

## Bhutanese Public Policy in the 'Century of Interdependence'

*Peter D. Hershock\**

### **Summary**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century promises to be the “century of interdependence.” Yet, growing interdependence is no guarantee or either greater equity of sustainable and just development. In order to insure that increasing interdependence leads to extending and deepening public good, public policy must appropriately respond to and coordinate the complex dynamics that characterize 21<sup>st</sup> century social, economic, political, and cultural realities.

This position paper proposes forging a coordinative approach to public policy that is systematically informed by Buddhist conceptual resources and that is consonant with the Royal Bhutanese Government's commitments to sustainably enhancing personal, communal, and national happiness. Such an approach would alloy the differing strengths and insights afforded by Bhutan's various ministries and knowledge communities under an analytically forceful, yet unifying policy aim. In particular, it would orient public policy toward building personal, communal, and national capacities for contributing freely and skillfully in directing the process of integration into global systems toward the consolidation of public good.

The key indices of this coordinative approach to public policy are poverty alleviation and enhanced diversity.

The preliminary implications of this coordinative approach to public policy will be briefly examined with reference to a single crucial policy domain: education.

---

\* Coordinator, Summer and Outreach Programs, Asian Studies Development Program, East-West Center, Hawaii

## **I. Imperatives for a New Approach to Public Policy**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is poised to be known as the “century of interdependence.” The rate and scale of changes taking place with present-day patterns of globalization are historically unprecedented, bringing about systems of interdependence that at once open and integrate societies worldwide. These systems are increasingly not only complicated, but complex.

Complicated systems resist predictive analysis and overt management because of the sheer quantity of variables involved. Given time and resources, however, the behavior of complicated systems can be (within accepted statistical parameters) accurately predicted and managed. By contrast, complex systems exhibit behaviors that in principle (and not simply in practice) could not be unanticipated. Complex systems do not simply aggregate the characteristics of previously existing relational systems (or sub-systems). They represent qualitatively distinct orders that are greater (or other) than the summed characteristics of their component parts. Complex systems generate novel behaviors by virtue of their recursive structure, by means of which histories of the situational outcomes of their own behaviors feed-forward into shaping future behavior. Coherently responding to complex systems and complex change thus involves commitment to coordinated trajectories of innovation.

A major consequence of this complex process of opening and integration has been a shrinking of possibilities for safely and effectively externalizing the costs of growth and development. Contrary to common fears, globalization has not resulted in worldwide homogeneity. Instead, it has sharpened differences, especially with respect to the desired outcomes, opportunity domains and cost distributions of rapid change and deepening interdependence. In spite of increasing institutionally-mediated cooperation, robust normative consensus remains elusive and social, economic and political conflict remains acute. Indeed, a global transition is now underway from an era in which social, economic and political troubles could effectively be treated as problems that can be

solved independently, to an era in which independent solutions have rapidly compounding, ironic consequences, giving rise to predicaments that express competing and often contrary goods and interests.

Problems can be solved within agreed upon horizons of factual relevance, without challenging or contravening existing norms and values. By contrast, predicaments force confronting disparities in the meaning and limits of relevance and can only be interactively resolved, through the negotiation of shared goods, interests, and commitments.

Together, the emergence of complex social, economic and political patterns of interdependence and the shift from problems to predicaments pose the need to go beyond factual cooperation to meaningful coordination in articulating, realizing, and sustaining public good. Globally, public policy has yet to systematically respond to and meet this need. In large part, this can be seen as a legacy of the historical dominance of rational choice theory and realism in modern governance practices, and their impact on policy-making.

Rational choice sets limits to cooperation based on the assumption of ultimately disparate interests held by essentially independent agents. Competition is structurally basic to rational choice theory. Realism asserts the ultimate objectivity of the context for decision-making and the subservience of values to power in effecting change.

Overtly peaceful and secure co-existence and co-operation are clearly preferable to outright conflict. But based on the assumption of essentially competing values and interests, co-existence and cooperation at best result in the tolerance of difference. Global realities now command going beyond mere tolerance to the harmonization of differences through patterns of diverse interdependence that promote self-sustaining mutual contribution. This is possible only on the basis of deep and fully coordinating consensus on the meaning of shared welfare.

