

Bhutan's Faustian Bargain?⁺

William J. Long*

Bhikkhus, there are two kinds of happiness. What two? Worldly happiness and spiritual happiness. These are the two kinds of happiness. Of these two kinds of happiness, spiritual happiness is foremost.¹

While seeing things clearly, the wise one knows both kinds of happiness. The other is not worth a sixteenth part of the bliss of blamelessness.² -- Shakyamuni Buddha

Introduction

Two decades ago, Bhutan opened to the outside world and created a mixed market economy directed toward the pursuit of greater Gross National Happiness (GNH) for its citizens, not merely an expansion of Gross National Product (GNP). A mere ten years ago, Bhutan underwent a political transformation: transitioning from a monarchy to a constitutional democracy.

In many respects, these changes have been remarkably successful. Across many domains of gross national happiness—standard of living, education and health—Bhutan

⁺ Faust is literary character based on a historical figure who appeared in the writings of Christopher Marlowe and later in a play by Goethe among other renditions. Faust is a successful yet dissatisfied scholar who makes a pact with the devil exchanging his soul for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. The term “Faustian bargain” generally refers to a short-sighted exchange of immediate material benefits at the expense of more enduring spiritual riches.

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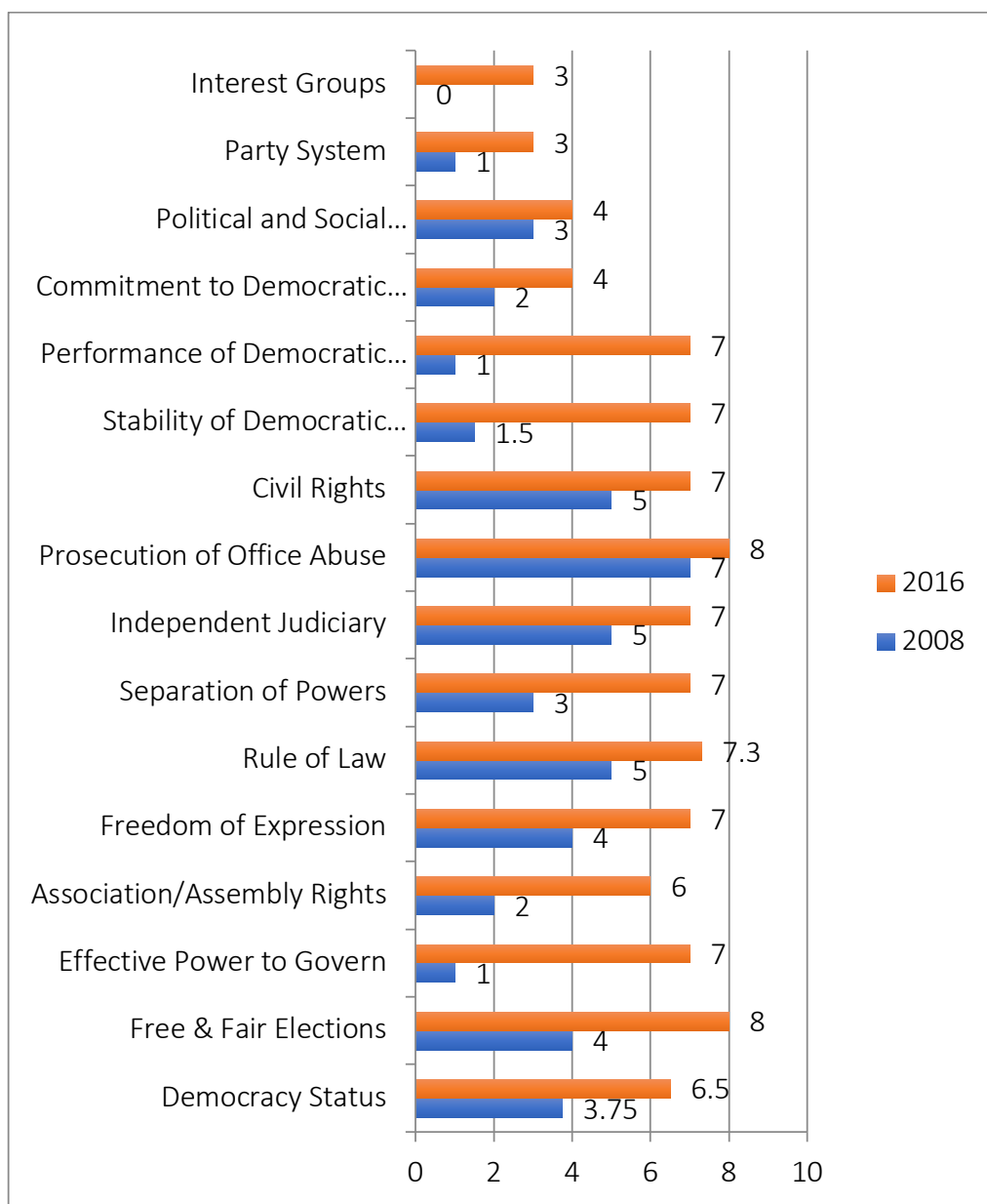
¹ A.N. 1:81.

² A.N. II:62.

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has made significant progress and has done so with policies consistent with Buddhist principles that emphasize equality, poverty eradication, full employment, provision of essential human needs and protection of the natural environment. For example, gross national income per capita in purchasing power parity terms increased from US \$3591 in 2000 to US \$7176 in 2014; poverty levels fell from 23.2% in 2007 to 12.7% in 2012; expected years of schooling for children entering school increased from 7.6 years in 2000 to 12.6 years in 2014; and, life expectancy rose from 52.4 years to 69.5 years during that period (UNDP, 2015). Despite rapid growth, Bhutan remains carbon negative and over 72% of the country's land area is covered in natural forests (up from 66% in 2000) (UNFAO, 2016). The World Bank Survey of Bhutan concluded, "The Kingdom of Bhutan is considered a development success story with decreasing poverty and improvements in human development indicators" (World Bank, 2016). Reflecting these trends, the GNH Survey reported that overall national happiness was measurably, if modestly, on the rise in Bhutan from 2010 to 2015. The GNH Happiness Index for the population increased nearly 2% when all domains were accounted for equally.

Equally impressive, Bhutan has quickly transitioned from an essentially authoritarian system of government to a recognizable democracy with uniquely Buddhist and Bhutanese features. The legal and institutional basis for democracy has taken root in Bhutan. Most state institutions associated with democratic governance are performing well, especially the Parliament, Judiciary and independent constitutional agencies. Non-state actors such as the press, civil society organizations and political parties which are also critical to democracy, are at an early stage of development and may need to increase their capacities to play a significant role in Bhutan in coming years.



Graph No. 1: Bhutan's Transition to Democracy, 2008 and 2016

Source: BTI, 2008, 2016.

A statistical comparison illustrates the overall progress that Bhutan has made in transitioning to democracy and, as they say, saves a thousand words. Graph No. 1 above reflects

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Bhutan's aggregated transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system of government as well as Bhutan's performance across 15 specific variables related to the elements of democratic consolidation.³ Recognizing that no one sure method measures democracy and democratization, the graph below gives a credible landscape view of the process.

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

There is a shadow over this otherwise sunny picture, however. The latest 2015 Gross National Happiness Survey shows a significant decline in the country's spiritual wellbeing relative to the 2010 Survey. This important trend may be overlooked or under-appreciated because the GNH survey's methodology weighs each of nine different domains⁴ of citizen satisfaction equally in determining the country's overall happiness index, and hence the decline in spiritual wellbeing is offset or masked by gains in other domains of happiness such as health and living standards. The methodological choice of weighing each of the nine domains of happiness equally is, as will be discussed below and suggested by the quotations above, problematic. This methodology privileges individual choice as to what constitutes the components of happiness over any other value, and is a decidedly Western, not Buddhist, approach to weighing happiness. According to Bhutan's own stated Buddhist principles and beliefs that originally animated the GNH development strategy, not all "happineses" are created

³ The data are taken from two detailed longitudinal studies in the Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI), which analyze and evaluate, on a ten-point scale, to what extent 129 developing countries are steering social change toward democracy. Available online at www.bti-project.org/en/index/.

⁴ These domains are: psychological wellbeing; health; time use; education; cultural diversity and resilience; community vitality; good governance; ecological diversity; and, resilience and living standards.

equally. Wellbeing that comes from within is a higher form of happiness than enhanced material comforts or improved external conditions. Applying Bhutan's Buddhist values and the foundational meaning of GNH to the survey's domains would prioritize the spiritual dimensions of happiness relative to the material.

Applying Bhutan's Buddhist approach to happiness would question whether it is sound to treat the "Psychological Wellbeing" domain of the GNH Survey, which encompasses spiritual happiness, as only one of nine equally important domains. This domain of happiness is, according to Buddhism and the founders of the GNH strategy, the most important dimension of happiness, and other domains of happiness are only lesser forms of happiness in themselves and important as conducive conditions for this higher form of happiness. This Buddhist understanding of happiness is what makes GNH unique, and what makes Bhutan's national goal and state identity distinctive. If Bhutan is declining in this dimension of happiness, even if it is succeeding in other measures of happiness, then the GNH experiment—to develop both spiritually and materially—is, at best, only half won. If Bhutan cannot maintain its happiness in the Buddhist sense, then providing improved material conditions is a laudable and necessary achievement, but short of the exceptional development goal Bhutan had set for itself.

