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## Bhutanese Buddhism: Harmonizing Tradition, Sustainability, and Wellbeing

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*Phramaha Natthapong Nakthum*<sup>1</sup>, *Phramaha Thanawut Upachai*<sup>2</sup>,

*Phra Dhammanan Sankaew*<sup>3</sup>

*Wat Chamni Hatthakan*<sup>1</sup>, *Graduate School*<sup>2</sup>, *IBSC*<sup>3</sup>, *Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University*<sup>2,3</sup>

*email: PhramahaNatthapong@gmail.com*

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### Abstract

This article delves into the intersection of Buddhism, tradition, sustainability, and wellbeing in Bhutan. Anchored in the Vajrayana tradition, Bhutan's Buddhist practices offer a distinctive approach to sustainable living and holistic wellbeing. The study focuses on Gross National Happiness (GNH) principles, emphasising holistic wellbeing over economic growth. GNH integrates four pillars: sustainable development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance, all deeply rooted in Buddhist values.

This exploration highlights how these Buddhist principles are theoretical and actively shape Bhutan's national policies and societal norms. The article examines Bhutan's environmental conservation efforts, including its constitutional mandate to maintain at least 60% forest cover and protect sacred natural sites. It also discusses how Buddhist practices like mindfulness and meditation, integrated into daily life and educational systems, contribute to mental health and emotional resilience. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of cultural preservation in maintaining social cohesion and identity, exploring the role of religious beliefs in wildlife conservation and tolerance.

The findings illustrate how Bhutan's unique blend of spirituality and modernity fosters a balanced and sustainable society. By integrating spiritual principles into governance and everyday life, Bhutan presents a compelling model for sustainable development that prioritises holistic wellbeing. This intersection of tradition and modernity offers valuable insights for the global community, demonstrating that development guided by spiritual and ethical values can enhance environmental stewardship and quality of life. Bhutan's experience underscores the potential of such an integrative approach, offering a holistic and sustainable path forward for other nations. Through an analysis of various aspects of Bhutanese life, including environmental conservation, mental health, cultural preservation, and wildlife conservation, this article demonstrates how Bhutan's development model can serve as a

global example of how spiritual values can guide sustainable development and enhance the quality of life.

**Keywords:** Bhutanese Buddhism; Gross National Happiness; Sustainability; Wellbeing; Cultural Heritage; Community Engagement; Buddhist Values

## Introduction

Bhutan is widely celebrated for its distinct approach to development, which prioritizes the well-being of its people over mere economic advancement. This philosophy is encapsulated in the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), a comprehensive development framework introduced by Bhutan's fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in the 1970s. Unlike the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measure, which focuses solely on economic output, GNH encompasses a holistic range of human experiences, including cultural preservation, environmental conservation, good governance, and sustainable socio-economic development. Bhutan's profound Buddhist heritage is central to this framework, particularly the Vajrayana tradition, which continues to shape the nation's cultural, social, and environmental policies (Allison, 2017).

The influence of Buddhist teachings is evident in Bhutan's policies and societal norms. For instance, the Buddhist principle of "tsewa" (compassion) is reflected in national health policies that prioritize universal healthcare and equitable access to resources (Tshewang et al., 2021). Similarly, the value placed on the interconnectedness of all life is mirrored in environmental policies, such as Bhutan's commitment to maintaining at least 60% forest cover as enshrined in its constitution (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2008). The promotion of mindful tourism, which emphasizes minimal environmental impact and respect for local cultures, also stems from these teachings (Duivenvoorden, 2023b). These examples illustrate how Buddhist values are operationalized in Bhutan's contemporary governance and everyday life.

In recent years, Bhutan has continued to demonstrate the relevance of Buddhist principles in addressing modern challenges. For example, its commitment to carbon neutrality—achieved through reforestation initiatives and renewable energy investments—highlights the integration of environmental stewardship rooted in Buddhist ethics (UNFCCC, 2020). On a societal level, Buddhist-inspired meditation and mindfulness programs have been

introduced in schools to promote mental well-being and resilience among youth, aligning with the broader GNH focus on psychological well-being (Ramkissoon, 2023).

Furthermore, the GNH philosophy embodies core Buddhist values by seeking to balance material progress with spiritual well-being. It ensures that development does not come at the expense of human happiness or environmental integrity, reflecting the Buddhist emphasis on the middle path. This holistic approach has garnered international recognition as a potential model for sustainable development that balances economic, social, and ecological priorities (Allison, 2017; Ramkissoon, 2023).

This article delves into the historical and cultural context of Buddhist tradition in Bhutan, examines sustainability practices influenced by Buddhist values, and explores the concept of GNH as a measure of well-being. Through this exploration, we aim to understand how Bhutan has harmonized tradition, sustainability, and well-being, offering insights into how these principles can inform broader global development practices.

