

Preserving the Consciousness of a Nation: Promoting “Gross National Happiness” in Bhutan Through Her Rich Oral Traditions

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His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, King of Bhutan, has developed the philosophy of “Gross National Happiness” in the Kingdom, accentuating Bhutan's vision of development beyond material economics and growth (sometimes reflected as Gross National Product). In order to balance and even outweigh creeping outside influences of materialism and self-centeredness, in addition to saying there is a better and more applicable standard than the United Nation's Human Development Index, a national emphasis on storytelling and the oral arts at the indigenous grassroots level is being considered.

The Kingdom of Bhutan has a rich heritage in its folktales and famous masked dances, setting the stage for the promotion of Bhutan's “Gross National Happiness” through the time-honoured traditions of oral communication. It is proposed that this integration of entertainment, information and education through a grassroots initiative would contribute to a sense of community, satisfaction and happiness. Also, the utilization of media through such an initiative would develop a sense of ownership at the level of the people, allowing for its acceptance, use and growth among the citizens of the kingdom.

A Royal Challenge

Bhutanese folklore has it that the bat would show its teeth to the birds in order to avoid the bird tax and show its wings to

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the beasts in order to avoid the beast tax. But come winter, when the food supplies are distributed, the bat would show its wings to the birds and teeth to the beasts to claim its share from both ...¹

The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, steeped in a Tibetan-like Buddhism and literally closed to all outside influences until only a couple of decades ago, has a rich heritage in its folktales, religious masked dances, and other traditional art forms. As such, it is now poised to meet a challenge put forth by the nation's king: How can the promotion and preservation of happiness for its people take precedence over an unhealthy and ever-increasing emphasis on the nation's Gross National Product?

A dichotomy of contrast and conflict seems to exist, however, in the Land of the Thunder Dragon: modern education vs. traditional education; *rigsar* (popular music) vs. traditional music; mass media vs. traditional media; modern, western morals and values vs. traditional, Buddhist morals and values; etc. Sometimes in the pursuit of development, the ends and means can get confused, even reversed. Debate over form and content can constantly arise.

Like the bat of Bhutanese folklore, does His Majesty's Royal Government bare its teeth or show its wings as it seeks to implement its dream of GNH? From an allegorical Buddhist perspective, does it concentrate on the drop of water that falls into the pond and merges with its waters, or does it concentrate on the same drop of water that falls into the pond and causes ripples on the surface, or does it not concentrate on the drop at all, but focus on the ripples? Questions that must constantly be asked and applied are, "What is the ultimate goal or aim of His Majesty's vision? What is right for Bhutan and its citizens? What contributes to Gross National Happiness?" These will help clarify ends and means, form and content. The challenge is to show that a national initiative of

¹ Phuntsho, Karma (2000) "On the Two Ways of Learning in Bhutan." *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 2 (2): 96-126, p.96.

storytelling using local storytellers, along with other specifically local cultural art forms, will not only help preserve the consciousness of a nation, but also help advance the King's vision of Gross National Happiness.

The World of Oral Communication

Oral cultures are centered in the practice of storytelling. Large numbers of the world's population are oral communicators. They learn best through communication that is not tied to or dependent on print. The definition of oral communicator, however, is somewhat fluid. At minimum, the term refers to people who are illiterate, around 1.5 billion in the world today. Many, though, who are functionally illiterate or semi-literate, express a strong preference for oral communication as opposed to literate or print-based communication. When they are included in the definition of oral communicator, it is estimated that more than two-thirds of the world's population, or over four billion people, are oral communicators by necessity or preference. However, preferences for oral communication span all educational, social, gender, and age levels. Many literates around the globe express strong preference for oral communication as well when tested by appropriate tools to identify their communication patterns and choices.²

Primarily through story, proverb, poetry, drama and song, oral communicators house their knowledge, information, teachings, concepts, lists, and ideas in narrative presentations that can be easily understood, remembered, and reproduced. Oral people think in terms of these stories, and not in outlines, guidelines, principles, steps, concepts, or propositions, which are largely foreign to their way of learning and communicating. If they have a teaching, a concept, or a principle they want to remember, they will encase it in a story. This is the common vehicle that oral communicators use to process, remember, and convey information. Through

² Lovejoy, Grant, ed. (2005) *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, pp.3-6, 20-25.

the story and other oral art forms, they preserve and transmit valued truths and teachings, since it is difficult if not impossible for them to learn through principles, precepts, analysis, and syllogistic argument (deductive reasoning in which a conclusion is derived from two premises).

