cup. Obviously this automatically leads to what is called 'an inclusive approach', rather than an approach in which one sub-culture is favoured and imposed over others.

<sup>12</sup> An eminent outer aspects of this problem is that specially in the early '90 many Southern Bhutanese left Bhutan and settled in refugee camps in Nepal. Today these camps still house about a hundred thousand people (whereas the total population of Bhutan is estimated just over sevenhundred thousand).

<sup>13</sup> When commenting on a draft of this paper, my Bhutanese wife recommended that I take out my reference to the refugee issue, as it seemed obnoxious and stupid to drag it into the GNH debate, which is so positive and passionately dear to me. But I believe I precisely need to mention the Southern Bhutanese issue here, *because* the invitation and cultural pressure is so large to ignore and avoid it on this happy occasion. And the more it is denied, the more I have to salute this shadow, if I am to look Bhutan straight in the eyes and take it completely serious. I refuse to inwardly write Bhutan and its government off as a lost case (and I pride myself for choosing to do so). Through this paper I choose to speak up calmly because the timing seems right (and addressing the wound lead to healing rather

than only to pointless pain), and because I have personally experienced that covertly addressing sensitive issues raises more suspicion than it evades (...).

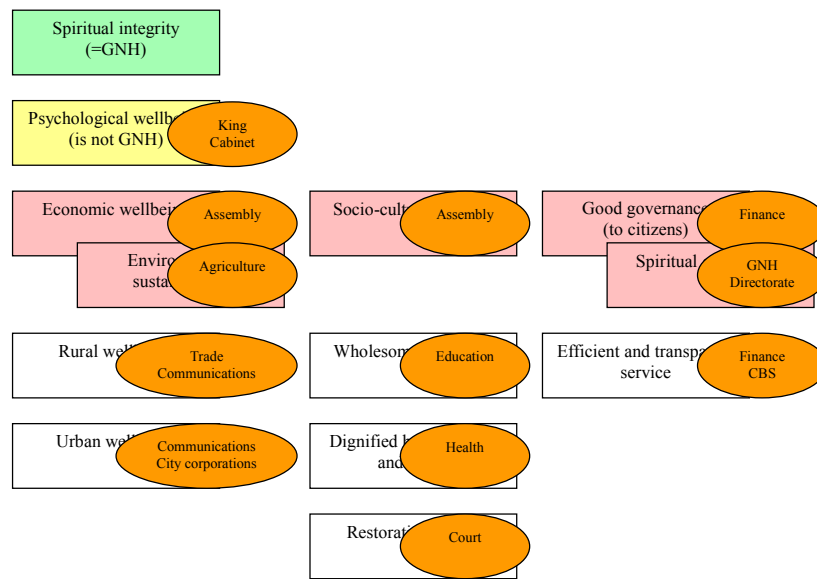
<sup>14</sup> To elaborate on the relationships between the pillars (and the foundation) I below depict them in a Logical Framework. Of course this is a brainteaser, rather than a final proposal.



The green box (Spiritual integrity (=GNH) symbolises the overall objective of Bhutan, and the yellow box (Psychological wellbeing (is not GNH) the purpose or aim of all government efforts. The aim is

sought for through the planned results in the red boxes, which each are to be achieved through a set of activities (some of which are listed in the white boxes). In my further notes I start at the level of the planned results (red boxed).

I put the environmental sustainability pillar under the economic wellbeing pillar, to show that environmental preservation is a sustainability condition for material wellbeing. As a last result I put good governance (which I see as an 'internal project' of the government), which again has the advance of the spiritual foundation (within governance) as a condition or sub-component. The advancement of spirituality countrywide I imagine as an aspect of socio-cultural identity, which is practised e.g. through wholesome education. The main results (material wellbeing and socio-cultural wellbeing) all contribute to psychological wellbeing of the population, which is only a conducive condition for GNH or spiritual integrity.



In this second image I suggested which government parties might be responsible for which activity or objective. Worth pointing out is that I believe the government cannot (and should not attempt to) achieve GNH or spiritual integrity, because this is up to individual people.

<sup>15</sup> A note to rule out possible misinterpretation. I have a high esteem of Lyönpo Jigme Thinley, so my questionmarks to the basics of the GNH concept are not meant as a hidden attack to (any person within) the Bhutanese government. In fact I have good memories ever since I first met with Lyönpo in a village in 1990. Although he may not remember them, these moments and a few later encounters have boosted my esteem of the government of Bhutan.

<sup>16</sup> Needless to say that my picture will be highly shoddy because I am not a master established in what is called the View, but only a defective practitioner who has read and glimpsed further dimensions to The Truth.

<sup>17</sup> Probably someone else with further opened spiritual eyes than myself, may have a completely different take on these two examples. I give these examples not so much to pretend that I am an unmistakable oracle transmitting the only possible message from Mother Earth. I rather share these examples to show that, *even while not-knowing*, we have to have the bravery to make affirmative connections between inner intuitions and outer practical situations.