This article raises, but does not attempt to answer, the following question: "Is Bhutan sacrificing its spiritual wellbeing, the deeper, more meaningful dimension of happiness for a Buddhist nation, in exchange for advancements in its material, or worldly happiness?" Or, in short, has Bhutan struck a Faustian bargain by opening itself to the forces of globalization, thereby foregoing spiritual wellbeing for increased material comforts.

I suggest that this is a critical question for Bhutan to examine because the country's unique Mahāyāna Buddhist values and

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culture are what make Bhutan, Bhutan. Bhutan is a country of less than one million people sandwiched between China and India with over 1.2 billion people each, or, as they say locally, “Bhutan is a yam between two boulders.” If the spiritual dimension of GNH is sacrificed to more conventional material dimensions of wellbeing, then Bhutan is not just experiencing a loss in a domain of happiness that could be offset elsewhere, it is in danger of losing its core values that shape its unique identity and that are critical to its sovereignty.

To understand this potential dilemma facing Bhutan, it is important to understand first the Buddhist meaning of happiness as compared with Western definitions of wellbeing, and to understand how this Buddhist understanding of happiness was the underpinning for the Bhutan's pursuit of gross national happiness as the touchstone of its political and economic policies in the first place. The following sections briefly address these two topics. I then elucidate in detail the current trends in Bhutan's spiritual happiness.

A Buddhist Understanding of “Happiness”

“Happiness,” in the Bhutanese Mahāyāna Buddhist sense of the term, has a meaning distinct from Western conceptions of happiness. In Buddhism, genuine happiness does not equate with Western notions of hedonic (“feel good”) pleasure or the concept of overall life satisfaction used by Western social scientists. Nor is the Buddhist notion of happiness fully analogous to Aristotle's notion of happiness as eudemonia, the sense of deep contentment arising from living a virtuous life (although moral discipline and virtue are the foundations for higher forms of happiness in Buddhism).

In Buddhism, true, lasting happiness is a state of mind and therefore can only be obtained by understanding, purifying and controlling the mind, not merely improving one's external

circumstances.⁵ Understanding, purifying and controlling the mind requires three related practices: (1) developing moral maturity through mindfulness of one's ethical responsibilities; (2) reducing and eventually eliminating negative emotions of hatred, greed and ignorance,⁶ and replacing them with positive emotions of equanimity, compassion and generosity that allow for contentment and peace of mind;⁷ and (3) developing "wisdom," which is an understanding of how ourselves and all things truly exist, that is, realizing the fundamental Mahāyāna Buddhist ontology of no-self, impermanence and interdependence. By developing compassion and wisdom, one can abandon self-grasping and self-cherishing (the pervasive delusions that are the root cause of all unhappiness), liberate oneself from suffering and enjoy an inexhaustible source of happiness that comes from within. Enduring happiness is not principally about securing ever better external conditions because happiness is the product of an internal state of mind. Happiness requires mindfulness in conducting one's activities to ensure that they are virtuous and meditative concentration, which connects practitioners to their pure Buddha nature and to the true nature of reality (emptiness). This connection or "awakening" is, for Buddhists, the authentic source of peace and happiness.⁸

Buddha's teachings do not ignore the need for material comforts or good external conditions as these assist one's practice and provide a lesser form of happiness in themselves.

⁵ A discussion of a Buddhist theory of the mind is beyond the scope of this article, but for working purposes, mind, in Buddhism, is a non-material continuum of awareness or consciousness that includes all concepts or discriminations and all emotional states.

⁶ These delusions are known as the "three poisons" or root delusions that contaminate the mind but are not an intrinsic part of the mind.

⁷ The positive emotions of generosity, patience and compassion are part of the six "perfections" of the bodhisattva's path.

⁸ Mindfulness and meditative concentration are two broad categories of innumerable instructions of Buddha designed to eliminate suffering and achieve happiness.

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Buddha instructed that society should be organized to provide these conditions for all. Government policies, no matter how charitable or enlightened, however, cannot directly make its citizens happier in the Buddhist sense. The state's responsibility is to provide the best possible conditions to contribute to mental development for the greatest number of people given available resources. It is the job of government to remove obstacles that inhibit an individual's progress toward enlightenment and to reduce unnecessary suffering. This responsibility is what makes happiness a political and socio-economic project, as well as an individual goal, and justifies the state's pursuit of GNH.

It is essential not to lose sight of this Buddhist understanding of happiness and the role of the state in it to appreciate the original and deeper meaning of pursuing gross national happiness. The Buddhist philosophical and soteriological understanding of "happiness" is what makes the pursuit of "gross national happiness" unique, and why it is not merely one of many multi-dimensional measures of development as it is usually seen in the West, and, increasingly, in Bhutan. Former Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigme Y. Thinley, summarized the notion of genuine happiness from a Buddhist perspective: "We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds" (GNH Centre, 2014). Most Western observers neglect the deeper meaning of Bhutan's national goal because they apply Western understandings of happiness to their analysis of GNH. As professor Ross McDonald noted, it is "very easy to miss the deeper [meaning] implied by GNH thinking and to completely miss the fact that we missed this" (McDonald, 2010, p. 616).

A Brief History of the Evolution of “Gross National Happiness”

The idea that political and economic policies of the state should be directed toward maximizing the happiness of its citizens (understood as described above) is not new or recently manufactured in the history of Buddhist philosophy or in the history of Bhutan. The principle of pursuing GNH comes directly from the 2500-year-old teachings of Buddha on how to overcome suffering and find happiness and the role of good governance and material prosperity in that process. GNH also encapsulates the core value that has guided Bhutanese society for centuries. Dasho Kinley Dorji, journalist and former Secretary of Information and Communications for Bhutan observed, “GNH is not a sudden concept and it is not as if in the 1970s, the King suddenly had a brand-new idea. It is really the expression of the Bhutanese system, of the values and social and economic arrangements we have had for centuries ... values that come out of Buddhism” (Dorji, 2010, pp. 104-105). Earlier, the Third King speaking in the 1960s said as much when he remarked that the goal of development should be to “make people prosperous and happy ... a holistic view of life and development is called for that augments equally people’s spiritual and emotional wellbeing as well. It is this vision that Bhutan seeks to fill” (Evans, 2013, p. 642).

Sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s,⁹ the Fourth Majesty in a public interview remarked that, “The pursuit of Gross National Happiness is more important than the pursuit of Gross National Product” (Ura, et al., 2015). What was new in “Gross National Happiness” as Bhutan’s enounced development goal was the clever and concise phrasing of this concept in a way that captured this deeply felt principle for the

⁹ The exact date of the King’s quote is not certain. Some claim the King made this remark in 1974, others say in 1979, still others the early 1980s (Munro, 2016).

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Bhutanese and attracted the attention of the global community. This comment held special meaning for Bhutanese and later struck a chord in the West when it appeared in the global media in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰ The King, by removing the word “product” and replacing it with the word “happiness” was offering an alternative model of development that would make the end of government policy happiness, not material output, in consonance with Bhutan’s Buddhist beliefs. Michael Rowbotham asserts that substituting a single word “happiness” for the word “product” “injects humanity, in all its rich complexity, into economics” (Rowbotham, 2013, p. 175). The change in phraseology is said to have put people, not output, the Centre of development (Brancho, 2013), and it made interiority (happiness), not external conditions, the starting point for assessing development (Hargens, 2002).¹¹

Bhutan’s most important economic policy body at that time, the National Planning Commission, explained Bhutan’s independent path, “Simply imposing development models from outside which do not take religion and tradition into account will only serve to diminish existing culture [and] meet with limited success” (Wangmo and Valk, 2012, p. 56). Bhutan was

¹⁰ The King’s quote appeared in an interview with the Financial Times of London in 1986 and the first multilateral discussion of GNH allegedly occurred in 1998 in Seoul at the Asia-Pacific Millennium meeting sponsored by UN Development Programme (UNDP). Since that time, GNH has been the subject of many governmental and non-governmental conferences and was discussed at the United Nations in 2012 as an alternative government paradigm.

¹¹ To appreciate the uniqueness of Bhutan’s GNH strategy, it should be compared with the dominant development model of the late 20th century, neo-liberalism, which accentuated many of the features of 19th century laissez-faire economics. The goal in neo-liberalism is expanding GNP and creating a surplus for investment for more output and to service foreign-held debt (Williamson, 1990). Neo-liberalism recommendations included fiscal discipline (austerity) to reduce budget deficits, tax reform, market-based interest and exchange rates, open trade and foreign investment, privatization of state industries and protection of property rights. Preservation of spiritual, cultural or environmental values did not figure into the equation

clear that its development model differs profoundly from the Western GNP growth model: “Our approach to development has been shaped by beliefs and values of the faith we have held for more than 1000 years firmly rooted in our rich tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The approach stresses not material rewards, but individual development, sanctity of life, compassion for others, respect for nature and the importance of compromise” (Royal Government of Bhutan Planning Commission, 1999, p. 19).