Oral cultures are centered in the practice of storytelling. It is their primary means of communication, normally in their mother tongue or heart language. They prefer these integrative ways of learning rather than the fragmenting, analytical approaches that are common in contemporary education. Western-style education emphasizes analysis—breaking things apart and focusing on extracted principles. Oral communicators prefer holistic learning, keeping principles embedded in the narratives that transmit them. They learn better through the concrete, relational world of narratives than they do through the abstract, propositional framework of Western educational systems.³ Both learning approaches deal with propositional truth, but oral communicators keep the propositions closely tied to the events in which those truths emerged. People who are steeped in literacy can more easily detach the propositions and deal with them as abstract ideas. In both cases people are learning ‘truth’, but the way the truth is packaged and presented differs dramatically.

Those of a literate-print culture mistakenly believe that if they can outline information or put it into a series of steps or principles, anyone, including oral communicators, can understand it and recall it. That is a misconception about learning and how different individuals process information. Most oral communicators do not understand outlines, steps, or principles, and they cannot remember them. For that matter, neither can those of the literate-print culture! They store information in notes, books, archives, libraries, and computers, and ‘look it up’ to refresh their memories.

³ Lovejoy, Grant, ed. (2005) *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*. Bangalore: International Orality Network, pp.5-6, 21-24.

As His Majesty's government seeks ways to implement Gross National Happiness in Bhutan and to ensure satisfied and content citizens at the grassroots level in local communities, it is important to consider the realities of the oral world and its communication and learning preferences.

Setting the Agenda: Gross National Happiness

Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product. - His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the King.⁴

Ever since His Majesty the King of Bhutan initiated the idea, there has been much talk, discussion, and debate concerning the concept of Gross National Happiness, especially in academic, development, and political circles. Needless to say, many do not see eye-to-eye on the topic. In asking the question, "What is it going to take to implement Gross National Happiness?" two other questions must first be considered: 1) How is the concept of Gross National Happiness offered by His Majesty the King of Bhutan to be understood?; and 2) Why is there conflict and confusion over some of the solutions currently being offered?

Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Royal Government of Bhutan said:

His Majesty has proclaimed that the ultimate purpose of government is to promote the happiness of the people. This point has resonated in many of his speeches and decrees, which stress both increasing prosperity and happiness. His Majesty has said, 'Gross National Happiness is more than Gross National Product,' and has given happiness precedence over economic prosperity.⁵

Stressing that happiness is a shared desire of all people,

⁴ Thinley, Jigmi Y. (1999) "Values and Development: Gross National Happiness." *Gross National Happiness: A Set of Discussion Papers*.

⁵ Ibid., 1999: pp.12-13.

Thinley said, "It is possibly the ultimate thing we want while other things are wanted only as a means to its increase".⁶ He pointed out that Gross National Happiness is a "non-quantifiable" development objective in Bhutan.

Happiness has been usually considered a utopian issue. The academic community has not developed the tools we need to look at happiness, one of our primary human values. This has led to a paradoxical situation: the primary goal of development is happiness, but the subject of this very goal eludes our analysis because it has been regarded as subjective.⁷

Thinley said that scientific proof was not needed to assess happiness meaningfully, but that Bhutan must raise policy and ethical questions about happiness. "Its absence in most policies contrasts sharply with the primary concern of each individual human being in his or her daily quest for happiness. But we infer rather boldly from improvements in socio-economic indicators that there might be growing happiness behind it," he said.⁸

"I wish to propose happiness as a policy concern and a policy objective," Thinley said. "In turn this may call for a new policy orientation. This also implies new departures in research, if the concept is considered important".⁹ Thinley stated that Gross National Happiness is the main purpose of development and is rooted in Bhutan's philosophical and political thought.

We asked ourselves the basic question of how to maintain the balance between materialism and spiritualism, in the course of getting the immense benefits of science and technology. The likelihood of loss of spiritualism, tranquility, and gross national happiness with the advance of modernization became

⁶ Ibid., p.13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p.14.

