

Presentation on Bhutan
by Ambassador Daw Penjo,
Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations,
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Distinguished Doctor Natalicio, esteemed participants, and my dear friends,

I would like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation to Dr. Diana Natalicio, President of UTEP, and the esteemed members of the faculty for organizing this event that brings the Cultures of the Himalayas to the Great Plains of Texas. I would like to place on record the immeasurable contributions Dr. Natalicio has made to promote relations between UTEP and my own country.

A very important initiative has been the formalization of institutional relations that will bring mutual benefits to UTEP and Bhutan, and is the first of its kind Bhutan has with an American University. Your personal commitment of bridging the immense distance between the great state of Texas and a small Buddhist kingdom halfway around the world builds a relationship of peaceful friendship that has vast connotations within today's global imperatives.

I understand that most participants here are professors and students in the humanities and social sciences. In light of that, my brief presentation on the history, recent political developments, and Gross National Happiness, it is hoped, will provide a backdrop of Bhutan that might be of some interest. I must warn you in advance that my views are defined by my shortcomings as a non-scholar and the necessities of being a cultural and political ambassador of my country.

Architecture Backdrop of UTEP and Bhutan:

As I had mentioned at the opening of the exhibition, UTEP has had a strong connection with Bhutan that is evident in its very foundations that was motivated by an article entitled “*Castles in the Air*” from a 1914 issue of National Geographic. Since then, through more than 80 years of campus expansions the UTEP buildings have now become a most breathtaking campus, which clearly exemplifies the possible harmonious blend of different traditions. I have been told many times, by my daughter who studies here and by alumni who now hold key positions in the private and public sectors of Bhutan that the UTEP campus always remind them of home.

Incidentally, UTEP today has 9 Bhutanese students, and I am sure they also share that sentiment. While there are only a few students, this is the largest number that there have been as many students from Bhutan at one time in an American University. If past accomplishment is anything to go by, we are confident that the benefits accrued by these young Bhutanese at UTEP will, like those who came before them, accompany their return home to assume key positions in the development process of Bhutan.

I would like to make a brief background introduction to Bhutan for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the country.

Background:

For those who may not know where Bhutan is, if you walk in a straight line up past the north pole and then head south you would reach a small kingdom

landlocked in the Eastern Himalayas between the Tibetan autonomous region of China to the north and the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal to the south.

A comparison with Texas would provide a good sense of how small the country is: The land area of 261,797 sq. miles of Texas means that Bhutan's paltry 18,000 is literally a geographical speck. Texas has a growing population of 23.9 million whereas Bhutan has about 600,000.

Bhutanese who have been to UTEP joke that everything is big in the USA but everything is bigger in the great state of Texas. In fact, the population of Bhutan is less than that of El Paso. Back in New York where I work, my office is less than five minutes away from one of the busiest places in the world and I mean the Grand Central Station where more than half a million people pass through each day. This number is close to Bhutan's total population of 600,000.

Centuries of isolationism, a small population, topographical extremes, and strong government policy for ecological conservation have ensured Bhutan maintains an intact ecosystem. Climatic conditions range from the monsoon rain in summer to a relatively dry winter, and varied climates depending on altitude that ranges from 100 meters in the south to 7,500 meters in the north. Bhutan has several of the highest unclimbed mountains in the world.

With habitats ranging from tropical lowlands to alpine meadows, Bhutan harbours an immense diversity of plants and animals and has been declared as one of the ten global biodiversity 'hotspots'. Bhutan is among the top ten countries in the world in terms of species density, and is possibly the only area where the habitat of the mythical snow leopard and mighty tiger traverse, including rare and endangered species like takin, red panda and golden langur.

History

Ancient stone implements and other archaeological findings indicate there were settlements in Bhutan dating back to 2000 B.C. but little else is known. The recorded history of the kingdom, however, begins with the advent of Buddhism in the 8th Century which since has occupied a predominant role in shaping the social political, economic and cultural evolution of the country.