Bhutan’s GNH approach to national development challenged many tenets of economic orthodoxy, most importantly the assumption that increasing material output and consumption automatically equates with increasing levels of human happiness (Upreti, 2016). Buddha directly rejected this idea and taught that a singular focus on material acquisition and consumption (the growth model) leads to dissatisfaction and unhappiness, not enduring and meaningful happiness. The wisdom of this teaching was clear to Bhutan: by pursuing GNP growth at all costs many countries had lost their cultural identity, spirituality and environmental integrity and a deeper sense of happiness. In 1990, the Fourth Majesty explained: “Our country has an ancient and unique cultural heritage which we wish to preserve as we feel that this is vitally important for a small nation like ours. We do not wish to be swept away by the tide of materialism and consumerism. We are determined to preserve our rich spiritual and cultural values and traditions. At the same time, we must achieve a high level of economic growth with equality to improve the quality of life of our people” (Kuensel, July 2, 1990, p. 1).

Although the pursuit of GNH encapsulated Bhutan’s response to globalization and asserted its own unique approach to modernization and development, Bhutan was not rejecting the forces of globalization wholesale, but it also was not accepting them uncritically. Bhutan’s leadership believed it would be essential to maintain a balance between materialism and spirituality while opening itself up to greater external

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influences to secure the benefits of Western science, technology and management. Bhutan sought to extract from Western development models what it believed was relevant and good and to harmonize these concepts with its cultural, political, religious and socioeconomic traditions, much like its experiment with constitutional democracy.

In contrast to a growth at all cost model, GNH envisioned controlled economic growth, which, if kept in its proper place in the hierarchy of society's values, can support societal wellbeing. Bhutan's economic planning committee wrote, "Economic growth is essential to support and nurture the spiritual and social needs of the community. If growth is combined with equity, it can support social harmony, stability and unity" (Royal Government of Bhutan Ninth Five Year Plan, 2003, pp. 4-6). Growth must be subservient to happiness as a national priority, however. Dasho Kinley Dorji (2004) explains, "GNH is not against change but propounds control of change at a manageable pace and with the right priorities. It insists on judicious balance of tradition and modernity, materialism and spiritualism, all within a pristine environment. It is an expression of the deep-rooted value system on which Bhutanese social, economic and political systems were built ..." (p. 6). Affirming its belief in a hierarchy of values, Bhutan asserted that when material and spiritual values come into conflict, "We have deliberately chosen to give preference to our understanding of happiness and peace, even at the expense of economic growth, which we have regarded not as an end in itself but as a means to achieve improvements in the wellbeing and welfare of the people" (Royal Government of Bhutan Planning Commission 1999, p.19).

Pursuing its distinctive course of development was not just a policy preference; it was believed essential to the country's very existence. Dasho Kinley Dorji underscored the importance of GNH to Bhutan's survival: "We will never be a major economic or military force so we decided our strength must lie in our identity, our cultural identity. We must be different from other

billions of people in the region or we will be swallowed up” (Dorji, 2010, pp. 103-104). Bhutan’s Constitution provides, and its political elite repeatedly states, that Bhutan’s sovereignty and its national survival depend on the preservation of its unique identity, which is a product of its culture, particularly its Buddhist values. Therefore, Bhutan rejects as its national goal any idea that contradicts what it considers the real source of wellbeing and the true purpose of the state. The King reminded his citizens of the responsibility they had to seek development according to their own values, “Nor must we ever lose sight of the fact that our nation is the last standing independent Mahāyāna Buddhist kingdom in the world. We are the sole surviving custodians of a social and cultural system that extended beyond the Eastern Himalayas to embrace a large part of Eastern and South East Asia. The world has been impoverished by the loss of the social and cultural system which is today unique to Bhutan and where it both survives and flourishes” (Upreti, 2016).

Originally, GNH was a widely-understood concept with deep spiritual roots, rather than an academic construct or a highly specified or quantified model for policymaking. As originally conceived, it was a philosophical principle that was considered “non-quantifiable” (Evans, 2013; Givel, 2015). GNH was meaningful to the Bhutanese because it captured what the Buddha taught as the true meaning and destiny of human life and it was powerful as a national aspiration because people intuited its deeper meaning. This is not to say that the average Bhutanese would explain the meaning of the GNH in philosophic or salvific terms. To a lifelong Buddhist this is self-evident truth, just as a Western “person on the street” takes subject-object dualism for granted, even if that person cannot offer a philosophical grounding for their belief.¹²

¹² A recent dissertation by Dr. Kent Schroeder documents the power of implicit, internalized GNH values in Bhutan. His study considered the integrity of GNH

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Until the year 2000, the concept GNH was an unstructured expression of Bhutan's worldview and development philosophy. The notion was shared by the country's leadership and civil service but was not formalized as a policy guide or index of any kind. Looking back at this earlier period, the Centre for Bhutan Studies and Gross National Happiness Research (CBS/GNH) concluded GNH policymaking "depend[ed] on people who were working almost subliminally, or unconsciously. There were neither doctrinal positions to follow nor managerial formats like goals, strategies and indicators to be adhered. These were to come later. ... It depended on the people who had intuitively internalized it. ... It is arguable that intuitive internalization is superior to bureaucratic institutionalization." (Ura, 2015, p. 6).

To concretize and operationalize the concept in measurable terms both for Bhutan's policy planning and implementation and for wider legitimacy of the concept, Bhutan overcame its reluctance to develop quantitative indicators of happiness and began to specify the elements of GNH and the means for their measurement with increasingly complexity (Givel, 2015). The first effort to enumerate GNH as a concept was to describe it as a broad strategic framework for development resting on "four mutually supporting pillars:" sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development; environmental conservation; preservation and promotion of culture; and, good governance (McDonald, 2010). What was faulty in the early architectural

directives from their initial national policy pronouncement to their subsequent local implementation in four distinct policy areas. He discovered that, despite frequent political conflicts and confusion within the policymaking and policy implementation process, "policy outcomes that result is often a reasonable reflection of the original GNH policy intentions." He found that the influence of common Buddhist values—harmony, balance, interdependence and sustainability—shaped interactions and implementation, mitigated conflicts and resolved inconsistencies and that Buddhist inspired cultural values that underlie GNH have often played the key role in generating policy outcomes consistent with GNH policy intentions (Schroeder, 2014).

metaphor was that “pillars” do not support themselves or each other but, to continue the metaphor, must rest on a “pedestal.” The unstated pedestal, of course, was Bhutan’s Buddhist worldview and ethics. To illustrate, the pillar of equitable social and economic development is grounded in the Buddhist principles of equality and dignity of all persons and the priority placed on eliminating the suffering of those most in need. The environmental pillar is based on the emphasis on harmony between mankind and nature and the interdependence and non-hierarchical nature of the relationship among all sentient beings. And good governance is rooted in the Buddhist belief that government, in whatever configuration it might take, should be judged by its virtue and ability to serve to reduce its citizens’ suffering and remove obstacles to mental cultivation and higher levels of happiness. Ross McDonald, who wrote extensively on GNH at that time, recognized that the metaphor of four mutually supportive pillars was lacking: “The real foundation of happiness is a widespread morality and if this is indeed the case, then Bhutan’s [Four Pillars] model is incomplete in its failure to explicitly recognize the fundamental importance of this factor in determining the subsequent quality of cultural, governmental, environmental and economic interaction” (McDonald, 2005, p. 31). Bhutanese parliamentarian Pema Tenzin, made the same point. He argued that for the Four Pillars to be operationalized as a vision of practical development, “we will need to consider religious values, because they can provide the inner strength and guiding principles for living and can motivate development activities” (Tenzin, 2004, p. 555). Nevertheless, with the advice of interested international experts, the four pillars evolved into nine domains of life that were thought to be equally important to happiness and this methodology of equal weighting of domains was built into the methodology for conducting the five-year national surveys of happiness.

To create measurable standards for policymaking and credible metrics for domestic and international audiences, the quantification of GNH began in earnest in 2006. Proponents of

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quantification argued that as GNH became a quantitative measure it could more easily be institutionalized in government policy, both in legislation and within the bureaucracy and by local governments charged with implementing GNH projects. To serve as a guide to policy, a quantitative measure would facilitate judgments about the strength or weakness of a domain over time and across region and sub-populations to permit tailoring of the appropriate policy response and to gauge the overall status of happiness in Bhutan. That year, the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS), which later became the Centre for Bhutan Studies and Gross National Happiness Research (CBS/GNH), an independent think tank working with the government's GNH Planning Commission, developed and administered a survey to gather data on the happiness of the nation, first on a limited basis in 2008 and then nation-wide in 2010, with the intent to conduct a full survey after every five years.

