

Presentation on Bhutan by Ambassador Daw Penjo,  
Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations,  
at the Ursinus College.

**Ambassador Joseph Melros, and my dear friends,**

I would like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation for this opportunity to be with you all at Ursinus College. I look forward to building upon this initial contact a long and fruitful relationship between Ursinus and Bhutan.

I understand that the education philosophy of Ursinus is to strongly encourage students to think for themselves, and that a doctrine central to the Ursinus experience is the forging of partnerships between students and faculty in all educational endeavours. In light of that, I want to share with you all a little of Bhutan's history, our foreign relations, and the subject of Bhutan's development philosophy.

I would like to begin now, by making a brief background introduction to Bhutan.

**Background:**

A comparison with Philadelphia would provide a good sense of how small the country is: Philadelphia's land area of approximately 46, 000 sq. miles means Bhutan is about two and a half times smaller at 18,000 sq. miles. Montgomery County alone has a growing population that is estimated to be almost 800,000 which is considerably higher than Bhutan's 600,000.

In fact, the population of Bhutan is only a little over what the Grand Central Station in New York sees in a day, where more than half a million people pass through each day.

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.

Centuries of isolation, a small population, topographical extremes ranging from tropical lowlands to alpine meadows and strong government policy for ecological conservation have ensured an intact ecosystem.

In terms of species density, Bhutan harbours an immense diversity of plants and animals, and has been declared as one of the ten global biodiversity 'hotspots'. The country is possibly the only place where the habitat of the mythical snow leopard and the mighty tiger traverse, including rare and endangered species like the takin, red panda and golden langur.

## **History**

Regarding the history of Bhutan, ancient stone implements and other archaeological findings indicate there were settlements 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.

As far back as the 17th century, when Bhutan was more a conglomeration of warring valley kingdoms than a nation state in the modern sense of the term, the Shabdrung, Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1652), a leader of the Drukpa Kargyu School of Buddhism, established his supremacy and founded a unified country.

Under his central authority, he established a dual system of governance (Choe-sid) whereby temporal and religious authority were separated and vested in the Druk Desi (Temporal Head) and Je Khenpo (Spiritual Head).

By the end of the 17th century, the country achieved a high degree of political stability, and had 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<sup>th</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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. He is fondly remembered as the father of modern Bhutan.

The 4<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> Druk Gyalpo His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.

Under the leadership of the 5<sup>th</sup> 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 31<sup>st</sup> December 2007 for the Upper House or the National Council and March 24<sup>th</sup> 2008 for the Lower House or the National Assembly.

In a 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 10<sup>th</sup> 2008, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Bhutan was conferred the *Da-kyen* or Ceremonial Scarf and assumed his office in a new era of the country's history.

The formation of the first party-based government, and the imminent adoption of the Constitution of Bhutan following the inaugural session of the first parliament in May 2008, clearly usher the country as the youngest member in the global fraternity of parliamentary democracies.

Bhutan is fortunate that the 5<sup>th</sup> Druk Gyalpo embodies the vision and wisdom of his father and represents the youthful vigour and dynamism of modern Bhutan entering a new era.

### **Bhutan and the United Nations:**

Before sharing my thoughts on Bhutan's development philosophy, and the transition taking place in Bhutan, I would like to briefly touch on the subject

of Bhutan's foreign policy and our interests in the United Nations. This is where I represent Bhutan.

Bhutan, however little known to the outside world, is an ancient country, as I have tried to explain, that has remained independent through out its history. This determination for sovereignty is so strong that until 1958, the country deliberately followed a policy of isolation as a means to protect our independence. This policy was facilitated by the geography of Bhutan's frontiers - the high Himalayas in the north and the dense tropical jungles in the south. During this long period of isolation, Bhutan's only external contacts were with Tibet in the north with whom it maintained strong trade and cultural links and with British India in the south with whom it interacted intermittently.

The advent of planned development and the need to secure the nation's international standing within the post isolation context led to the immediate establishment of official diplomatic relations between Bhutan and India in 1968. Following this, the next step that Bhutan took to guarantee sovereign status was to join the United Nations which is the only world body that brings together all the countries of the world. On September 21st 1971 Bhutan was formally admitted as a member.