<sup>18</sup> Worth noting in this context is the emerging of the concept of 'Highly Sensitive Persons' (HSP) in the field of psychology. Perhaps there is not only increasing attention for the characteristics and demands for such persons, but an actual rise in the numbers of HSP's themselves. If true, this would make paying attention to spirituality all the more important.

<sup>19</sup> Here I refer to what is referred to in Buddhism as two inseparable wings of a bird: Wisdom (the female principle, connected to the sun



and emptiness) and compassion (the male principle, symbolised by the moon of skilful means or action).

<sup>20</sup> Let me add a 'geo-political' argument in favour of focussing on Buddhism (in Bhutan or elsewhere), and let me present these thoughts simply in the terms and language in which I think.

Whereas further crumbling down in the West, Christianity (and in particular the Pentacostal type of churches) is exploding in Africa. I am delighted that these churches are full of love and joy. My worry though is that this approach is pedantic, self-satisfied and too sugary in promising salvation. Although the West is blind to this movement, I believe Africa is rising, not due to development co-operation but by means of religion. The more African Christianity - though currently imported from America - (re-) connects to the soul of Africa, the more I think this sweeping advance is a critical hope for our planet.

Meanwhile I am expectant and curious whether within the Muslim world the mystical and blazing manner of professing Islam will become more mainstream. While Muslim cultures cope with vast perversion (it's not completely co-incidental that terrorists abuse Islam of all religions), there is also so much potential and depth in the cultures still alive.

As for the Buddhism: The general image of Buddhism is that of a friendly way of life without many obvious historical excesses, and therefore a 'religion' worth the benefit of the doubt. Buddhism gets sympathy rather than admiration. And that's what it currently deserves; the time of impressive empires and imposing social achievements has passed. Today there is no swaying example of a country where Buddhism is the central scorching force for progressive movement in a direction that truly differs from mainstream development. I would love to help create such an example, not to outsmart other religions, but to contribute this particular inspiration and possibility to humanity.

<sup>21</sup> Ngöshül Khyenpo Rinpoche. A similar willingness to get to the bottom of the truth speaks from the poem 'I want it all', by Thich Nhat Hanh (1954, quoted in 'Being Peace'). From this poem:  
[...]

This morning my brother is back from his long adventure.  
He kneels before the altar and his eyes are filled with tears.  
His soul is looking for a shore to put an anchor,  
My own image of long ago.  
Let him kneel there and weep,  
Let him cry his heart out.  
Let him have his refuge for a thousand years.  
Enough to dry his tears.

Because one of these nights I shall come.  
I have to come and set fire to this small cottage of his on a hill.  
His last shelter.  
My fire will destroy,  
Destroy everything.  
Taking away from him the only life raft he has, after a shipwreck.  
In the utmost anguish of his soul,  
The shell will break.  
The light of the burning hut will witness, gloriously, his deliverance.  
I will wait for him beside the burning cottage,  
Tears will run down my cheeks.  
I shall be there to contemplate his new existence,  
And hold his hand in mine,  
And ask him how much he would want.  
He will smile at me and say that he wants it all.  
Just as I did.

<sup>22</sup> Now I am an increasingly devoted student of Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, who addressed the participants at the opening of this second GNH conference. The Sakyong touches me and draws me out through his teachings and especially through his life example. By fully manifesting both in the West and again in Tibet, and engaging in the full vitality of life (next to being a Buddhist teacher he also is

for example a marathon runner) he wakes me up to the full width and depth of life. Recently he made spontaneous visits to important Buddhist monasteries and teachers of the so-called crazy wisdom lineage, showing a fearless direction and complete dedication to both East and West. To me hearing of the Sakyong's actions is always a bit of a painful shock and a welcome fresh breath at the same time, knocking me out of a cosy Buddhist cocoon in which I exclude the vastness of this world and the Buddhist vision.

<sup>23</sup> My personal perception of Bhutanese society had a number of stages, which I often see back in the way other foreigners relate to Bhutan.

1. At first I saw Bhutan and Buddhism as picturesque, but naïve and backward.
2. Then the profound dimension of Buddhism captured me.
3. In step three I romanticised: I tried seeing the whole government of Bhutan as implementing completely enlightened policies. I was setting myself up for a disillusion in the
4. Fourth stage, being a resentful acknowledgement that not everything was perfect.
5. Currently I consider myself as mostly in the fifth stage, in which I see both unique and fantastic practices and opportunities, as well as problems, pain, wrongdoings and challenges.

<sup>24</sup> A specific feature of Bhutan in this regard is that the government plays such a big role in development. Much of what is appreciated today was forced on the people a few decades ago. Disadvantage of the irrefutable success of 'forced' or 'top-down' development is that the population is rather passive, and the government easily self-contented. A challenge for the government is to step back into a serving role, rather than sticking to a position of control. The government cannot make the mind of the people, but it can allow people to express themselves and appreciate that. The Bhutanese government aims to empower and liberate the human mind and spirit, and is challenged to stimulate and let go more on the level of self-expression (on the level of freedom I am happy that many

Bhutanese recognise that freedom without duties is another form of slavery).