⁹ Ibid.

apparent to us.¹⁰

Thinley said that within Bhutanese culture, inner spiritual development is as prominent a focus as external material development. “Suffice it to say that, in varying degrees, the contemporary world may be too acutely preoccupied with the self in the sense of paying excessive attention to our selves, our concerns, needs and likes,” Thinley said. “There is a paradox here: excessive preoccupation with our selves does not lead to a real knowledge of our self. Happiness depends on gaining freedom, to a certain degree, from this particular kind of concern”.¹¹ Thinley pointed out that a growing income does not always lead proportionately to an increase in happiness:

In a world where everyone who has less is trying to catch up with everyone else who has more, we may become richer but happiness becomes elusive. People may become richer but they will not have a greater gift for happiness. Nations will not rank higher on the scale of happiness as they move up on the scale of economic performance. As is widely known, this is due to the fact that the value of money in giving happiness or utility diminishes as the amount increases”.¹²

Human Development and Happiness: Amicable Partners?

If happiness is among the cherished goals of development, then it does matter how this happiness is generated, what causes it, what goes with it, and how it is distributed—whether it is enjoyed by a few or shared by all.¹³

According to the *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000*, no one can guarantee human happiness. The choices people make are their own. However, the report said that the process

¹⁰ Ibid., p.15.

¹¹ Ibid., p.18.

¹² Ibid., p.20.

¹³ Royal Government of Bhutan (2000) *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000: Gross National Happiness and Human Development, Searching for Common Ground*, p.22.

of development should at least create an environment to developing citizens' full potentials, giving them a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives. People have a right to make their own decisions and chart their own course, the report implies, and it is the government's responsibility to create the environment in which good choices and courses can be determined. At the same time, however, there is a widespread growing disenchantment with the use of income and income growth as indicators of well-being and progress. "Clearly there is more to life than an expansion of income or accumulation of wealth," the report said.¹⁴ The Human Development Index assumes, however, that by adding increased life expectancy and increased education to increased income, chances of life satisfaction and happiness are almost guaranteed. The question remains whether this is true.

Consistent with the human development approach, but from a Bhutanese perspective, His Majesty the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has called for focusing more broadly on Gross National Happiness—and not narrowly on just Gross National Product. Already in the 1960s, the late King Jigme Dorjii Wangchuck had declared that the goal of development should be to 'make people prosperous and happy.' Development did not mean a blind expansion of commodity production. Instead, a holistic view of life and development is called for that augments people's spiritual and emotional well-being as well. It is this vision that Bhutan seeks to fulfill.¹⁵

The report said that the concept of Gross National Happiness was articulated by His Majesty to indicate that development has many more dimensions than those associated with Gross National Product, and that development should be understood as a process that seeks to maximize happiness rather than economic growth.

The concept places individuals at the centre of all development efforts, and it recognizes that the individual has

¹⁴ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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material, spiritual, and emotional needs. It asserts that spiritual development cannot and should not be defined exclusively in material terms of the increased consumption of goods and services.¹⁶

A grumbling rich man may well be less happy than a commercial farmer, but he does have a higher standard of living than the farmer. It is the sense of discontentment or emptiness that the rich farmer experiences that constitutes unhappiness. Happiness may be subjective, but this subjectiveness [sic] is shared by all, regardless of levels of income, class, gender, or race.¹⁷

If happiness is among the cherished goals of development, then it does matter how this happiness is generated, what causes it, what goes with it, and how it is distributed—whether it is enjoyed by a few or shared by all.¹⁸

According to the *Bhutan Development Report 2000*:

Ultimately, a happy society is a caring society, caring for the past and future.... Establishing such a society will require a long-term rather than a short-term perspective of development.... Happiness in the future will also depend upon mitigating the foreseeable conflict between traditional cultural values and the modern lifestyles that inevitably follow in the wake of development.¹⁹

The report concludes:

As economic and social transformation gathers momentum and Bhutan becomes increasingly integrated with the outside world, people's lifestyles are changing along with family structures. Assimilating these changes without losing the country's unique cultural identity is one of the main challenges facing Bhutan today.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.22.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p.50.