## **Buddhist Tradition in Bhutan**

Bhutanese Buddhism indeed plays a pivotal role in cultural preservation, contributing significantly to the country's unique identity and collective wellbeing. Monastic education, as highlighted in Jigme & Choki (2023), is a cornerstone of Bhutan's cultural heritage, instilling traditional values and practices in the younger generation. As discussed in Lepcha et al. (2022), festivals serve as vibrant displays of devotion to Buddhism, blending religious significance with community celebrations. Additionally, integrating spirituality and indigenous knowledge into public health systems, as seen in Chopel et al. (2024), underscores Bhutan's holistic approach to well-being. The government's emphasis on cultural preservation through education, as emphasised in Thinley (2020), ensures the continuity of Bhutanese traditions and values, safeguarding the country's rich heritage for future generations.

Buddhism has been a cornerstone of Bhutanese culture and society for centuries. It influences every aspect of life, from daily practices to national policies. The teachings of Buddhism, particularly the principles of compassion, mindfulness, and interdependence, play a crucial role in shaping the values and behaviours of the Bhutanese people.

### **1. Historical and Cultural Context**

Bhutanese Buddhism, primarily rooted in the Drukpa Kagyu school, has shaped Bhutan's cultural and spiritual landscape for centuries. The introduction of Buddhism to

Bhutan is attributed to Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) in the 8th century, who is revered as the second Buddha. His teachings laid the foundation for the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, influencing its culture, traditions, and social norms (Dorji, 2012). Monasteries and dzongs (fortresses) are central to Bhutanese religious life, serving as places of worship, education, and community gathering.

## **2. Rituals and Practices**

Buddhist rituals and practices are deeply ingrained in Bhutanese daily life. From birth to death, significant life events are marked by Buddhist ceremonies, reflecting the pervasive influence of the religion. Annual festivals, or techs, celebrate Guru Rinpoche's and other saints' deeds, attracting thousands of devotees who participate in religious dances, prayers, and rituals (Jigme & Choki, 2023). These festivals reinforce religious beliefs, strengthen community bonds, and preserve cultural heritage. (Gyeltshen et al., 2022; Bagio & Priyadarshana, 2023).

## **3. Monastic Education and Role in Society**

Monastic education plays a crucial role in preserving and disseminating Buddhist teachings. Monasteries are learning centres where young monks receive education in Buddhist philosophy, literature, and ritual practices. These institutions are vital for maintaining religious knowledge and practice continuity across generations. Moreover, monks often serve as spiritual leaders and advisors in their communities, guiding people in faith, ethics, and social conduct. (Lepcha et al., 2022; Jonveaux, (2023).

## **4. Influence on Governance**

Buddhism significantly influences Bhutanese governance. The concept of a compassionate and just ruler, as epitomised by the Dharma kings, is rooted in Buddhist ideals. The current system of governance, including the GNH philosophy, reflects these values. Policies are designed to promote economic growth but also spiritual and emotional wellbeing, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation. This holistic approach to governance ensures that development aligns with Buddhist principles, fostering a balanced and harmonious society. (Zinchenko & Boichenko, 2022; Lin, 2022).

The enduring influence of Buddhism in Bhutan has created a society that values harmony, respect for nature, and the well-being of all sentient beings. These principles are reflected in personal spiritual practices and national policies that prioritise sustainable and inclusive development.

## Sustainability in Bhutanese Buddhism

Sustainability is deeply embedded in Bhutanese Buddhism. The concept of interdependence, a fundamental Buddhist teaching, underscores the importance of living in harmony with the environment. This perspective has driven Bhutan's commitment to environmental conservation and sustainable development, making it a global leader.

### 1. Environmental Ethics in Buddhism

Buddhist teachings emphasise the interdependence of all life forms and the importance of living in harmony with nature. The principle of non-harming (ahimsa) and the belief in karma underscore the ethical responsibility to protect the environment. In Bhutan, these principles translate into policies and practices prioritising environmental conservation and sustainable use of natural resources (McDonald, 2012). The constitution mandates that at least 60% of the country's land remains under forest cover, reflecting a deep commitment to ecological balance.

### 2. Forest Conservation and Wildlife Protection

Forests are sacred in Bhutanese culture, often associated with local deities and spirits. This spiritual reverence for nature is evident in Bhutan's rigorous forest conservation policies. Establishing protected areas and national parks ensures the preservation of biodiversity and the habitats of various species (Allison, 2017). Additionally, community-based forest management practices empower local communities to actively participate in conservation efforts, fostering a sense of stewardship and responsibility (Nepal, 2023).