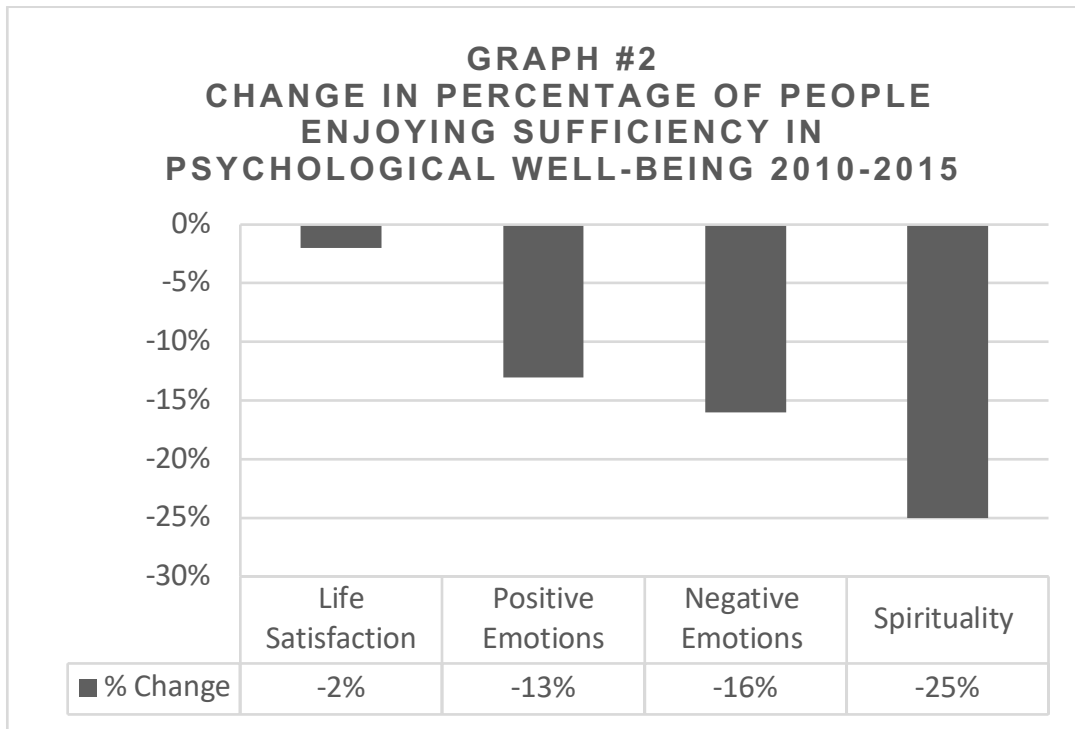
The nationwide survey included 124 questions and interviewed one percent of the entire population. The responses to the questions would ultimately be used to generate a GNH Index that measured the status and progress of society's happiness in the nine domains and in total. The specific findings contained in the GNH Index were to be used by government planners and policymakers to create and assess policies in each domain and at all levels of government to most effectively promote national wellbeing. Considering this survey, the Government would design policies directed to areas and populations of need, thus deploying its limited resources in the most effective way possible to alleviate obstacles to a conscious inner search for contentment. CBS/GNHR Director Karma Ura proposed six uses for the Index: (1) setting an alternative framework for development; (2) providing indicators to sectors to guide development; (3) allocating resource in accordance with targets and GNH screening tools; (4) measuring people's happiness and wellbeing; (5) measuring progress over time; and, (6) comparing progress across the country (Ura, 2015).

A Closer Look at Trends in Bhutan's Spiritual Wellbeing

As noted above, by many measures, Bhutan has been successful in providing the political, social and material conditions that are associated with good government and economic development consistent with its Buddhist values and its accomplishments are truly laudable. But, it is another question to ask whether these changes have made its citizens happier in the Bhutanese Buddhist understanding of the concept. To explore this question requires an emphasis on a subset of the results contained in the 2010 and 2015 GNH surveys—the data in the domain of “Psychological Wellbeing.” Despite its Western and secular terminology, “psychological wellbeing” probes the populations’ internal state, or happiness in the Buddhist meaning of the term. A more accurate term for this domain would be “quality of mind.”

If one focuses on the survey measurements that track psychological wellbeing, happiness in the Buddhist meaning of the term, the trend nationally is downward. Bhutan’s material and social progress has coincided with a decline in its mental wellbeing and its deeper sense of happiness. During the period 2010 to 2015, the domain of “Psychological Wellbeing” suffered statistically significant declines in the percentage of the population achieving sufficiency in each indicator; Life Satisfaction, Positive Emotions, Spirituality and Freedom from Negative Emotions as seen in Graph No. 2.

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Graph No. 2: Change in people enjoying sufficiency in psychological wellbeing 2010-2015

To appreciate what lies behind this decline in inner wellbeing, it is necessary to unpack the GNH survey data that measures happiness in a Buddhist sense.

Trends in the Three Dimensions of Higher Form of Happiness

The three steps to higher forms of happiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism are: (1) developing equanimity, (2) replacing negative thoughts and feelings with positive ones (particularly, developing compassion), and (3) seeking and realizing wisdom by understanding the interdependence and impermanence of all phenomena. When the GNH Survey data are examined according to these categories, the data reveal that the population is not making progress on the stages of the path

that lead to higher forms of happiness. I consider each of the three steps in turn.

1. Developing Equanimity

In Buddhism, a contented, non-distracted and balanced mind that keeps material life in proper perspective comes from practicing moral discipline and right view. Having a balanced mind, one without excessive worldly concerns or grasping at material objects, allows one to overcome daily anxieties, frustrations and worries and allocate more of one's energies to the pursuit of higher forms of happiness, the minds of compassion and wisdom. Achieving this balanced mind is known as "developing equanimity" in Buddhism, and it is the first step along the path to the higher forms of happiness. The mind of equanimity is likened to a well-prepared field in which love and compassion can grow. Equanimity also reduces distractions in the mind, which facilitates the meditative concentration needed to realize wisdom, the highest form of happiness. Under the indicator of "Negative Emotions" the GNH Surveys asks about the frequency of negative distractions in the respondent's mind that prohibit the development of equanimity through the following question:¹³

"During the past few weeks, how often do you experience worry or stress?"

Graph No. 3 illustrates the increase in worry and stress from 2010 to 2015, which inhibits the development of equanimity.¹⁴

¹³ Answers were scaled from 1 (often) to 4 (never) in 2010, and 1 (several times a day) to 7 (never) in 2015.

¹⁴ Methodological Note: The data used throughout this chapter were provided directly by the Center for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research. The Center kindly shared their original data and reports that were used to run analysis and comparisons for this article. Questions in the 2010 survey about negative

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Further insight into the level of equanimity of the population can be found under the indicator, "Positive Emotions." The GNH survey assesses the affirmative development of equanimity through the following questions:¹⁵

"During the past few weeks, how often do you experience calmness?"

"During the past few weeks, how often do you experience contentment?"

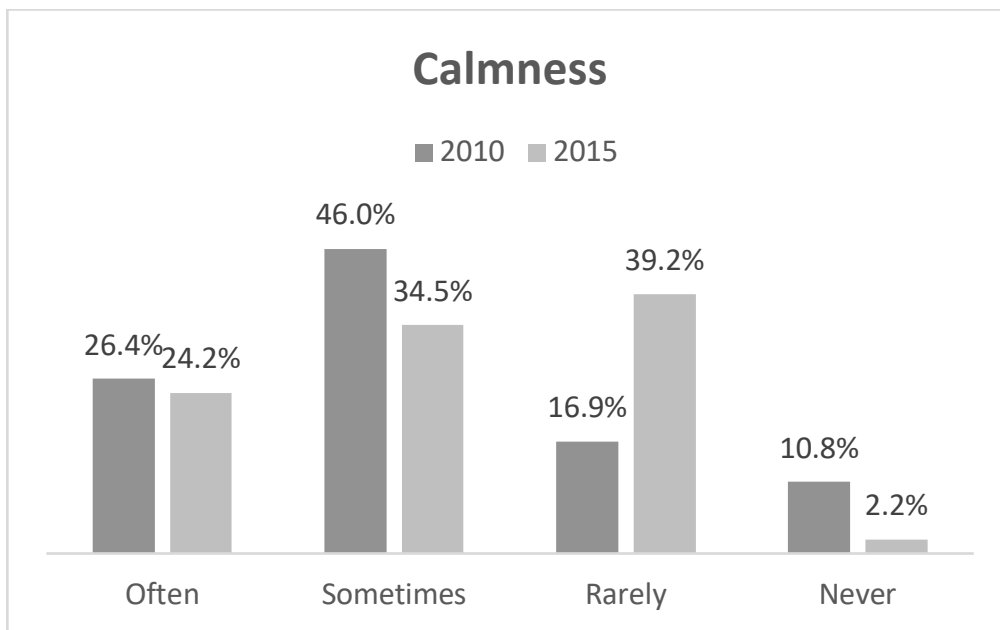
and positive feelings as well as spirituality were asked as multiple-choice questions each with four possible answers (Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never). However, questions in the 2015 survey were asked as multiple-choice questions with 7 possible answers (few times a day, once a day, few times a week, once a week, once or twice a month, not in the last month or never). To run comparisons, specifically for negative and positive feelings, this study used the 2010 matrix as it could clearly explain the trends, and the 2015 data could be collapsed accurately in to four categories. To match the comparison categories, the 2015 data was collapsed in the following manner:
Few times a day + once a day = Often
Few times a week + once a week = Sometimes
Once or Twice a month + not in the last month = Rarely
Never = Never

¹⁵ Answers were scaled 1 (often) to 4 (never) in 2010, and 1 (several times a day) to 7 (never) in 2015.