In the 17th century, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1652), a leader of the Drukpa Kargyu School of Buddhism unified the country under a central authority and established the dual system of governance (Choe-si system), whereby the temporal and religious authority were separated and vested in the Druk Desi (temporal head) and Je Khenpo (Spiritual Head) respectively. By the end of the 17th century, the country achieved a high degree of political stability and developed a distinct national and cultural identity.

Instability resurfaced by the second half of the 18th century due to internal dissent, and external threats in the latter half of the 19th century added a new dimension to the political quandary. It was against this setting that the need for strong leadership emerged and was found in the person of Ugyen Wangchuck, the Penlop (Lord) of Trongsa. On December 17, 1907, with the signing and sealing of the Oath of Allegiance by an assembly comprising of representatives of the monastic community, officials, and the common people, the Druk Gyalpo His Majesty Ugyen Wangchuck (1907-1926) was elected as the First Hereditary King of Bhutan. The establishment of the monarchy ushered in an era of peace and stability and most significantly unified the country under a central authority.

During the reign of the 2nd Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck (1926-1952), the country took further steps towards modernization by sponsoring a program of education and training of Bhutanese abroad, and continued his father's centralization and modernization efforts to build more schools, dispensaries, and roads within Bhutan.

The 3rd Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, (1952-1972) instituted far-reaching political, social and economic reforms. He established the National Assembly, the High Court, the Royal Advisory Council, and a system of governance responsive to social and economic requirements of the people. Fondly remembered as the father of modern Bhutan, he guided Bhutan's membership in the United Nations in 1971, ensuring the kingdom a place in the comity of nations.

The 4th Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck ascended the throne in 1974 and dedicated himself to defining and promoting a long-term vision and direction for the country. His reign was marked by unprecedented progress and achievements in all fields of the kingdom's development under the propagation of his philosophy that "*Gross National Happiness is better than Gross National Product.*" A most noteworthy contribution made by the 4th Druk Gyalpo was in the devolution of power from the throne to the people through a gradual but deliberate process lasting over three decades. After steering the country through dramatic developments, and preparing the country for parliamentary democracy. His Majesty abdicated in favour of the Crown Prince, now the 5th Druk Gyalpo His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.

Under the leadership of the 5th Druk Gyalpo, who like his father has fully embodied the vision of peace and prosperity for the people of Bhutan, the kingdom has witnessed a complete transition to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy. For those of you who may not be aware, Bhutan recently held our first ever parliamentary elections on 31st December 2007 for the Upper House or the National Council and March 24th 2008 for the Lower House or the National Assembly. In true spirit of democracy His Majesty has willingly denied himself and the immediate Royal Family any voting rights so as to not sway the ballot. On April 10th 2008, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Bhutan was conferred the *Tashi Khada* or Scarf of Good Fortune and assumed his office in a new era of the country's history. The formation of the first party-based government, the inaugural session of the first parliament, and the imminent adoption of the Constitution of Bhutan clearly usher the country as the youngest member in the global fraternity of parliamentary democracies.

Bhutan is fortunate that His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck embodies the vision and wisdom of his father and represents the youthful vigour and dynamism of modern Bhutan entering a new era.

Before sharing my thoughts on the transition taking place in Bhutan, I shall briefly touch on the subject of Bhutan's development philosophy. As mentioned earlier, the concept of GNH as a development philosophy is another significant contribution of the 4th King His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. While the idea of happiness and well-being as the goal of development has always been a part of the Bhutanese political psyche, it was pursued as a deliberate policy goal only after His Majesty elaborated the idea and provided a concrete framework. Within this framework the four pillars of GNH are:

1. Sustainable and equitable economic development:

The necessity of economic development follows from the need to obviate people from economic suffering. Therefore, GNH does not ignore economic development but recognizes the importance of having sustainable and equitable development that meets the needs of future generations. We accept economic growth as being essential for supporting and nurturing the spiritual and social needs of society. This is evident by the fact that in successive development plans almost one-fourth of the Royal Government's Plan budget is allocated to the social sectors.

Considerable efforts have also been made in training and developing the capacity of the country in the professional and specialized skills that are required for the development and management of economic activities.