Chaos, Conflict, Contrast and Confusion

...there is a need to provide a sense of continuity amidst change. In addition, since culture and traditional values form the bedrock of Bhutanese national identity it is important for the Bhutanese to ensure that its culture and values are not undermined.... It is more necessary than ever to ensure the intergenerational transmission of values.²¹

Five articles appeared in various issues of the *Journal of Bhutan Studies* a few years ago that, while not directly addressing the topic of this article, influence it to a large degree. The articles are “On the Two Ways of Learning in Bhutan” by Karma Phuntsho; “Ensuring Social Sustainability: Can Bhutan’s Education System Ensure Intergenerational Transmission of Values?” by Tashi Wangyal; “The Attributes and Values of Folk and Popular Songs” by Sonam Kinga; “Mass Media: Its Consumption and Impact on Residents of Thimphu and Rural Areas” by Phuntso Raptan; and “Folktale Narration: A Retreating Tradition” by Tandin Dorji.

These five articles, coupled with a series of papers on development in Bhutan found in *Gross National Happiness: A Set of Discussion Papers* published by the Centre for Bhutan Studies and *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000* published by the Planning Commission Secretariat, Royal Government of Bhutan, all point toward an underlying situation that greatly affects Gross National Happiness and its success in Bhutan. There is a pattern of contrast and conflict brought out in these studies: modern education vs. traditional education; *ragsar* (popular music) vs. traditional music; mass media vs. traditional media; modern, western morals and values vs. traditional, Buddhist morals and values; etc.

Debate constantly arises over form and content. Phuntso said, “The primary factor that determines the difference in

²¹ Wangyal, Tashi (2001) “Ensuring Social Sustainability: Can Bhutan’s Education System Ensure Intergenerational Transmission of Values.” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 3 (1): 106-131. p.107.

outlooks and approaches between the two [education] systems [—traditional and modern—] is the ultimate goal they aim to achieve—learning is not an end in itself in either system”.²² At the same time, he makes a strong case for “modern” education while not seeming to recognize the full value of traditional methods. He said, “...modern curricular structures and methods by far excel the traditional styles”.²³

Phuntso is right in concluding that many Bhutanese equate traditional education with monastic Buddhist instruction and want nothing to do with it. Two issues are raised here that need to be addressed, those of ‘form’ and ‘content’. Perhaps it is needed to keep some of the form of traditional education and provide new and appropriate content. I would suggest that education is more than merely imparting knowledge, and that traditional education transcends mere learning of facts and techniques. It is an experiential process directly linked with life itself.

Wangyal raises an important and valid question: “Can Bhutan’s education system ensure intergenerational transmission of values?”²⁴ He then makes an excellent appraisal of the values of Bhutan.

Traditional values based on Buddhist culture have a profound influence on the lives of a majority of the Bhutanese people. Traditional Bhutanese values not only address individual self-discipline and the conduct of interpersonal relationships but also delineate responsibility of all sentient beings.... Such traditional values are, however, being gradually undermined, as people become more self-centered, and materialistic.... Thus there is a need to provide a sense of continuity amidst change. In addition, since culture and traditional values form the bedrock of Bhutanese national identity, it is important for the Bhutanese to ensure that its culture and values are not

²² Phuntsho, K. 2002, p.99.

²³ Ibid., p.104.

²⁴ Wangyal, T. 2002. p.106.

undermined.²⁵

Wangyal points out that Bhutanese society is now witnessing a shift in values, attitudes and expectations. “External influences arising from the values accompanying economic development, the media and the modern education systems, among others, challenge continuance of the national values,” he said.²⁶

According to Wangyal, one of the main challenges in preserving values in modern Bhutan is the need to reconcile the fact that the social, cultural, and economic context in which these values developed through the past centuries is very different from that of Bhutan today.

Apart from the influence of foreign travel and tourism, the mass media is [sic] perhaps one of the greatest sources of external influences and values. The recent introduction of television and the Internet has enabled the Bhutanese to have instant access not only to global news and information but also whetted their appetite for consumer goods. The process of modernization has thus had a profound influence on the social, economic and political outlook of the Bhutanese people leading to a gradual shift in their values, attitudes and expectations.²⁷

This, he said, has created an insatiable appetite for material acquisition.