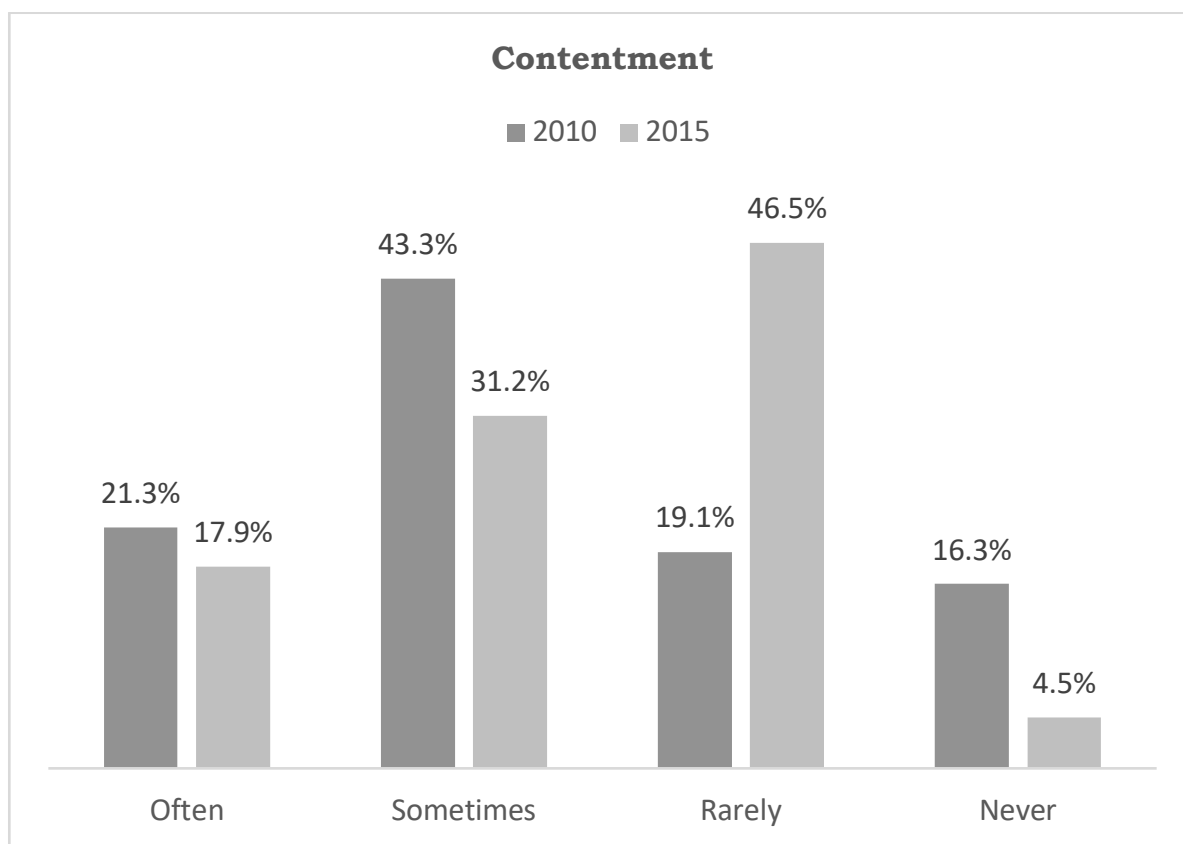
Graph No. 3: Impediment to Equanimity: Stress/Worry 2010-2015

Graphs No. 4 and No. 5 illustrate the frequency of the experience of equanimity by the population, which has declined from 2010 to 2015.



Graph No. 4: Equanimity: Calmness 2010–2015

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Graph No. 5: Equanimity: Contentment 2010–2015

2. Replacing Negative Emotions with Positive Emotions

Step two in achieving the higher forms of happiness involves reducing negative emotions and replacing them with positive ones. Negative emotions and thoughts are considered delusions in Buddhism, states of mind that are un-peaceful, uncontrolled and likely harmful to the individual both in a karmic sense and regarding an individual's immediate happiness. The practices of mindfulness, contemplation and meditation are designed to help train the mind to inculcate affirmative emotions.

There are various lists of negative emotions or thoughts in Buddhism, but the primary ones are the “three poisons” of

anger, desirous attachment and self-grasping ignorance.¹⁶ Other secondary delusions that flow from these three include pride, jealousy, miserliness and others.¹⁷ The GNH survey does not probe all these emotions, but it does assess some of the important negative emotions through the following questions:¹⁸

“During the past, few weeks, how often do you experience selfishness?” (i.e., self-grasping ignorance);

“During the past, few weeks, how often do you experience jealousy?” (a consequence of desirous attachment and self-grasping); and

During the past, few weeks, how often do you experience anger?

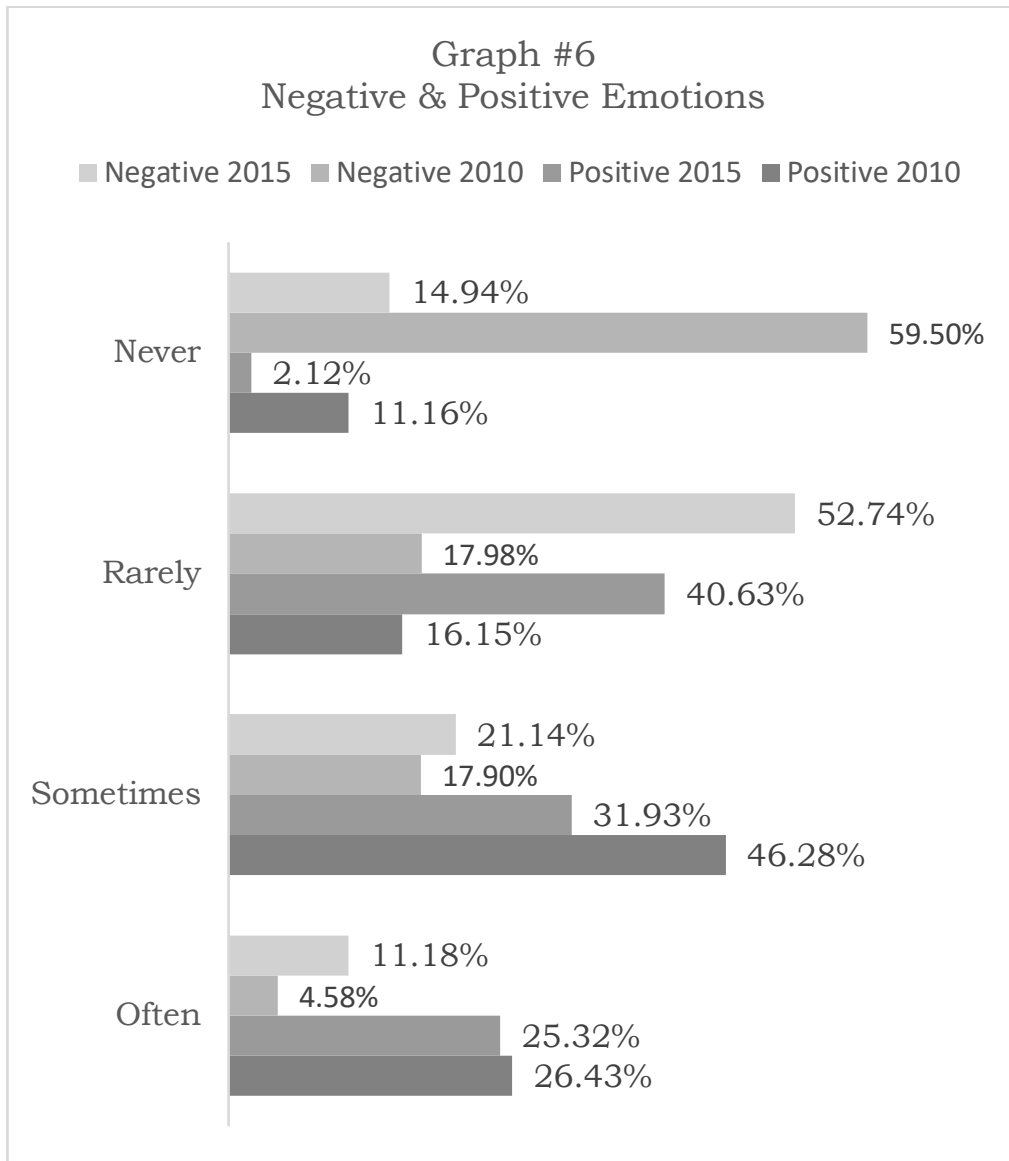
In general, the Bhutanese are experiencing negative emotions with greater frequency, as seen in Graph No. 6.

¹⁶ Buddhism identifies six “root delusions:” desirous attachment, anger, deluded pride, ignorance, deluded doubt and wrong view.