<sup>25</sup> Above I haven't talked much about the many wonderful, free and alive characteristics of Bhutan, which I also recognise and enjoy profoundly (I had my reasons to work so many years in the country). To get a balanced picture, I should praise the fun, laughter, earthiness, singing and dances in the villages (and in fact even at the ReThinking Conference), the peace in the mountain retreats, the sacredness of many a shrine room, and the stunning beauty of the Himalayas themselves. And I would have to indicate how much Bhutan does change over time, and for the better. While living in Bhutan (as an ambitious idealist) I was often frustrated how little change took place after the façade of friendly smiles. Yet looking back over a fifteen years period, I do see enormous growth in genuine openness to new ideas.

However, altogether I do not exhaust myself trying to sketch a balanced picture in this paper, because it is not about passing a judgement on Bhutan.

<sup>26</sup> On this level Buddhism isn't all that different from other religions, and paradoxically Bhutan may maintain its own identity best by fearlessly opening itself to the larger world. Earlier this year I attended a moving Christian service in Nairobi, realising that this service had made a round trip to the USA. Africa's most precious contribution to the world is probably its music (as much as Bhutan's contribution can be Vajrayana Buddhism), which awakens the life force in the stiff and frozen hips of even a man like me. But to get in that Nairobi Church, the music first travelled with the African slaves to Louisiana and Virginia. Having been assimilated in the US, white missionaries brought Pentecostal Christianity and its gospel songs back to Kenya...

For a Buddhist, knowing the doctrine of non-self, this isn't even all that surprising. You become yourself, by opening yourself to others without any hesitation or prejudice.

<sup>27</sup> The reader may conclude that, although I am absolutely a foreigner to Bhutan, I am not too hesitant to play a role in the most 'private' aspects of Bhutan. I feel it is inappropriate to shy away from playing a role (insignificant or magnificent as it may be), for two reasons.

In the first place Bhutan already looks at the West (where I come from). Young Bhutanese either admire or despise Western lifestyles (which both binds them to the West), and think and act in Western academic concepts. If they are already infected by these sometime dubious blessings then let them also see how some Westerners take the eastern heritage completely to heart.

And secondly the West has picked up Buddhism in a vibrant way that can enrich and re-ignite the latent Buddhist inspiration in the East. Although the Buddhist gene is perfectly encoded (or ingrained) deep in the Eastern mind, Eastern societies are not Shangri-La. Tibet for instance was (according to e.g. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche) an easy catch for the Chinese because Tibetan society at large had become a rather self-snugged, backward and degraded civilisation. Western Buddhists don't have something fundamentally alien or superior to offer to Bhutan, but may be instrumental to re-igniting appreciation for its own spiritual heritage.

<sup>28</sup> Similarly I believe (like Amnesty International) that it is not appropriate only to grant Bhutanese citizenship to children who have both a Bhutanese father and a Bhutanese mother (see also the box with examples under 'Religion and development'). However, I do acknowledge Bhutan's legitimate desire to remain a Buddhist country in a region where the Bhutanese are an insignificant minority. Therefore Bhutan is in a dilemma to which there may not be an easy way out. And that illustrates once again that this listing records actual dilemma's rather than rhetorical questions.

<sup>29</sup> The issue of power is intriguing (see also endnotes viii and ix). Vajrayana Buddhism offers moving examples of Saints who kept

themselves sharper than any control mechanism ever could have commanded. However, the history of Zen and Vajrayana in the West also illustrates how easily even genuine masters get trapped by sex, alcohol and extravagance when acquiring positions of veneration. Yet even such shortcomings of great practitioners do not make me sceptical about the ultimate potential and integrity of all human beings. Therefore I do not blindly promote (as 'the West' in general seems to) a 'flat-thinking' control mechanism to tightly inspect all leaders. Or at least I wish to *also* pay attention to trusting and strengthening intrinsic powers, rather than only debate external control mechanisms.

Closer surveillance on government servants to observe that they truly *serve* seems valuable in Bhutan, although it breaks with the culture of respect or even devotion for leaders. I learned to see the enormous positive side of devotion, but won't promote blind adoration. Therefore 'Control versus Trust' remains a dilemma I have no absolute answers to. Nonetheless I believe that promoting a true spiritual inspiration within governance is at least as important as checking.

It is interesting that both the King of Bhutan and my teacher Mipham Rinpoche are enthroned as 'Sakyongs', or 'Earth Protectors'. Whereas the King of Bhutan is to lead a nation in a spiritual way, Mipham Rinpoche's challenge is to provide spiritual guidance to a global community of individuals. The difference between those two missions isn't too big, if we believe the story of the Buddha. According to the Shambhala tradition, the King of Shambhala requested the Buddha for spiritual teachings that were relevant to him as a Ruler, because he did not want to let his people down by renouncing his Kingdom and becoming a monk (as the Buddha's students did until that point). In response the Buddha taught this King the Kalachakra teachings, and the King established an enlightened society in which spirituality was the basis for governance and all citizens practised meditation. From this account I conclude that Bhutan should designate a central role to spirituality on a very practical level, not only for the benefit of its own citizens

but ultimately in the first place to serve humanity at large as (at this moment) last and only Vajrayana Buddhist Kingdom.