Where change is relatively slow and interdependence relatively weak, the failure of public policy to meet needs for meaningful coordination may only result in negligible compromises of public good. But where change is rapid and emerging interdependence strong, resulting compromises of public good can be both widely evident and severe.

In the U.S., for example, where the effects of globally opening and integrating societies are arguably most mature, public policy has demonstrated troubling impotence with respect to stemming the erosion of public good. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 20% of all American children and 13% of the general population live in poverty, with 35% of the population dropping below the poverty line at some point during each year. Roughly 28% of all Americans have no health insurance, while for minorities this can be as high as 45%. In China, where economic growth has been at record levels since market liberalization, income disparity is now also near a global high and environmental degradation globally threatening. Worldwide, the World Health Organization recently affirmed that depression is the single most important factor in morbidity and early mortality for women in the developed world (and is projected to be such for all developing and developed societies by 2010). Insofar as depression is most strongly correlated with an experienced absence of opportunities and abilities to contribute to one's own welfare, this is a scathing indictment of the failure of public policy to coordinate social, economic, political and cultural dynamics in such a way as to insure meaningful lives and livelihood for all.

In the absence of an overarching policy aim capable of coordinating policy formation and implementation across sectors and, ultimately, across societies, public policy will be increasingly prone to generating ironic consequences and deflecting growing interdependence from contributing to and consolidating public good.

## **II. Forging a Coordinative Policy Paradigm**

The presuppositions that underlie dominant approaches to public policy work against the attainment of meaningful coordination in the form of robust social, economic, political, and cultural diversity. It is now relatively common for knowledge communities in various sectors of society to affirm that the driving conditions for troubling developments within a given sector often lie outside that sector. Nevertheless, there is little effort to comprehensively coordinate policies across sectors. Troubling developments within sectors are most commonly treated as problems that can be factually addressed and solved without reference to the dynamics, norms, and patterns of interest proper to other sectors. Solutions in one sector thus tend ironically to result in the proliferation of problems in other sectors and, finally to deepening predicaments with respect to both the means and ends of continuing change.

Where this becomes apparent, it is most common for the goods proper to one sector to be subordinated to those of another. This may result in rationally cooperative policies, but not in the robust coordination needed to resolve predicaments of the depth and scale as those arising with 21<sup>st</sup> century patterns of global interdependence.

### **A. Buddhism as Resource**

Buddhism offers a promising body of resources for addressing complex change and meeting the need for meaningfully coordinated public policy.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true in predominantly Buddhist societies. But much as the concepts and methods of Western science and democratic governance have global relevance, the concepts and practices proper to Buddhism can be seen as having widespread and particularly timely salience in a world of increasingly complex, meaning-sensitive interdependence.

The root practices of Buddhism aim at developing keen and caring insight into the interdependence of all things for the

purpose of enabling sentient beings to author liberation from trouble and suffering (*dukkha*). Buddhist insight into the nature of interdependence stresses how values-intentions-actions (*karma*) shape and orient the patterns of outcomes and opportunities that structure the dynamics of interdependence. It is the engagement with interdependence as both dynamic and dramatic (or value- and intention-laden) that underlies the particular promise of Buddhism as a body of resources for crafting coordinative public policy in light of complex and predicament prone realities.

Recent developments in ecological systems theory and complexity theory also promise much in the way of resources suited to framing policy in an increasingly interdependent world. These theories do not, however, provide a sufficiently robust account of the role of values and intentions in shaping situational dynamics, treating interdependence as an essentially factual, rather than dramatic, phenomenon. To the extent that complexity theory recognizes the possibility of “downward causation” and hence the role of history and values in shaping systemic change, it perhaps comes as close as possible to Buddhist approaches to interdependence within the purview of realist commitments to the ultimately objective (rather than non-dual) nature of reality.

Contrary to purely factual approaches to understanding interdependence, Buddhist insight into interdependence is coeval with insight into the moral complexion of change. In Buddhist terms, understanding implies responsibility. This alliance of the real and the moral assumes particular force in light of the Buddhist teaching that, for the purpose of resolving trouble or suffering (*dukkha*), all things be seen as impermanent. Seeing all things as impermanent is to see that whether a situation can be changed is not ultimately in question, but only in what direction change is occurring, in accordance with what values-intentions-actions.