Today, Bhutan has formalized relations with about 22 countries and the EU. You may be interested to know that we have, however, only 6 resident missions abroad due to various compulsions.

The country's engagement at the United Nations is always guided by the United Nations Charter as an indispensable foundation for managing

international relations and promoting peace, security, justice and progress in the world. The principles of sovereign equality of all states, territorial integrity and political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of states and resolution of disputes by peaceful means are of tremendous importance to Bhutan.

As a country that is least developed and landlocked, Bhutan's current priorities at United Nations are also based in the socio-economic and development fields.

While it is essential that developing countries retain responsibility for their own development, national action must receive the strong support of the international community to address vulnerabilities.

The need to strengthen the United Nations, and the need for collective action through the United Nations is even greater today due to globalization and the multiple challenges that the world faces: poverty, disease, underdevelopment, disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation and other weapons of mass destruction, international terrorism to name a few.

It is with this conviction that my country, participates in the deliberations and decisions on trade, social, economic and development issues in the United Nations and other multilateral fora.

Bhutan consistently calls for greater development assistance to the developing countries, attention for countries in special situations such as least developed and landlocked developing countries, and promotion of fair trade.

Just over a week ago, we had an important debate on the Millennium Development Goals to take stock of the situation.

Over the years, Bhutan has contributed to the work of numerous UN agencies through membership in important bodies such as ECOSOC, the Human Rights Council, and the Executive Board of the UNDP/UNFPA etc. Bhutan was also honoured to serve as one of the Vice-Presidents from Asia at the 61<sup>st</sup> session of the UN General Assembly.

Bhutan is today seen as a progressive, forward looking and a responsible member country of the United Nations.

Some of the initiatives and ideas that Bhutan has been pursuing over the decades have gained recognition, notably our development philosophy of GNH, which as mentioned earlier in my presentation is a very important contribution of the 4<sup>th</sup> King His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck.

## **GNH**

This idea seems to be gaining lots of interests. I read last week that in Washington some reference was made to GNH in the context of looking at the concept of well-being-happiness for the USA.

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. I will very broadly try to explain the framework known as the 4 pillars of GNH.

## **1. Sustainable and equitable economic development:**

Through the wisdom of our leaders we are trying to carefully catch up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and so, Bhutan accepts the reality that a nation's success in this globalized world, more so than ever before, is determined by the strength and competitiveness of her economy. Maybe this will change in the future, but today, if we are to succeed, we need a strong economy. It is as simple as that.

Also, we take it as a given that 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 our people today while bearing in mind the needs of future generations.

We also advocate the necessity of social growth as being essential for supporting and nurturing both our spiritual and economic needs. This is why since the start of our planned development process almost one-fourth of the Royal Government's Plan budget has been 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.

Such policy can be sourced to our social norms as people who believe in the middle path, exemplified by the traditional saying *‘it is better to have milk and cheese many times , than beef just once’*”.

It is not enough that we only take local or national actions. External factors also affect our survival directly, none more so than global warming which has already led to very visible and alarming signs of the withdrawal of glaciers that 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, especially given that water scarcity is already a major concern.

Much of our fertile valleys would 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.

### **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 Bhutan, preservation of our rich cultural heritage is critical to our 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. It would be

incorrect, to propose that only our cultural beliefs lead to happiness, but it is true that 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. Not too far from here, from June 25<sup>th</sup> through July 10<sup>th</sup> 2008, the Smithsonian Folk life Festival will be held at the Washington Mall. I do hope you get an opportunity to see the festival as it will be showcasing our religious and cultural heritage, and will also 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 then head west to San Fransisco thereafter.

#### **4. Good Governance**

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. Without good governance there cannot be progress in any field be it in the economic, political, social or cultural realm.

Within the changing political climate of Bhutan, we do not see good governance as identical to 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 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. In the past we sought guidance in the intuitive wisdom of benevolent kings, and for the future we are building the necessary democratic foundation.