“It is now more necessary than ever to ensure the intergenerational transmission of values,” Wangyal said. “Otherwise, unbridled modernisation [sic] may destroy the very spiritual and cultural fabric that has enabled the Bhutanese society to live in harmony with each other and with the natural environment”.²⁸ Wangyal praises the introduction of ‘value education’ into the school system and

²⁵ Wangyal, T. 2002, p.107.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p.112.

²⁸ Ibid., p.115.

calls for more of it. He recognizes that it is the stories found in this 'value education' that most impact a student.²⁹

Going beyond education, Kinga pulls into the picture the attributes and values of folk and popular music. While Kinga says that songs and music are integral parts of Bhutanese culture—"not only as mere forms of entertainment, but also as highly refined works of art reflecting the values and standards of society," he also says that *rigsar* or popular songs and music lack the artistic depth and seriousness of traditional songs.³⁰ Kinga concludes, "In their similarity and association with English pop songs and songs of Hindi films, *rigsar* songs no longer function as a repository of and a medium for transmitting social values".³¹ Not knowing if this means that they did at one time but no longer serve in transmitting social values or not, it could certainly be argued that they could and can. There are numerous case studies from around the world that show how popular music has been a powerful tool in transmitting social and moral values. Kinga has a valid concern, that "the popularity of *rigsar* songs and the specialization of music studios in producing them are gradually challenging the sustainability of the culture of traditional folk songs and music".³²

Rapten goes in an even different direction.

The media in Bhutan have progressively enhanced individual awareness by widening the scope of information transmission beyond the traditional face-to-face oral interaction to literacy-oriented communication and now to electronic media. They have helped to share information about the past and present, depict social, cultural and historical aspects of Bhutan that helped to create a common culture, tradition and system of

²⁹ Ibid., pp.115-116.

³⁰ Kinga, S (2001) "The Attributes and Values of Folk and Popular Songs." *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 1 (1): 132-170. p.132.

³¹ Ibid., p.133.

³² Ibid.

values.³³

He says that the mass media and information technology are increasingly becoming powerful instruments for the penetration of global culture and the values of a global market into Bhutan. "This presents one of the greatest challenges to Bhutan as it transitions from a traditional society into the age of information and technology," he said. "While the aim is to reap the benefits of mass media, its excessive influence threatens to undermine indigenous culture and value system".³⁴ In his study, Rapten observes: "It is also a fact that advertisements create desires, which cannot be satisfied by people's current economic situation. Crimes and corruption are often born out of economic desires".³⁵ He concludes: "The greatest challenge that Bhutan is facing at the moment is to make a conscious and informed choice in order to benefit from mass media and information technology, and at the same time keep its negative forces at bay".³⁶

A Change of Heart

"These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life They are foundational words, words to build a life on".³⁷ How does a nation curb and diminish the outside negative influences of the media and electronic technology, while at the same time protect, preserve, and promote its cultural values that have been central to the well-being of its people? Once again, the power of the story, coupled with the inherent nature of the oral communicator, can help accomplish this. The transformational power of stories is not merely found in the compiled written transcriptions of

³³ Rapten, Phuntsho (2001) "Mass Media: Its Consumption and Impact on Residents of Thimphu and Rural Areas." *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 3 (1): 172-198. p.172.

³⁴ Ibid., pp.172-173.

³⁵ Ibid., pp.186.

³⁶ Petersen, Eugene (1999) *Stories of Jesus*, p.17.

³⁷ Ibid., p.17.

traditional folktales and heritage stories, but in the hearing and oral transmission of them. Schools must embrace this and even become catalysts for those stories to flow from the classroom back to the homes and villages from where they originated.

Not only must the question “What to do?” be asked, but also “What is right?” What needs to be addressed are matters of the internal self, matters of the heart. If Bhutan were to focus only on the external, she can never fully impact or influence the internal. Some would say: “Let’s change the environment or the circumstances of our communities. That will give us better, happier people!” Others would say, “Let’s change their actions; changed actions lead to changed people!” Still others, “Change his belief system, then we can fully change the person!” Changing how people live, what they do, how they think, and what they believe, can’t guarantee a happier, more content and satisfied people. The issues are complex. Basically, people are shaped by the stories and events of their individual lives, families, communities, nation, etc., as they are conveyed and lived-out. These stories and events become threads woven together to form the tapestries of their lives. In the academic world, this is called worldview, and it is, illustratively, the particular pair of glasses one wears that determines how he or she sees the world. To completely integrate Gross National Happiness into the lives and very core of the people of Bhutan, she must insert new threads into the tapestries or lives of her people. With the introduction of appropriate stories and narrative events, the tapestry—or worldview—changes, and the mind’s eye sees the world from a different perspective, with a new pair of glasses, so to speak. A changed worldview, does in fact, create a changed person.³⁸