In traditional terms, interdependence is most often represented as directed toward either *samsara* (the

persistence, if not intensification, of *dukkha* or *nirvana* (the meaningful and liberating resolution of *dukkha*). Seeing all things and situations as dynamically interdependent is also to see them as mutually altering. It is to see that each thing contributes to the meaning of all other things and that revising the meaning of all things and all situations is thus always possible. No situation is intractable. Given the further insight that all things are empty (*sunya*) of any essential essence, even the most troubling outcome is also an opportunity for liberating engagement.

It is the function of Buddhist practice, most broadly understood, to establish and systematically cultivate the values-intentions-actions needed to realize wisdom (*prajna*), attentive mastery (*samadhi*) and moral clarity (*sila*), for the purpose of resolving trouble and suffering. In widely accepted Buddhist terms, wisdom grows out of caring and skilled insight into and engagement with interdependence. Attentive mastery develops as sustained, focused, and yet flexible attunement to situational dynamics. Moral clarity arises with mature appreciation of the currents of value-intention-action shaping a given situation and how to direct these currents toward liberating interdependence.

Wisdom, attentive mastery and moral clarity are both means and ends of Buddhist practice. They can also be seen key dimensions for coordinating public policy and public good in the context of complex change and strong interdependence. This coordinative function can be illustrated in terms of traditionally cited outcomes of sustained and well-directed Buddhist practice. First, deepening practice is said to result in both the rise of *kusala dhamma* or wholesome and virtuosic eventualities and the demise of those that are *akusala* or unwholesome and unskilled. Conduct that is *kusala* is not just “good enough” or factually sufficient; it is good to the point of excellence. Maturing practice means skillful excellence in attending to things, as they have come to be (*yathabhutam*), as opportunities for realizing liberating patterns of relationship. Secondly, those faring well on the

path of Buddhist practice are said to suffuse their situation with compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity, and joy in the good fortune of others—relational qualities that harmonize and aptly direct situational dynamics away from conflicts of interest and disparate perceptions of the good toward immediately and profoundly shared welfare.

Importantly, the relational qualities fostered by Buddhist practice are not represented as merely subjective or even inter-subjective attainments. Ultimately, they are situational transformations. This follows from the fact that *dukkha* arises through particular patterns of conditions. The trouble and suffering to be resolved by Buddhist practice are results of blocked and/or errant patterns of relationship. Buddhist practice finally means exercising skillful and transformative insight into relational dynamics, appreciating and contributing to all that comes to be, as it comes to be, in order to change the way things are changing. Buddhist practice involves the ongoing orientation of complex change.

Policy guided by rational choice and realism valorize freedoms of choice and independence or autonomy. The benefits of this in situations of acute inequity or injustice are undeniable. But as stressed by the teachings of no-self (*anatta*), emptiness (*sunyata*) and interdependence, valorizing autonomy is eventually conducive to further and deepening *dukkha*. It restricts caring insight into interdependence; works against diversity or realizing robust, self-sustaining contributions to shared welfare; and favors blindness with respect to the ironic consequences of self-interested choice.

Policy formulated in keeping with the commitments of Buddhist practice subordinates freedoms of choice to relating freely, fostering patterns of relationship that culminate in appreciative and contributory virtuosity directed toward increasingly refined and meaningfully shared public good. This means going beyond simply solving problems within particular horizons of factual relevance. It means systematically confronting and resolving predicaments as

they arise, most fundamentally by activating the emptiness (*sunyata*) of all things, their capacity for limitless mutual relevance. Public policy shaped according to the dynamics of Buddhist practice does not reject circumstances, as they have come to be, but rather works with and through them to reveal their ultimately opportune nature.

### **B. Alloying Buddhist Practice and Gross National Happiness in Bhutanese Public Policy**

The ultimate aim of policy formulated in keeping with Buddhist practice is to enhance personal, local and national capacities for relating freely and demonstrating virtuosity in resolving trouble or suffering (*dukkha*), however they should arise. But for this ultimate aim to be realized, it must have real-world traction in all the activity domains of contemporary life.