Human-wildlife conflict is a significant issue in Bhutan due to the proximity of human settlements to wildlife habitats. However, traditional Buddhist beliefs promote tolerance and coexistence with wildlife. Studies have shown that religious beliefs and wildlife value orientations influence the acceptance of wildlife impacts among Bhutanese farmers (Yeshey et al., 2023; Wangchuk et al., 2023). This cultural tolerance, supported by government policies and community initiatives, helps mitigate conflicts and promotes sustainable coexistence.

### 3. Green Practices and Renewable Energy

Bhutan's commitment to sustainability is also evident in its energy policies. The country has invested heavily in hydropower, which provides a clean and renewable energy source. This reduces reliance on fossil fuels and generates revenue through the export of electricity to neighbouring countries. Additionally, green road development aims to reduce plastic waste and promote eco-friendly infrastructure (Chojey et al., 2023). These practices align with

Buddhist values of simplicity and minimalism, advocating for a lifestyle that minimises environmental impact.

#### **4. Education for Sustainability**

Education plays a pivotal role in promoting sustainability in Bhutan. Schools incorporate environmental education into their curricula, teaching students about the importance of conservation and sustainable living. This education is not limited to theoretical knowledge but includes practical activities like tree planting and waste management (Mongar, 2023). By instilling these values in the younger generation, Bhutan ensures its commitment to sustainability, rooted in the Buddhist principle of caring for all living beings, will endure.

Bhutan's sustainability practices, guided by Buddhist values, demonstrate the powerful role that spiritual traditions can play in promoting ecological balance and environmental stewardship. These practices ensure that development does not come at the expense of the environment, reflecting a deep commitment to preserving the natural world for future generations.

### **Wellbeing and Gross National Happiness**

Bhutan's governance model, influenced by Buddhist principles and the Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy, emphasises collective wellbeing and Happiness (Ongsod & Braila, (2022); Kim et al., (2023); Jigme & Choki, (2023). The country's constitution incorporates GNH as a spiritual core, promoting values like compassion and human rights while aiming to preserve identity and stability (Van Norren, (2023). Additionally, Bhutan's focus on GNH has led to the exploration of entrepreneurship education guided by GNH principles to address challenges like youth unemployment, showcasing a commitment to holistic development even in the face of modernisation and globalisation pressures (Van Gelderen, (2024). By aligning policies with Buddhist values and prioritising the wellbeing of its citizens over mere economic growth, Bhutan sets an example of governance that seeks to minimise suffering and promote collective Happiness.

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is Bhutan's unique development philosophy, which prioritises the well-being of its citizens over economic growth. Rooted in Buddhist principles, GNH encompasses various dimensions, including sustainable development, cultural preservation, and mental and physical well-being, aiming to create a balanced and harmonious society.

### **1. The Concept of Gross National Happiness**

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is Bhutan's unique approach to development, prioritising the wellbeing of its citizens over mere economic growth. The concept, introduced by the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in the 1970s, is based on four pillars: sustainable development, cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and good governance (Ura et al., 2012). These pillars reflect the holistic nature of GNH, aiming to balance material and spiritual wellbeing.

### **2. Measuring Happiness**

The GNH index is a comprehensive tool that measures the Happiness and wellbeing of Bhutanese citizens. It includes nine domains: psychological wellbeing, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards (Ura et al., 2012). Surveys and statistical analyses are used to assess these domains, providing a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to Happiness.

### **3. Policy Implications and Implementation**

The GNH philosophy has significant implications for policy-making in Bhutan. Policies are evaluated based on their potential impact on the population's wellbeing and the environment. For instance, economic projects must undergo GNH screening to ensure they align with sustainable development and cultural preservation principles. This approach ensures that development initiatives do not compromise the core values of Bhutanese society.

### **4. Global Recognition and Influence**

Bhutan's GNH philosophy has gained international recognition as a pioneering model for sustainable development. It offers an alternative to conventional measures of progress, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which often overlook social and environmental costs. Scholars and policymakers worldwide have shown interest in GNH as a holistic development framework that prioritises human wellbeing and ecological balance (Hossain & Jami, 2023). Bhutan's experience provides valuable insights into how other countries can integrate similar principles into their development strategies.

GNH exemplifies Bhutan's holistic approach to development, where the wellbeing of individuals and the community is paramount. This approach has led to significant improvements in various aspects of life in Bhutan, demonstrating that actual development

extends beyond economic indicators to include the overall Happiness and wellbeing of the population.

## **Integration of Tradition, Sustainability, and Wellbeing**

Bhutan's success in integrating tradition, sustainability, and wellbeing is a testament to its innovative and holistic approach to development. By harmonising Buddhist traditions with modern sustainability practices and prioritising the wellbeing of its people, Bhutan has created a unique model of development that balances progress with cultural and environmental preservation.