An old story from Japan, called “Empty-Cup Mind,” illustrates the value and sometimes necessity of changing worldview, that of replacing the old with the new:

³⁸ Lovejoy, Grant, ed. (2005) *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, pp.36-37.

A wise old monk once lived in an ancient temple... One day the monk heard an impatient pounding on the temple door. He opened it and greeted a young student, who said, "I have studied with great and wise masters. I consider myself quite accomplished in [Buddhist] philosophy. However, just in case there is anything more I need to know, I have come to see if you can add to my knowledge.

Very well," said the wise old master. "Come and have tea with me, and we will discuss your studies." The two seated themselves opposite each other, and the old monk prepared tea. When it was ready, the old monk began to pour the tea carefully into the visitor's cup. When the cup was full, the old man continued pouring until the tea spilled over the side of the cup and onto the young man's lap. The startled visitor jumped back and indignantly shouted, "Some wise master you are! You are a fool who does not even know when a cup is full!

The old man calmly replied, "Just like this cup, your mind is so full of ideas that there is no room for any more. Come to me with an empty-cup mind, and then you will learn something."³⁹

It is important to realize that the 'end' is happiness, and the 'means' are what it takes to get there, whether it's 'old form' with 'new content' or 'new form' with 'old content'. The use of storytelling to promote Gross National Happiness can serve as a bridge among all viewpoints, spanning the traditional and the modern, the new and the old. Story, whether narrated, sung, or dramatized, conveys the message and quickens the heart. Stories make up the fabric of changed lives. Whether it's stories from an old man sitting around a campfire in a village, conveyed through *ragsar* or popular music, seen and heard on television, learned in school, or read in the newspaper, the point is to touch lives with the morals and values of Bhutan, leading to a happier and more satisfied people.

³⁹ Yolen, Jane, ed. (1999) "Empty Cup Mind." *Gray Heroes: Elder Tales from Around the World*. New York: Penguin Books, pp.3-4.

The Role of the Story in Bhutan

“In the memory of the people dwell the folktales ready to be ‘untied’ at an appropriate time”.⁴⁰ In Bhutan the literary genre of *khaju*, or ‘oral transmission’, serves as an important tool of communication between one generation and another.⁴¹ Tandin Dorji, lecturer of history at Sherubtse College in Kanglung, said:

The role that it plays in the transmission of moral values, philosophy, beliefs, humour [sic], etiquette, and many other traits specific to the Bhutanese society holds an increasingly eminent place.... What is special about Bhutanese folktales is that it is still a living tradition in many pockets of rural Bhutan. In the villages which are far flung from motor roads, the narration of folktales in the pastures and in the evenings is today very much alive.⁴²

He questions, however, “How long will it continue to survive? Will the development process engulf this beautiful tradition? What can be done to keep this heritage alive?”⁴³

Kunzang Choden, author of the classic book *Folktales of Bhutan*, indicates that stories in the Mountain Kingdom are not narrated, but “released” or “set free” (*tangshi*).⁴⁴ “This could then imply that the Bhutanese and the folktales are inextricably interwoven,” Dorji said. “It wouldn’t be wrong to comment that they are found one inside the other. The folktales contain the traits and aspects of the Bhutanese. In the memory of the people dwell the folktales ready to be ‘untied’ at an appropriate time”.⁴⁵ Excluding the narration of epics and the biographies of saints, Dorji observes that there are no professional storytellers and no particular way or place

⁴⁰ Dorji, Tandin (2002) “Folktale Narration: A Retreating Tradition.” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 6: 5-23. p.7.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.5.

⁴² Ibid., p.5-6.