In Buddhism, ultimate truth (*paramartha*) is said to be expressible only in terms of conventional realities (*samvritti*). Likewise, ultimate policy aims can only be realized by way of conventional practices, even if these practices cannot by themselves generate ultimate policy aims. For ultimate aims to have real-world traction, they must be embodied in real-world practices. Ultimate public good should not be seen, then, as a transcendent ideal above and beyond concrete, societal circumstances, but as expressed directly in these circumstances as their core disposition or meaning.

Policy-making must work with existing and emerging interdependencies as patterns of outcomes and opportunities shaped by consistently sustained systems of values-intentions-actions. Thus, policy making must be guided by research that is attentive to the factual dynamics addressed by the social sciences, but also by humanistic research that is attentive to currents of meaning and alternative interpretations of factual dynamics. In both cases, research must be guided by the overall commitment to elicit resources within the conventional situation for expressing ultimate policy aims. This is only possible on the basis of a fully

coordinative approach to the making of policy.

Significant progress in this direction has been made in Bhutan through the inspired challenge posed by His Majesty, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, to orient development activities toward increasing Gross National Happiness. By stating that Gross National Happiness (GNH) will be more important than Gross National Product (GNP), His Majesty explicitly subordinated quantitative to qualitative criteria for policy evaluation, and implicitly called for a fully coordinated approach to policy formulation and implementation.

The 5<sup>th</sup> 5-Year Plan anticipated the need for coordinated public policy by departing from the emphasis of prior 5-Year Plans on sector divided objectives to emphasize cross-sectoral aims. In addition, from this time forward, Bhutanese planning has been more visionary in aspiration, stressing the need for proactive policies in keeping with such broad values as sustainability, consolidating and conserving cultural identity, and decentralization. From the 6<sup>th</sup> 5-Year Plan onward, GNH has served as an umbrella for identifying emerging, proactive concerns and commitments related to environmental and cultural conservation, good governance, and equitable economic development.

To date, however, GNH has lacked the kind of traction needed to drive development practices and to establish clear trajectories for policy formation and innovation. Fully and effectively operationalizing GNH has become an objective of both ministries and knowledge communities and led, in 2004, to the hosting of an international conference on that theme by the Centre for Bhutan Studies.

At the same time, there have been limited, but promising efforts to infuse policy formulation and institutional development with Buddhist concepts and traditional Bhutanese values. Perhaps the most fully articulated of these efforts is that undertaken by the Judiciary. Efforts have been made to use traditional Buddhist teachings and texts to

inform not only the spatial practices of the courts (though the incorporation of specifically Buddhist architectural and iconographic elements), but also to ground jurisprudence practices in Buddhist textual traditions. Recently, Buddhist training (one year-long) for judicial professionals has been undertaken and efforts are ongoing to establish the compatibility of contemporary judicial institutions with Buddhist traditions.

Thus far, however, Buddhist concepts and teachings have mostly been marshaled only to mitigate the untoward effects of modernization and to qualify externally-derived institutions. They have not been systematically mobilized to critically assess existing institutional paradigms. Nor have they been used innovatively to articulate distinctively Buddhist and/or Bhutanese institutional paradigms suited to contemporary circumstances.

Truly Bhutanese paradigms for public policy and public good can be developed by alloying the conceptual resources and aims of Buddhist practice with the visionary development aim of enhancing Gross National Happiness. Doing so would enable all ministries and knowledge communities to undertake systematic revisions of their own structures and practices to activate an analytically forceful and coordinated approach to realizing and sustaining public good. The crucial first step in such an effort to skillfully alloy public policy and public good is to develop a conception of happiness that is sufficiently clear and resolute to enjoy decisive traction in the complex world of contemporary realities.

Much debate has taken place regarding the nature, measurability, and institutional implications of happiness. In the absence of a highly resolved, consensual definition of happiness, operationalizing GNH is unlikely to advance beyond the ambit of inspirational rhetoric and cosmetic adjustments to policy. A certain ambiguity in the nature and meaning of happiness is to be appreciated in deference to the multiplicity of perspectives within Bhutan. But the real world

traction needed to resolve the complex predicaments associated with rapidly opening and integrating societies cannot be expected of a vague conception of happiness.