¹⁷ From the three root delusions, 20 secondary delusions arise: aggression, resentment, spite, jealousy, miserliness, concealment, pretention, denial, self-satisfaction, harmfulness, shamelessness, inconsideration, dullness, distraction, mental excitement, non-faith, laziness, non-conscientiousness, deluded forgetfulness and non-alertness.

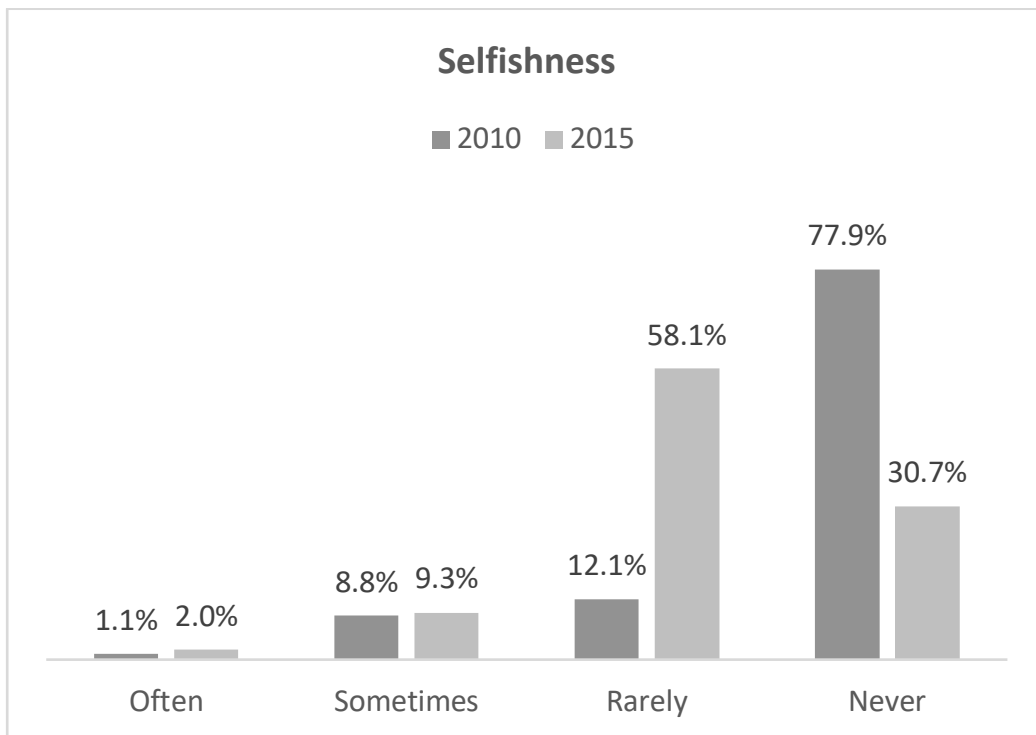
¹⁸ Answers were scaled 1 (often) to 4 (never) in 2010, and 1 (a few times a day) to 7 (never) in 2015.

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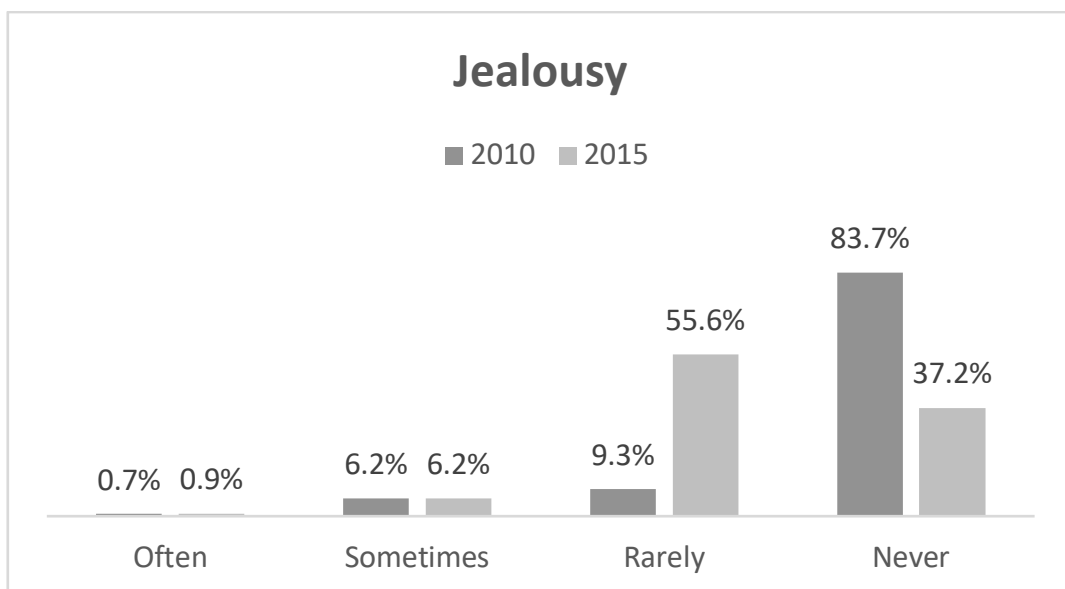


Graph No. 6: Negative & positive emotins, 2010 and 2015

Regarding the specific mental “poisons” of selfishness, jealousy and anger, comparing survey results in 2010 and 2015 reveal an increased experience of all three negative emotions. See Graphs No. 7, No. 8 and No. 9.

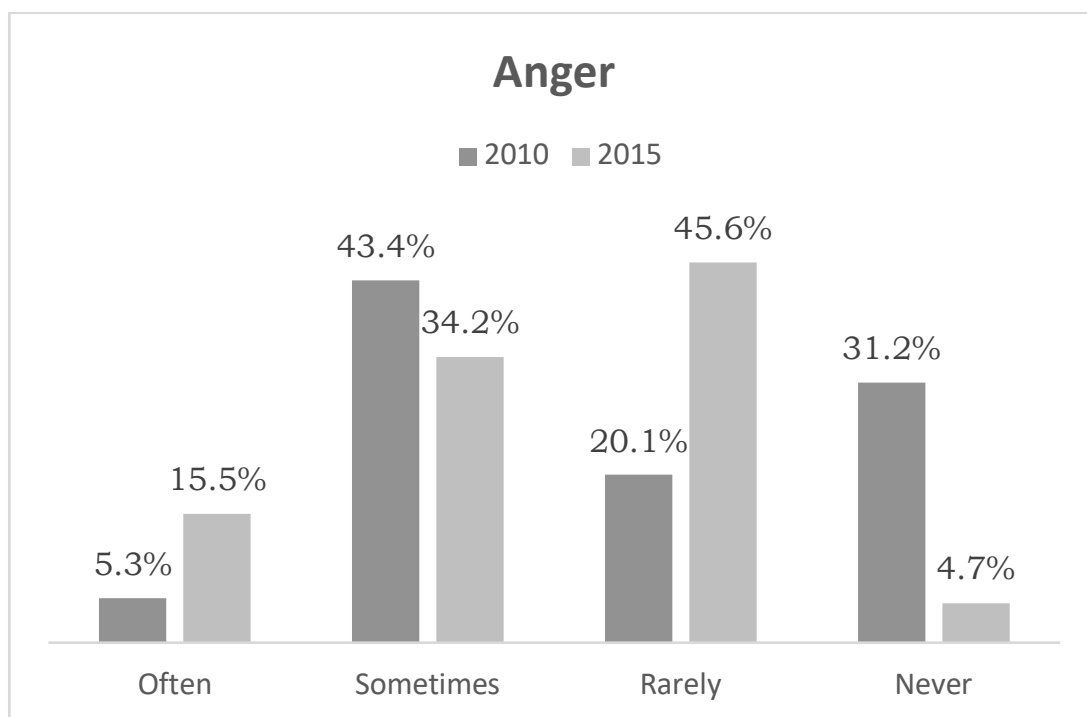


Graph No. 7: Negative Emotions: Selfishness 2010–2015



Graph No. 8: Negative Emotions: Jealousy 2010-2015

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Graph No. 9: Negative Emotions: Anger 2010 –2015

Similarly, there are many lists of positive emotions or virtuous mental states in Buddhism that are to be cultivated for greater happiness.¹⁹ In the Mahāyāna tradition, the most celebrated minds in addition to the mind of equanimity are love, compassion and sympathetic joy in others good fortune (the opposite of jealousy). The development of compassion is particularly beneficial because it is the foundation for developing the enlightened mind of bodhicitta—a mind, motivated by compassion for all sentient beings that spontaneously seeks enlightenment for their benefit. This great or universal compassion is a mind that wishes to liberate all living beings from their suffering. It combines cherishing love for all sentient beings (as opposed to our usual self-cherishing)

¹⁹ In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the most well-known virtues to be practiced are the “Six Perfections” of a bodhisattva: giving, moral discipline, patience, effort, mental stabilization (concentration) and wisdom.

with the recognition of their pervasive suffering in saṃsāra, i.e., birth, aging, sickness, dissatisfaction, etc. A loving attitude combined with a recognition of pervasive suffering constitutes the “heart of compassion.” In addition to compassion, in both the Pāli Canon and in the Mahāyāna tradition, giving with pure motivation (dāna) or generosity also ranks among the highest virtues. Giving, in Buddhism, takes three forms: providing material things, offering protection from suffering (giving “fearlessness”), and teaching or giving the dharma (the highest form of giving because its value is not limited to one lifetime alone).