In 1981, the 4<sup>th</sup> 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. With the successful implementation of decentralization in administration and finance, the culmination of this policy was total decentralization in political governance.

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 4<sup>th</sup> Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuck.

During the elections, the vote was popularly referred to as a *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 865 polling stations. Also, numerous independent observers from country governments around the world were present during the elections.

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

### **GNH Indicators**

To briefly elaborate our attempts to quantify GNH, the Centre for Bhutan Studies [CBS], a domestic think tank that amongst other tasks, has been specifically engaged in coming up with GNH Indices. The CBS is now ready to present a pilot study on GNH indicators. It will be one of the most comprehensive studies conducted and expected to contribute to national policy.

Work has already been started to determine the statistical indicators and indices to measure GNH which should be completed by 2008. 9 provisional GNH indicators have been identified. These are:

1] Standard of living, 2] health of population, 3] education, 4] vitality and diversity of eco-system, 5] cultural vitality and diversity, 6] use and balance of time, 7] good governance, 8] community vitality, and 9] emotional well being.

### **Views on the transition:**

I would now like to go over some personal reflections on the changes that have taken place in Bhutan.

While many who do not know us well think of Bhutan as a hidden mystical place of spiritual monks, historical antecedents show we are practical realists striving to balance our beliefs in religious tenets with the ground realities of socio-political persuasions and economic necessities.

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. 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.

Bhutan's experiments with the implementation of democratic institutions, the adoption of a constitution, and the development of indices to weigh GNH are works in progress to better enable us to adapt to the tide of globalization and modernization. These tides of change could potentially upset our traditional assets of natural environment, cultural heritage, and social fabric and value systems. We believe that these changes are best addressed by achieving a balance of material growth and spiritual nourishment.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, let me say that 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. I have, to the best of my efforts, simply shared a layman's view of what we are trying to do in my country.

As explained earlier, at this stage of our journey towards GNH, the creation of an enabling environment for GNH is being undertaken through a set of four key strategies, popularly known as the four pillars.

I would like to clarify here that Bhutan does not claim to have achieved GNH. Rather, we regard GNH as a goal and a guide in our development. In our efforts to share the concept of GNH with the world, Bhutan is not saying "it's our way, or the highway". We hope to find lessons through participation in various conferences and research on happiness, and sound out a gentle reminder for the need to develop domestically relevant alternatives to established development paradigms.

It seems obvious to me and I am sure my dear friends at Ursinus will agree, that all our thoughts, our actions, our desire for achievements, whether as an individual or as a nation state is deeply rooted in our inherent responsibility of the individual for public well being. And, with this responsibility we must remember to always maintain a human touch.

Allow me to once again take this opportunity to express sincere appreciation for the efforts of our dear friends in Ursinus 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 sincerely hope that with my visit, we can establish a relationship between Ursinus and Bhutan that will be mutually beneficial. I hope to see future exchanges of faculty and staff between this college and Bhutan, whereby through our exchanges we learn and teach each other. I would like very much to see students from Bhutan at Ursinus, as I am sure they would greatly benefit from the Ursinus emphasis of focusing on the right things, on not what needs to be done, but rather on how it is to be done. Such a sentiment is close to my personal worldview, and to that of Bhutan's.

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

**LINKS:**

For those who have more than a cursory interest in GNH, the following are a few links to sites that are more informative than what I might have only glossed over.

**1. Official Government Website for Bhutan**

<http://www.bhutan.gov.bt/government/gnh.php>

**2. Official Website for GNH Commission**

<http://www.pc.gov.bt/>

**3. Official Website for Centenary Celebrations**

[http://www.bhutan2008.bt/ndlb/media\\_collection\\_associations?collection\\_id=9](http://www.bhutan2008.bt/ndlb/media_collection_associations?collection_id=9)

**4. Third International Conference on GNH**

[http://www.bhutan2008.bt/ndlb/media\\_collection\\_associations?collection\\_id=9](http://www.bhutan2008.bt/ndlb/media_collection_associations?collection_id=9)