A clear working definition of happiness as a public good can be derived from the traditional location of happiness (*sukkhā*) in the maturation process of Buddhist practice. In the early Buddhist canon, the causes and conditions of the arising and resolution of *dukkhā* are described with unparalleled thoroughness and clarity. Happiness (*sukkhā*) appropriately appears most often in descriptions of the process of awakening or liberation. This process originates with mindfulness, which brings wisdom, which brings tireless energy, joy, a tranquil body, happiness, attentive mastery, and equanimity, compassion, loving-kindness, and joy in the good fortune of others.<sup>2</sup> Happiness arises as a pivotal phase in a process of increasingly refined and highly attuned presence and relational enhancement. The ultimate meaning of happiness is an environment suffused with relationships focused on the realization of clear and abiding mutual welfare.

In terms of personal practice, happiness links bodily tranquility or the absence of stress with attentive mastery or the capacity for freely, flexibly, and yet concentratedly attending to one's situation, as it comes to be, the result of which is transformative and liberating emotional maturity. Happiness comes with mindfully expressing caring insight into the interdependence of all things in zealously skillful attentive action. Happiness is appreciation turning to contribution.

*Dukkha* is ultimately a function of disrupted and disoriented relationships that are personal and communal, but also national and global in scope. *Dukkha* means relationships that are devaluing, that resist meaningful participation, and that thus erode diversity or the presence of self-sustaining patterns of mutual contribution to shared welfare. To the extent that the process of Buddhist practice resolves *dukkhā*, happiness or *sukkhā* can be seen as a pivotal occurrence in

personally, locally, nationally, and globally opening and revising the meaning of relationships to bring about resolutely liberating and enriching interdependence. In terms useful for public policy, then, happiness arises then as the alleviation of poverty through enhanced diversity.

### **C. Poverty Alleviation and Diversity as Indices of Personal, Communal and National Happiness**

The Buddhist canon supports seeing poverty as the result of *akusala* or unskilled and unwholesome patterns of attention and relationship that bring about the proliferation of blockages or impediments to relating freely.<sup>3</sup> Poverty marks an erosion of the attentive and environmental resources needed, in any given situation, to orient that situation toward the resolution of trouble or suffering. Contrary to widely prevalent understandings, poverty does not primarily consist in the presence of lacks or wants. Rather, poverty marks the closure of contributory possibilities.

In circumstances or societies where material needs are poorly met, material lack and want can assume tragic prominence. But, simple lack and need alone are insufficient conditions for poverty. Poverty arises when the poor are unable to do anything effective to meet their material needs. Material conditions like drought or global economic downturns can contribute to this inability. But much more crucial is the ignorance—or severely restricted appreciation—of the poor by those not yet poor. This ignorance effectively denies the value (or potential for offering) of the poor and blocks their ability to contribute as needed to their own and others' welfare. In societies where material needs are comfortably met, and where at least modest contributions to factual welfare are open to all, trouble and suffering more commonly pivot on inabilities to contribute in ways experienced as truly meaningful. Here, poverty takes the generic form of depression. In all societies, however, poverty means forcible isolation from the possibility of offering or contribution.

Poverty alleviation means realizing and sustaining patterns of

interdependence that enhance the capacity of individuals, communities, and nations for relating freely in contributing to one another's welfare. This means taking seriously the relational locus of poverty, resisting the temptation to identify poverty with the poor, and seeing it instead as a breakdown of full and liberating mutuality. Poverty alleviation necessarily entails systemic change driven by clear and resolute insight into the values and intentions that have been shaping and directing interdependence toward a troubling erosion of mutual and equitable contributions to shared welfare. Ending poverty means realizing heightened diversity.

Diversity is often misused as a synonym for variety or multiplicity. In ecological terms, diversity measures the resilience of a self-sustaining ecosystem and is tied directly to the extent and depth of interdependencies by means of which individual species convert situational resources in ways that contribute to one another's welfare. Indeed, individual species *are* or *come to be* as a complex function of what they *mean* to one another. These meaningful interdependencies are the basis of which ecosystems arise and are able to respond to stress. Ecological diversity is not a function of numbers of fundamentally competing species, but of the density and depth of contributory relationships.