[Using these guidelines, we have made impressive gains through our development efforts in the last few decades.

- *Life expectancy has risen from 45.8 years to 66 yrs.*
- *Infant and maternal mortality rates have decreased.*
- *Health coverage is over 90%.*
- *Enrolment and literacy rates have risen.*
- *Development facilities such as schools, hospitals, agriculture extension centers are located in all sub-districts.*
- *Policy instruments such as personal income taxes have been introduced to bring about redistribution of income.]*

2. *Conservation of the Environment:*

The obvious truth that mankind's survival hinges on the maintenance of the natural system on which life depends has directed Bhutan's policy on environmental conservation as intimately linked to sustainable development and the achievement of GNH. This is very important to us as we not only live in a fragile ecosystem but the livelihood of a majority of Bhutanese depends directly on the natural environment.

Although forests are a major natural resource of the country, one of the basic tenets of the country's development philosophy is not to exploit it indiscriminately. Only 16% of Bhutan's land is arable, and while there is pressure to fell trees and sell timber, the country is mandated by law to maintain a forest cover of 60% at all times.

Our National Environment Strategy [NES] is called "The Middle Path" and is guided by the National Environment Action Plan (NEPA). Together they provide Bhutan with a combination of regulatory mechanisms and fiscal incentives to encourage the public and private sectors to develop economically without unnecessarily compromising the natural resource base. [EIA: Environmental Impact Assessment]

It is not enough that we take local or national actions as external factors also directly affect our survival. Global warming has already led to very visible and alarming signs of the withdrawal of glaciers, which are the sources and natural regulators of our river systems.

There is the definite possibility of the disappearance of all the glaciers in the Himalayas within the next 30 to 50 years. Bhutan could eventually become a barren desert and the process leading to it could be devastatingly painful and prolonged. Much of our fertile valleys could be swept away by Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) that are no longer a rare phenomenon in the mountain regions of the world. The impact of all this on the two and a half billion people living on either side of the Himalayas and on the security of the whole world is unthinkable, especially given that water scarcity is already a major concern.

3. Preservation and Promotion of Culture:

Much of the values and customs of Bhutanese are derived from our ancient culture and traditions that have enabled us to develop a distinct national identity and a strong sense of security. For a small country like Bhutan, preservation of our rich cultural heritage is critical to the very survival as a nation state.

In this context, our cultural heritage, acting as an effective social security net, provides strong linkages between the individual and the society at large. As a people, we Bhutanese respect our cultural traditions and our habitat as everyday essentials for building a strong nation unique to our own way of life now and to our future generations. It would be incorrect to propose that only our cultural beliefs lead to happiness, but it is true that our culture has much to do with our choice to make happiness the goal of our development process.

You all may be interested to know that several important events on Bhutan are taking place in the USA this year. This will not only showcase Bhutan's

religious and cultural heritage, but depict Bhutan's living culture through every day Bhutanese life. An exhibition of the Sacred Artefacts of Bhutan was held in the Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii in February 2008, and this exhibition is slated to visit the Rubin Museum in New York later in the year and will come to San Fransisco thereafter.

Further, the events lined out at UTEP have a special significance because this summer, the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival, which as you all may know is the largest annual cultural event in Washington D.C. has chosen to honour Bhutan and the State of Texas. Here, I am pleased that UTEP will play an important role in being the bridge between Texas and Bhutan.

4. *Good Governance*

Without good governance there cannot be progress in any field be it in the economic, political, social or cultural realm. Also, good governance is not synonymous with government. In fact there is no obligatory relationship between democracy, understood in an institutional and procedural sense, and good governance, understood as a goal. The legitimacy of a government must be established on the basis of its commitment to creating and facilitating the development of public policies in which people's wellbeing is primary.

Such a well-being has been enjoyed thus far by the people of Bhutan under our beloved monarchs, and in keeping up with the imperatives of modern political systems we are now in the process of building the democratic institutions that will provide the vision, policies, and rule of law for secure and stable growth.