Regarding the status of Positive Emotions, the GNH Survey asks the following questions:²⁰

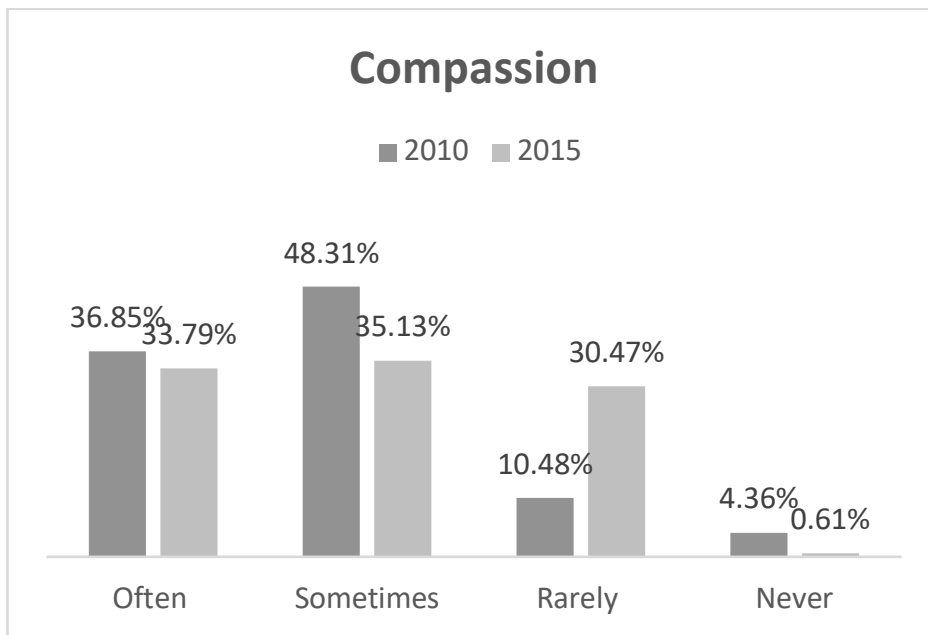
“During the past few weeks, how often do you experience compassion?”

“During the past few weeks, how often do you experience generosity?”

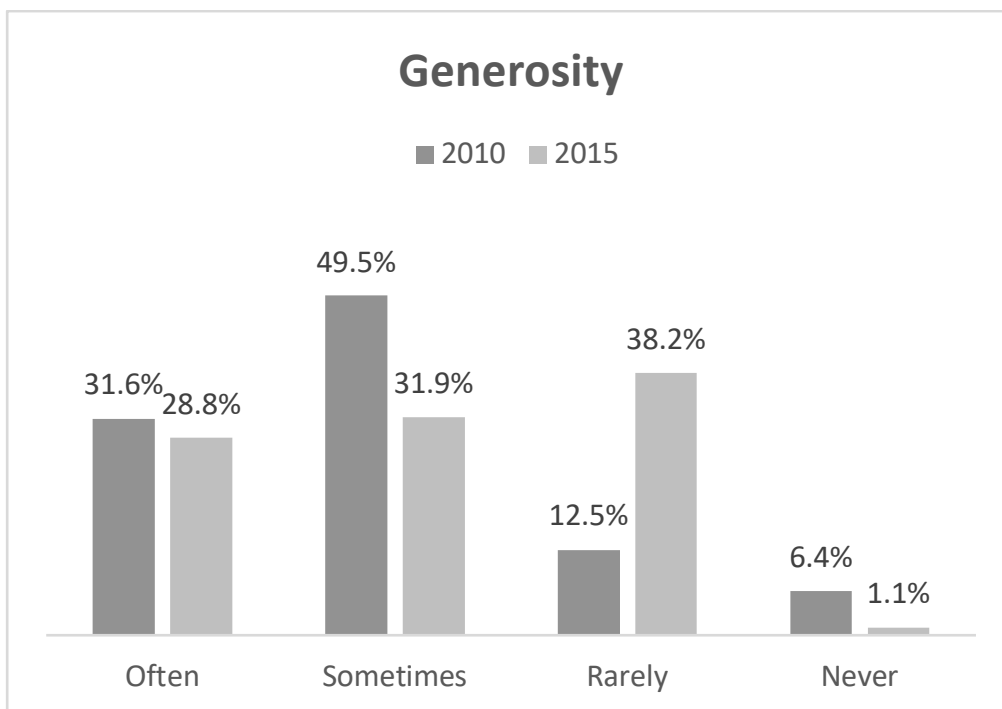
Comparing survey results from 2010 to 2015 reveals a decline in the populations’ frequency of experiencing these positive emotions. See Graphs No. 10 and No. 11.

²⁰ Answers were scaled 1 (often) to 4 (never) in 2010, and 1 (several times a day) to 7 (never) in 2015.

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Graph No. 10: Positive Emotion: Compassion 2010–2015



Graph No. 11: Positive Emotions – Generosity 2010 – 2015

3. Wisdom Practice

In Buddhism, the highest form of happiness comes from attaining wisdom, realizing the true nature of oneself and reality that provides liberation from suffering and, in the Mahāyāna tradition, when combined with compassion, encourages an individual to help all others reach the same state. The method of developing this special wisdom comes from mindfulness of karma and one's ethical responsibilities, contemplation on virtuous teachings (the dharma) and meditation (repeated and deep familiarization of the mind with the truth). The GNH Survey does not ask respondents to assess the status of their wisdom directly, but instead asks about their opportunity to practice mindfulness (of karma), pray (contemplate) and meditate. In other words, the Survey inquires how often they are practicing the methods for obtaining wisdom through the following questions:

“Do you consider karma in your daily life?”;²¹

“How often do you recite prayers?”;²² and

“How often do you meditate?”²³

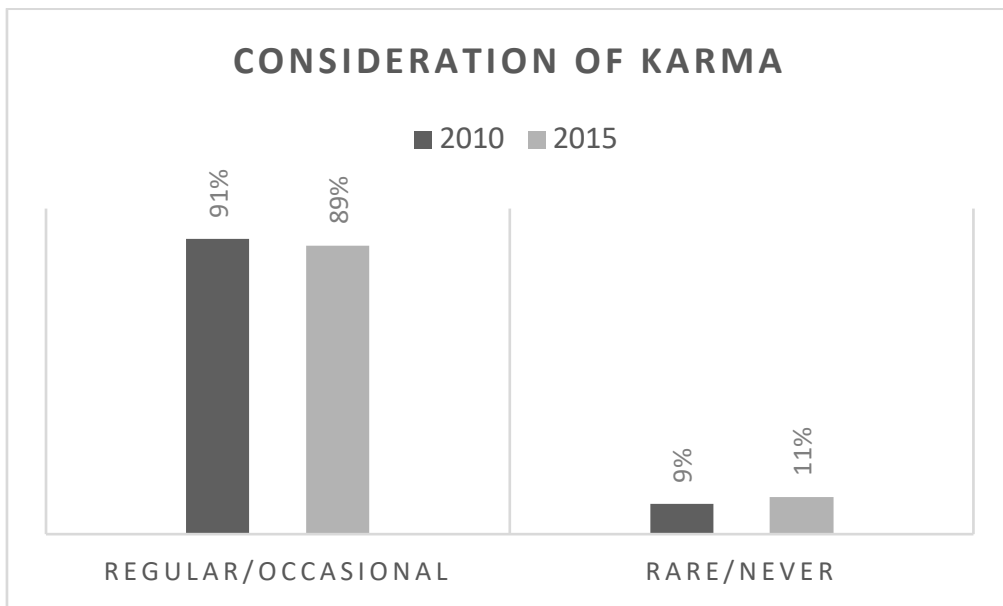
Comparing survey results from 2010 to 2015 regarding wisdom practices, reveals a decline in the frequency of praying and a very slight decline in mindfulness of karma and meditation across the population. See Graphs No. 12, No. 13 and No. 14.

²¹ Answers were scored 1 (not at all) to 4 (always) both in 2010 and in 2015.