A Buddhist conception of diversity can be derived from the concept of emptiness (*sunyata*). Given that all things have no essential nature, arising in complex interdependence and interpenetration, each thing can be seen as a nexus of contributions from and to all other things. Diversity arises with self-sustaining systems of relationships through which each thing appreciates or draws out the value of their situation as a whole, for the benefit of all others. Each thing ultimately *is* what it *means* for all other things. Insofar as all things are empty (*sunya*), they are all ultimately the same. But they are the same precisely because of how each uniquely expresses the contributory force of all others. Thus, diversity in this Buddhist sense implies equity, but not strict equality. Heightened diversity means heightened equity in the maximal

appreciation of situational resources, relating freely in mutually beneficial contribution to shared welfare.

Poverty alleviation and heightened diversity can be seen as key indices of increasing personal, communal and national happiness. Together, they index the tranquility of the “body politic” and the opening of new and meaningful possibilities for relating freely in the focused and flexibly attentive realization of truly common goods.

### **III. Coordinating Happiness and Public Policy: Some Concrete Issues**

If indexed by poverty alleviation and diversity, and interpreted in broadly Buddhist terms, happiness can effectively coordinate policy-making across all sectors of society. This coordination means, first of all, arriving at definitions of each policy domain that are consonant with both Buddhist teachings and contemporary realities. This would require innovative interpretations of Buddhist texts and concepts, as well as detailed understanding of grassroots realities and trends, and would reflect both social scientific and humanistic research undertaken by individual ministries and knowledge communities.

This research would be informed by a succinct, but rich working definition of happiness as a quality of enriching relational development. The discussion of Buddhist happiness presented in this paper can be seen as a synopsis of such a working definition. Included in this working definition would be concise definitions of poverty alleviation and diversity: the key indices of personal, communal and national happiness. The working definition would constrain the process of policy domain definition, but in ways that should bring about a convergence of concerns and creativity among the agencies involved.

Representatives of drafting agencies would meet in committee to jointly clarify the definitions of each policy domain and would use these clarified definitions to further inform the

working definition of happiness as an ecological whole synthesizing the domain definitions. The imperative of this recursive process would be to insure that the pivotal values-intentions-actions shaping each of the policy domains are brought into mutually beneficial relationship. This will insure the diversity of the working concept of happiness, contributing substantially to its real-world traction and resilience under conditions of accelerating opening and integration of Bhutanese society into global patterns of interdependence.

It is imperative that these policy domain definitions be drafted in light of both national and global dynamics. That is, they must be sensitive to global trends affecting the interplay of different activity domains. In Buddhist terms, they should include incisive, deeply historical analyses of the karma (values-intentions-actions) that have been and continue to drive global practices associated with each policy domain. In some cases, emerging contemporary realities may recommend a shift of previously existing institutional boundaries and associated policy domains.

This working concept of happiness would differ in several specific ways from “gross national happiness.” GNH is often described as resting on four pillars: the promotion of environmental conservation, cultural preservation, equitable economic development, and good governance. The broad and encompassing nature of these four developmental domains has the merit of including virtually all development activities under the rubric of GNH. Nevertheless, they map only imprecisely onto existing institutional structures for making and implementing public policy. More importantly, GNH seemingly rests on an insulating “glass ceiling” supported by these four development pillars. GNH is thus often seen as corollary result of development activity, but not as an analytically forceful driver of that activity.

By deriving a robust working concept of happiness through the coordinated input of all relevant policy-making agencies,

GNH will gain functional specificity and complexity. At the same time, the recursive nature of this process insures that the structure and meaning of these agencies will both be informed by and inform the working concept of happiness. Additionally, this working concept would emphasize the complex relational nature of happiness. As indexed by poverty alleviation and diversity, happiness necessarily links all levels of relationship from the personal, communal, regional, and national to the global. This makes explicit the Buddhist realization that truly liberating happiness is never merely 'mine' or 'yours,' but irreducibly 'ours.'

GNH is a rhetorically powerful idea that contrasts powerfully from the more common development measure of GNP. But by implicitly focusing on the national level, the term raises immediate questions of categorical relevance and measurement. Given that happiness consists of a quality and direction of relationship, the concept of nation involved in GNH should also be glossed in fully relational terms as a responsive interface merging local with regional and global patterns of relationship. In this sense, the nation is empty (*sunya*) of any essence and consists of characteristic ways of relating the local and the global. This character-driven operational definition of nation is consistent with GNH emphases on religious and cultural identity, as well as the continued eminence of monarchical leadership. But by positioning the nation as a negotiator of smoothly and properly oriented patterns of interdependence among the local and the global, the nation is also represented as the leading edge of growing or intrinsically developing Bhutanese identity.