With regard to political systems, we in Bhutan gratefully learned from the experiences of other countries and interpret our learning experience as a path to our own development objective of GNH. In Bhutan, the process towards establishing a democracy is not our main goal. Good Governance is what we seek. In the past we sought guidance in the intuitive wisdom of benevolent kings, and for the future we are building the necessary democratic institutions.

In 1981, the 4th Druk Gyalpo initiated institutional arrangements through a vigorous program of administrative and political decentralization as a process of democratization and involvement of the people in their own affairs from the national to the community level. The functions of state were also clearly defined and divided among the various organs of governance. The decentralization policy has enhanced the democratic powers, social responsibilities, transparent processes, and structures of villages and communities to make decisions at the grass-root levels.

These dramatic political changes that are taking place in the country today are all geared towards promoting the pillars of GNH.

Further, the peaceful elections of December 2007 and March 2008 marked a turning point in Bhutan's smooth transition to a democratic constitutional monarchy, and the large numbers of ballots cast [almost 80% of registered voters and more than 50% of the country's total population] are indicative of the people's reverence for this historic process as the vision of the 4th Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. During the elections, the vote was popularly referred to as *norbu*, or precious jewel, granted by the Druk Gyalpo to the people who will be the constant reminder of the mandate. Over a hundred representatives of

international media, representing 63 agencies, covered the 865 polling stations. Also, numerous independent observers from country governments around the world were present during the elections.

Views on the transition:

We have learnt from the histories of the world that the deciding factor between the success and failure of a new democratic system replacing older ideologies has been the presence or absence of the right conditions. This is natural, after all, parties, politicians, and elections are very much a part of a democratic system and the misuse of these tools of governance can create a rift between good governance and actual participatory democracy.

But democracy is not about politics alone. It is about values and principles, and in its purest form is the empowerment of the people. So this becomes a collective responsibility. In the end, systems are only as good as the people who run them. In Bhutan, we are contemplating the relationship between our civil servants, politicians, media, civil society, private sector, and people. This places the responsibility on career bureaucrats within the executive service, politicians who form the legislative body, legal professionals as interpreters of law and the constitution, and most importantly the people who hold the power of vote. It calls for active and judicious interventions of the media and of civil society.

GNH as Bhutan's approach to development is based on the affirmation that the search for happiness is inherent in every Bhutanese, much as in all fellow citizens of this world. For Bhutan, our ideal of GNH requires that every citizen, to achieve happiness, be empowered to make the right decisions. And that is the heart of GNH, the responsibility of the individual for public well being. Bhutan

has begun work to determine the statistical indicators and indices to measure GNH, which is expected to be completed soon.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I would like to say that Bhutan's experiments with the implementation of democratic institutions, the adoption of a constitution, and the development of indices to weigh GNH are all works in progress. These attempts on the part of our kings, our government, and our people to innovate traditional systems by integrating borrowed methods of governance will, it is hoped, eventually result in the establishment of a true state where all the people find contentment in their lives. Even the far-sighted founding fathers of your great country, while signing a magnificent symbol of democracy, the American Declaration of Independence, concluded that along with "life" and "liberty" the "pursuit of happiness" is an inalienable right of the people.

The purpose of my talk today was not to lecture you on GNH as I am not capable of doing that. That will be better left to the intellectuals and scholars. The keynote speaker for the discourse on GNH is not here today, as he is now a member of the National Council and is pressed to remain in Bhutan for the inaugural of our first elected parliament. I have, to the best of my efforts, shared a layman's view of what we are trying to do in my country. Bhutan cannot say "it's our way, or the highway" to the world. Bhutan can only sound out a gentle reminder for the need to develop domestically relevant alternatives to established development paradigms. For those who have more than a cursory interest in GNH, I will be happy to provide some links that are more informative.

Allow me to once again take this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation for the efforts of our dear friends in UTEP as yet another sign of the growing relationship between our two countries. I am confident that the continual strengthening of relationships between the small and the big, the east and the west, the material and the spiritual, are sure signals of the progress we are making in the inner and outer advancements of becoming enlightened societies.

I wish you all my deepest regards, and Tashi Delek.