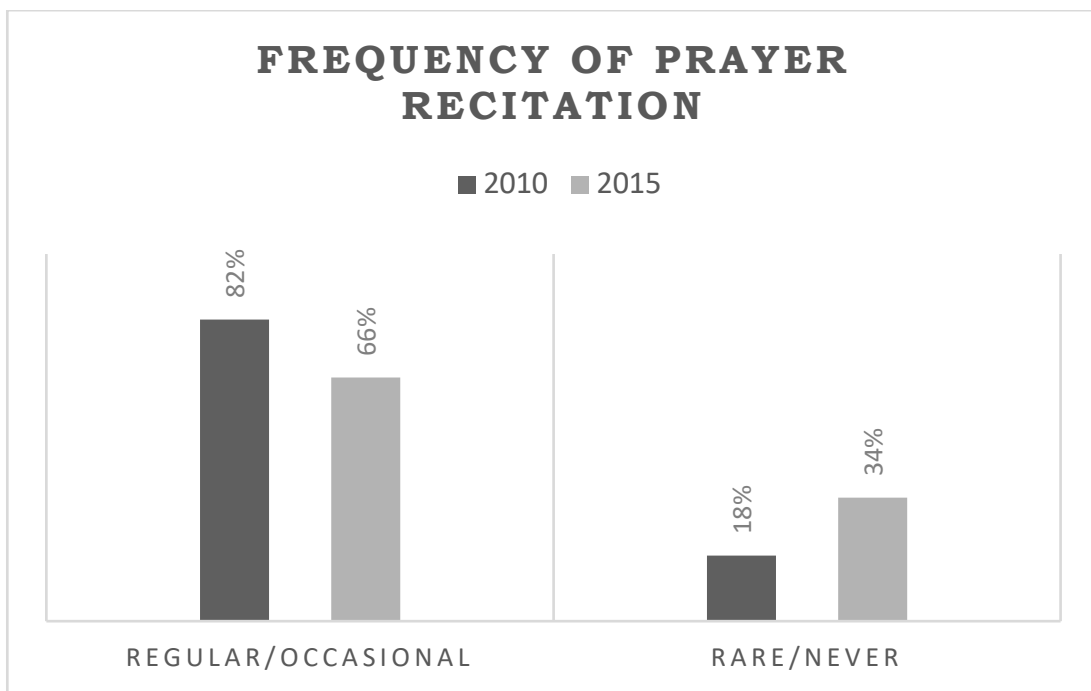
²² Answers were scored 1 (not at all) to 4 (regularly) in 2010, and from 1 (never) to 5 (several times a day) in 2015.

²³ Answers were scored 1 (not at all) to 4 (regularly) in 2010, and from 1 (never) to 5 (several times a day) in 2015.

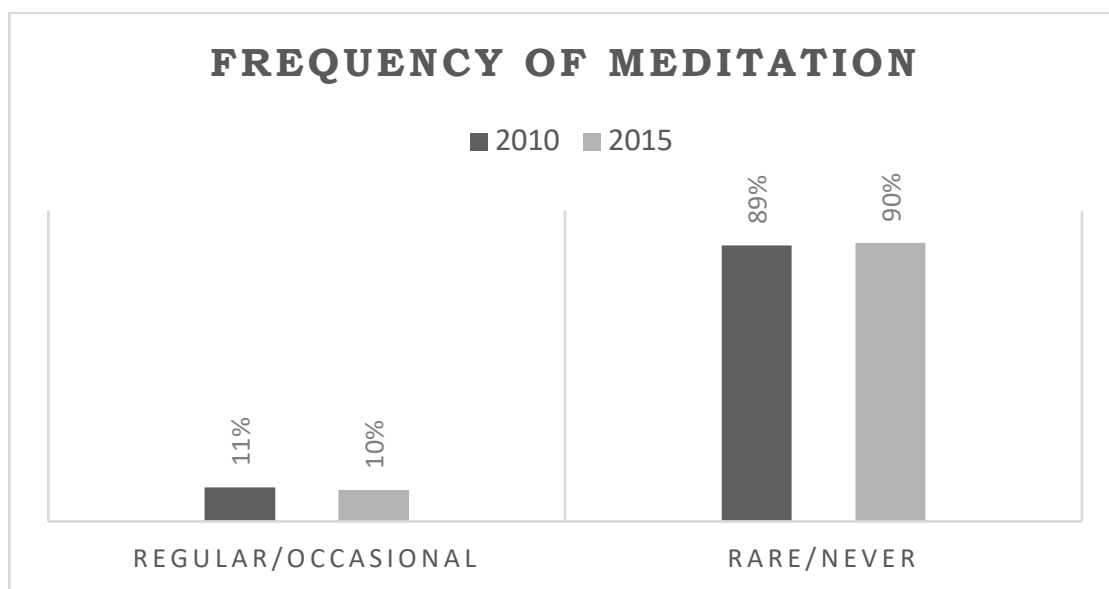
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Graph No. 12: Consideration of Karma 2010–2015



Graph No. 13: Prayer Recitation 2010–2015



Graph No. 14: Frequency of Meditation 2010–2015

Summation

When viewed through the lens of Bhutan’s Buddhist values, the trend in the population’s experience of the higher forms of happiness has declined noticeably in the short period of five years. Levels of worry and stress have increased and calmness and contentment levels have fallen. The experience of the negative emotions of selfishness, jealousy and anger are more frequent and the experience of positive emotions of compassion and generosity are rarer. Prayer recitation is down and recognition of the ethical responsibilities of karma and meditation practices that lead to wisdom are beginning to decline. Regarding wisdom practices generally, one could say that the population continues its practices much as before but gets much poorer results in terms of equanimity and positive minds. Overall, Bhutan’s population is experiencing a significant decline the higher forms of happiness as it modernizes and achieves success in many of the other GNH domains.

Conclusion

Some observers believe that Bhutan's current leadership is aware of this trend but has already turned away from the traditional meaning of GNH to focus on material and social dimensions of wellbeing. In a recent publication, Wolfgang Drechsler concludes that GNH has become secular as it has been modernized and internationalized (Drechsler, 2016, p. 16). One interviewee described the problem of declining spirituality to me as "boring," as there is nothing that can be done to stop it (Interview data, 2017). If so, perhaps the trade-off of traditional notions of happiness for material advancement has already been made, i.e., Bhutan's Faustian bargain.

Others maintain that the recent decline is likely a temporary phenomenon, that this decline may underestimate Bhutan's spiritual robustness and that policy measures can reverse any near-term deterioration in spiritual happiness. One observer cited the popularity recent public lectures by Bhutan's spiritual leader, the Je Khenpo, and the prevalence of Buddhist programming on radio and television as evidence of the country's spiritual enthusiasm. The point is made that the very forces of global communication that threaten Bhutan's traditions—YouTube, Internet, television—have been used to translate traditionally rarefied Buddhist teachings from classical Tibetan to Dzongkpa and English and make them accessible to laypeople (Interview data, 2017).

Some analysts note that Bhutan has experienced remarkable changes during the period 2010-2105, including democratic transition and consolidation after a century of monarchy and rapid growth in its economy and global connectedness. They believe that Bhutan will absorb these changes over time without the ongoing loss of its spiritual wellbeing. The shock of democracy and greater openness over the period of 2010 to 2015 may normalize and stabilize in terms of its effects on spiritual wellbeing. Future survey data may reveal a rebound

in greater feelings of equanimity and positive emotions once some of these political, economic and social changes are digested.

It is also possible that surveys, by their individualistic method of gathering data and the impersonal summing and manipulation of atomistic responses, may be missing something about Bhutan's collective consciousness, that Bhutan's spiritual strength is greater than the sum of its parts. Bhutan is a far more communal society than most in the West and its attitudes, opinion, and actions are shared and shaped by the family and village and a long national history. This local, regional and national zeitgeist may not necessarily be fully reflected in the tally of individual responses.

Furthermore, Bhutan is a self-confident country that does not see itself as a passive subject buffeted by the forces of globalization. Because of its improbable birth and survival as a nation, Bhutan considers itself to be "auspicious," a Buddhist term used to mean that the Bhutanese and their unique culture have had and will continue to experience fortunate conditions that will allow them to flourish (Interview data, 2017). Many in Bhutan believe that the country can push back against influences that it judges as detrimental to its society through conscious policy choices that neutralize or counteract pernicious forces.

There is some evidence for this assertion. For example, Bhutan's Parliament is debating ways to improve values education in its schools and there are proposals to allow the monastic community to make its facilities increasingly available to lay people—particularly teachers and civil servants—for extended visits and short-term retreats to strengthen traditional values. More ambitious still are early designs to improve the mindfulness, positive emotions and wisdom of the population through government-supported meditation retreats as part of the next five-year development plan. This initiative envisions supporting up to 10,000

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meditators a year for a three-year solitary retreat in Buddhism where one studies all the stages of the path and receives systematic training in advanced meditation techniques designed to attain high realizations to allow the graduates to serve as exemplars to the wider society. The outcome of these policy initiatives is uncertain, but they counsel caution in extrapolating only one possible trajectory for Bhutan's spiritual future. The recent survey data point in a direction that is troublesome, but not inevitable.

Bhutan 12th five-year plan, 2018-2022, will develop and later monitor policy performance for its fidelity with GNH principles. These policies initiatives will, for the first time, track the nine-domains of the GNH survey with individual ministries taking the lead in devising and implementing policies designed to strengthen wellbeing in their domain. Likely, the Home Ministry will be responsible for the domain Psychological Wellbeing, and it will merit watching to see how, in policy terms, Bhutan attempts to improve conditions that support its populations' spiritual wellbeing and to what effect.

Ultimately, the aim of the GNH Survey is to generate discussion and reflection on what brings the citizens of Bhutan happiness. The recent decline in spiritual wellbeing, if accurate and if it continues, could constitute an existential threat to Bhutan's unique culture and core beliefs that define it as a nation. Whether this threat is real, its significance, and the appropriate response, if any, are essential questions for Bhutan to consider.

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