#### **A. Toward a Coordinative Bhutanese Education Paradigm**

Education recommends itself as an exemplary policy domain for illustrating the initial phases of crafting public policy in terms consonant with a coordinative conception of happiness.

Presently, education in Bhutan is carried out in three distinct settings, composing a cooperative approach reaching equivalently distinct parts of Bhutanese society: monastic

education; modern education; and, Dzongkha medium education. These educational streams are intended to serve different populations in Bhutan, and have comparatively independent aims. Together, they aim to insure the development of competencies needed in a society opening to and integrating with global dynamics.

The monastic stream is the traditional form of education in Bhutan and has the well-defined aim of preserving Bhutan's rich religious traditions. Modern education, originally formulated on European and post-colonial Indian models, is essentially structured according to a now globally standard, competency-oriented education paradigm. Its original intent was to foster Bhutanese self-reliance in terms of technical and professional expertise. Dzongkha medium education developed as an alternative to the modern stream as a way of reaching populations whose needs were not well-served by modern or monastic education models, and for the purpose of preserving Bhutanese cultural traditions. Recently, boundaries between these educational streams have become somewhat porous, with religious and cultural elements being infused into the modern stream and with the monk body undertaking limited social-educational outreach (related, for example to HIV/AIDS awareness). Nevertheless, as attested by the perceived, continued need for the innovative and insightful capstone program for Graduates Orientation, there is a clear lack of confidence that the mainstream modern education programs adequately prepare students to participate in and guide Bhutan's further opening and integration into the global community.

Although the last decade has seen a policy shift toward "wholesome education" attentive to the needs of students as whole persons, education in Bhutan remains practically wedded to a globally dominant educational paradigm focused on inculcating standardized competencies in all graduating students. While the call for educating whole persons evidences recognition of the shortfalls of this paradigm, it does not go beyond asserting the need to balance mental,

emotional and physical education. The relationship among “wholesome education,” the three distinct formal streams of education in Bhutan, and happiness as an overall development aim is at best vague. To date, happiness has had little, analytically forceful traction in driving or directing educational change.

The following brief comments on education are offered as an illustration of how each policy domain might undertake a revision of its own structures and practices in accordance with a coordinative policy aim of happiness, as outlined above.<sup>4</sup>

The globally dominant educational paradigm can be characterized as orienting education toward engendering individual and collective competencies that embody highly context-dependent abilities to take part in reproducing (and incrementally extending) contemporary norms and practices. This paradigm is increasingly misaligned with contemporary realities, as outlined earlier in this position paper. These realities practically command a shift toward educational practices suited to engendering virtuosity in improvising context-revising, anticipatory norms and practices. Such a paradigm would not center on preserving or modestly reforming abilities to fit into current and anticipated social, economic, political and cultural conditions, but rather on cultivating the complex sensibilities and skills need to virtuously accommodate and direct conditions that could not have been anticipated.

Educational systems aimed at fostering the acquisition of presently relevant skills and knowledge are suitable only in the context of relatively slow and predictable change. They are ill-suited for responding to the imperatives and opportunities of rapid change and global diversity. In effect, competency-biased education contributes to significant friction between available attentive and responsive resources and changing realities and needs, and can introduce considerable drag in the overall pattern of societal development.

The complex and accelerating change characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup> century patterns of interdependence suggest the merits of a shift away from a focus on objective knowledge and competencies to an educational paradigm focused on relational maturity and exemplary skills in shared meaning-making. Buddhist education, in its broadest terms, offers a coherent model for undertaking such a paradigm shift.

The central aim of Buddhist education or training is the expression of relational virtuosity in resolving trouble or suffering (*dukkha*). Because *dukkha* announces relational disruption or discord, and because values-intentions-actions (karma) play a pivotal role in shaping relationships, the liberating virtuosity aimed at in Buddhist education implies consummate skill in negotiating and revising the meaning of a given situation, for the purpose of enabling all participants to contribute freely to the realization of truly shared welfare. This skill, because of the changing nature of all situations, necessarily implies fully realized excellence in improvisation. In sum, Buddhist education is not primarily or substantially preparation for problem-solving, but rather training in liberating predicament-resolution.