⁴³ Ibid., p.6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.xi.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.7.

of narrating stories in Bhutan. “However, there seems to be two ways of telling stories,” he said. The first way is solemn and is done in the house of a sick person, focusing primarily on the victory of good over evil.⁴⁶ “The other type is a freestyle narration,” said Dorji, “as the narrator can be from any age group”. This is the most common and popular type of narrative storytelling, according to Dorji.⁴⁷

By beginning a story with “*dangbo, dingbo*” (long, long ago), the Bhutanese audience detaches itself from the world and enters into the fascinating land of folktales where they identify themselves with the heroes and the good. “People rejoice when the hero very cleverly steals the cubs of a tigress and laughs when he is able to make fools of the villains,” Dorji said. “They are worried when the monsters kidnap the beautiful maiden, and they are sad when the marriage of the charming Prince and the Princess fails”.⁴⁸ Thus, by beginning the story with “*dangbo, dingbo*”, the audience is navigated into a marvelous world that takes place during an unspecified time and is temporarily disconnected from the mundane, everyday world around it. The other ritualistic formula for opening a Bhutanese folktale is “*henma, henma*” (once upon a time).⁴⁹ “Little by little and bit by bit the narrator releases the folktale,” Dorji said, “punctuating his narration with *dele*, which equates to ‘and then’”.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.8.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp.8-9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.9.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.10.

Dangbo, Dingbo

“*Dangbo, dingbo,*” the old man slowly uttered.

“Henma, henma.”

“Long, long ago and once upon a time.”

The circle of crowding villagers around him grew quiet and still. Stars twinkled above in the crisp cold air of the surrounding mountains. Sparks from the burning fire drifted upwards, creating a magic of their own, competing with the impending magic of the story about to come. For a few moments the storyteller drew incomprehensible designs in the dirt with his walking stick, then pulled his *kabney* tighter around him to ward off the chill of the night. Eventually he looked up, his eyes piercing, reflecting the burning fire and projecting the wisdom of generations before him. “When few stones and pebbles could be seen,” he said. “When the saplings and grasses began to sprout out in greenness. When a few drops of water began to drip...in the upper direction; in the lower direction; in that, that direction; in this, this direction.”

On and on he went, with a tale captivating and enchanting, punctuating various parts of the story with “*dele*” (“and then”), leading his audience from one event to another. Not a word was said by those around him; not an eye strayed from the figure huddled by the fire—until he was finished. Then there was a collective sigh, with smiles on their faces and murmurs of approval. One said, “We can be like those of this story! Are we not as good as they are?” The others responded in agreement, “Yes! Yes! We are as good as they! We can be like them!” Then there were pleas for another story from the wandering storyteller who stopped by their village to entertain them for the night. They would stay up late, absorbing the stories of the old man like dry parched ground absorbs the drops of freshly fallen rain. And long after he’s gone they would recall his words, the details of his stories, telling them to others, who in turn would pass them on to even others. “All is right with the world,” they would say upon hearing the

tales. “We are content; we are happy.”⁵¹

For the ancient mystic Drukpa Kunley, fondly called the Divine Madman by the Bhutanese, life was not measured by eight hours of sleep per night or three good meals a day on the table. There was more to life than this, he would say. Though some may laugh at some of his stories and be embarrassed by some of his antics, Drukpa Kunley fully understood the power of story and song and the emotions they evoked.

He knew that people—ordinary, everyday people who worked hard, believed in God, and supported the royal family—needed to laugh, cry, be shocked, and even be outraged sometimes, to give them a broader, better understanding of life and themselves, leaving them content with what they had around them and within them, rather than seeking after things that would never be. Today the Divine Madman has become more than an historical figure in Bhutan; he is a cultural hero around whom a web of stories and legends has been spun. An example follows how the very life of Drukpa Kunley (also named Kunga Legpa) was a story, an event to be remembered, passed on, and enjoyed:

By the age of 25, Kunga Legpa had gained mastery of both mundane and spiritual arts. He was accomplished in the arts of prescience, shape-shifting, and magical display. Returning home to visit his mother in Ralung, she failed to recognize his achievement and judged him merely by his outward behaviour [sic]. “You must decide exactly who you are,” she complained. “If you decide to devote yourself to the religious life, you must work constantly for the good of others. If you are going to be a lay householder, you should take a wife who can help your old mother in the house.”