Virtuosity serves to bridge the traditional (and in the dominant model of education, firmly segregated) categories of knowledge and wisdom. Virtuosity is an expression of situationally specific contributory genius—an utterly fluid and skillfully productive power of live engagement. But more than that, virtuosity connotes a stunningly graceful capacity for dramatic immediacy and innovation. Virtuosity is relating freely within situation-specific limitations to bring about a coordinated appreciation of all that is present. In Buddhist terms, virtuosity is emptiness expressed as liberative action.

The means and ends of Buddhist training or education, in the very broadest sense, have been wisdom, attentive mastery and moral clarity. As educational aims, caring and effective insight into interdependence, focused and yet flexible

awareness, and clarity of response in dramatically or morally complex situations force a reconfiguration of curricula that takes relationships as primary. This marks a significant shift away from curricula focused on building individual cognitive, emotional and physical competencies. The “whole person” educated in competency-focused curricula is a person in substantial isolation from others and the demands of complex realities. Indeed, in keeping with the Buddhist teaching of no-self—that is, the irreducible relationality of persons—the identification of independent cognitive, emotional, and physical abilities must be seen as ontologically prejudiced and counterproductive. Curricula focused on relational virtuosity will, at the very least, center on coordinating activities that bring students together in the shared realization of complex ends. They would also introduce students to the full range of activity domains comprised in and informing Bhutanese society. These would run the gamut from parenting activities through home-making, trade work, technical and professional activity, and both secular and sacred leadership. Stress would be placed on revealing interdependencies and hands-on experience.

According to such a paradigm, educational progress will not be measured or determined strictly or even primarily in terms of what is known, but in terms of how students are present—bodily, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The more highly educated persons and communities become, the more readily, relevantly, and responsibly they will be able and inclined to demonstrate truly appreciative and contributory virtuosity. Education can be measured, then, in terms of personally and communally achieved and sustained happiness in the relational terms outlined above.

The particulars of effecting such a shift of educational paradigms must vary from locale to locale. Moreover, such a shift is not a one-time event, but rather the initiation of commitment to a particular trajectory of ongoing and ever-expanding innovations. In the case of Bhutan, a central concern will be to break with the educational aim of

“preserving” Bhutanese culture in segregated curricula. Preservation is equivalent to sterilization and forestalls further growth and evolution. Education focused on virtuosity is simultaneously committed to cultivating creativity and responsibility. Education in Bhutan should further the growth of cultural and religious traditions in complex interplay with contemporary realities. This means conserving tradition, but also improvising through tradition to respond to contemporary needs and to continuously revise what is meant by shared welfare and public good.

Education practices aimed at cultivating appreciative and contributory virtuosity need not eschew science any more than they need be in tension with the conservation of cultural and religion traditions. But such practices would radically reframe priorities within curricula to reflect a commitment to promoting mindful and energetic attunement to relationships and interdependencies in such a way that student (as well as teacher, parent, and social) stress is reduced. Only on the basis of tranquil students and student bodies will they be able to go beyond cooperation in a spirit of competition to true coordination in concentrated attention to the possibilities for infusing all Bhutanese environments with equanimity, compassion, loving-kindness and joy in the good fortune of others.

Education practiced along these lines will change the way all social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual activity is undertaken and understood. As such, it would play a crucial part in driving all development activities toward engendering greater happiness in all the complex interdependencies linking the personal, the communal, the national and the global.

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this position paper attempts to present Buddhist practice and concepts in a generally useful manner, with minimal appeal to particular Buddhist traditions. This “generic” formulation of Buddhism recommends itself in the present context due to the finally global ambit of policy coordination. Apologies are,

---

nevertheless, extended in advance for any loss of interpretative precision and depth pursuant to this presentation of Buddhism in general terms.

<sup>2</sup> For an illustrative passage, see *Majjhima Nikaya* 118.29ff.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the Cakkavatti-Sihanda, Ina, and Sakkapanha Suttas.

<sup>4</sup> A more substantial paper discussing the revision of educational practices based on Buddhist insights into contemporary realities is available from the author on request. Similar treatments are available on health and environmental policy.