⁵¹ Evans, A. Steven. (2001) “Tears and Laughter: Promoting Gross National Happiness Through the Rich Oral Traditions and Heritage of Bhutan.” *Gross National Happiness and Development*. Eds. Karma Ura and Karma Galay. Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies, pp. 637-659, pp.650-651.

Promoting Happiness Through Oral Traditions

Now the Naljorpa was instinctively guided at all times by his vow to dedicate his sight, his ears, his mind, and his sensibility, to others on the path, and knowing that the time was ripe to demonstrate his crazy yet compassionate wisdom, he replied immediately, "If you want a daughter-in-law, I'll go and find one." He went straight to the market place where he found a hundred-year-old hag with white hair and blue eyes, who was bent at the waist and had not so much a single tooth in her head. "Old lady," he said, "today you must be my bride. Come with me!"

The old woman was unable to rise, but Kunley put her on his back, and carried her home to his mother. "O Ama! Ama!" he called to her. "You wanted me to take a wife, so I have just brought one home." "If that's the best that you can do, forget it," moaned his mother. "Take her back where she came from or you'll find yourself looking after her. I could do her work better than she." "All right," Kunley said with studied resignation, "if you can do her work for her, I'll take her back." And he returned her to the market place.⁵²

According to Dugu Choegyul Gyamtso in the book *The Divine Madman*:

[Drukpa Kunley's] style, his humour [sic], his earthiness, his compassion, his manner of relating to people, won him a place in the hearts of all the Himalayan peoples.... He may not have been the greatest of scholars or metaphysicians, although he left some beautiful literature behind him, but he is a saint closest to the hearts of the common people.... For the common people it was Drupka Kunley who brought fire down from heaven, and who touched them closest to the bone.⁵³

The life, stories and songs of Drupka Kunley touched, stirred and even changed the lives of the common people in a time when they so desperately needed it. He is a successful example of what the storyteller and his tales can do.

⁵² Dowman, Keith and Paljor, Sonam, trans. (2000) *The Divine Madman: The Sublime Life and Songs of Drukpa Kunley*. Varanasi and Kathmandu: Pilgrims Publishing, pp.39-40.

⁵³ Ibid., p.23.

Dorji claims that folktales represent the collective memory of society:

Despite the nuances in the art of narration and the use of varying vocabulary, the central theme and principle facts remain unaltered no matter who narrates the stories. If the folktales talk of the society, it is in the minds of the people that the stories lie ready to be released at an appropriate moment ... Many beliefs, sentiments, as well as values concerning a society are evoked in the day to day life of the Bhutanese directly or indirectly through the vehicle of folktales.⁵⁴

Dorji emphasized that the telling and hearing of folktales in Bhutan is a grassroots event: “The old and the young alike listen and narrate the same story repeatedly in their own way and always with the same enthusiasm and zeal. The simplicity of the theme and plot of folktales offer itself as a literary genre that is comprehensible to all....”⁵⁵ He concludes:

We have to all agree that the immense reservoir of stories are all created by man for the benefit of the upcoming generations, not only as the entertainment but also as a vehicle of transmission of religious, social, and moral values, philosophies and many unique traits of society. Then, it is not only important to document and create a treasury of folktales but also to keep them alive.⁵⁶

Conclusion

There is a Bhutanese folktale that poignantly, yet delightfully, portrays that happiness and prosperity are not necessarily one and the same. The story titled “Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise” is about an old man who begins the day finding a priceless turquoise and exchanges the jewel with a horse, the horse for an ox, and the ox for a sheep, the sheep for goat, the goat for a rooster, and in the end the rooster for a song.

⁵⁴ Dorji, T. 2002, p.18.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.19.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp.19-20.

The words of Buddhist master Shantideva summarize this story well: “The goal of every act is happiness itself, though, even with great wealth, it’s rarely found”.⁵⁷ It is through the intentional and spontaneous telling and retelling of such stories that allows them to accomplish what they are inherently able to do—touch lives at the heart level, affecting worldview and becoming catalysts for life transformation. As Bhutan moves towards a proactive national promotion and program of traditional storytelling in the entertainment, educational, and informational spheres, the closer she will come to achieving His Majesty, Jigme Singye Wangchuck’s dream of Gross National Happiness.

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⁵⁷ Ibid., p.50.

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