### **1. Holistic Approach to Development**

Bhutan's development model integrates tradition, sustainability, and wellbeing, creating a balanced and thriving society. This holistic approach ensures that cultural heritage is preserved, environmental sustainability is prioritised, and the wellbeing of citizens is at the forefront of development initiatives. The synergy between these elements is evident in various aspects of Bhutanese life, from governance and education to community practices and daily living (Tobgay, 2023).

### **2. Community-Based Initiatives**

Community involvement is key to successfully integrating tradition, sustainability, and wellbeing. Local communities are actively engaged in conservation efforts, cultural preservation, and sustainable practices. For example, community forests are managed by local groups who take responsibility for protecting and sustainably using forest resources (Allison, 2023). This participatory approach fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, ensuring the sustainability of these initiatives (Wangdi, 2022).

### **3. Education and Awareness**

Education and awareness programs are crucial in promoting the integration of tradition, sustainability, and wellbeing. Schools and communities emphasise Buddhist values, environmental conservation, and holistic wellbeing. By educating the younger generation about these principles, Bhutan ensures that its cultural and environmental heritage is preserved for future generations. Additionally, public awareness campaigns highlight the benefits of sustainable practices and the importance of maintaining a balanced and harmonious lifestyle (Kaur & Mehndroo, 2022).

#### **4. Challenges and Future Directions**

Bhutan's unique developmental approach, guided by the Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, is an admirable blend of Buddhist philosophy, sustainability, and well-being. However, this model faces significant challenges in balancing modernisation, cultural preservation, climate change, and economic pressures. Despite these hurdles, Bhutan's adaptive strategies and innovative policies continue to offer valuable insights into sustainable development while shedding light on the integration of Buddhist principles into governance.

##### **Challenges in Harmonizing Tradition, Sustainability, and Well-being**

One of the most pressing challenges Bhutan faces is the tension between preserving its cultural identity and embracing modernisation. The younger generation's aspirations for greater integration with global trends often clash with traditional values, creating a potential cultural rift. Furthermore, while Buddhist principles offer a cohesive moral framework, they may inadvertently marginalize non-Buddhist populations, raising questions about inclusivity in an increasingly pluralistic society (Dorji, 2023).

Economic challenges also persist. Bhutan's commitment to prioritizing happiness and well-being over conventional economic metrics like GDP limits its ability to attract foreign investments and integrate with global economic systems. This divergence creates vulnerabilities, particularly in the face of globalization and economic competition (Venkatraja, 2023).

Environmental challenges are equally pressing. Despite being carbon-negative and maintaining over 70% forest cover, Bhutan remains highly susceptible to climate change impacts. Glacial melting, erratic weather patterns, and biodiversity loss threaten the nation's ecological balance and sustainability goals (UNFCCC, 2020; Mongar, 2023). Geopolitical pressures and reliance on hydropower exports further complicate Bhutan's ability to maintain economic and environmental stability.

##### **Future Directions for Sustainable Development**

To address these challenges, Bhutan must enhance community participation in development initiatives. Empowering local communities to engage in decision-making processes ensures that policies align with grassroots realities while fostering ownership and sustainability. Studies have shown that participatory approaches significantly improve the effectiveness of environmental and social programs (Yeshey et al., 2023).

Strengthening environmental policies and diversifying economic activities are also critical. Bhutan's heavy reliance on hydropower and tourism makes it vulnerable to external shocks. Diversification into sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and creative industries could mitigate these risks while preserving its cultural heritage (Hossain & Jami, 2023). Moreover, integrating advanced technologies and innovative practices into environmental management will enhance resilience against climate change impacts (Duivenvoorden, 2023a).

International collaboration presents another promising avenue. Bhutan can share its GNH-based approach as a soft power strategy, influencing global sustainability dialogues while securing technical and financial support for its initiatives. Partnerships with international organizations and neighboring countries could facilitate the exchange of expertise, fostering mutual learning and capacity building (See, 2022).

### **Lessons for Global Development**

Bhutan's integration of tradition, sustainability, and well-being offers valuable lessons for other nations. It demonstrates the importance of a holistic approach to development that respects cultural heritage, promotes environmental stewardship, and prioritizes human happiness. For example, the principles of GNH, rooted in Buddhist philosophy, could inspire alternative development models that challenge the dominance of purely economic metrics.

The practical outcomes of Bhutan's approach further validate its effectiveness. For instance, life expectancy in Bhutan has risen from 52 years in 1985 to over 70 years by 2020, a result of investments in healthcare and education driven by GNH principles (World Bank, 2021). Similarly, youth literacy rates surpassed 92% in 2021, reflecting the success of policies prioritizing equitable access to education (UNESCO, 2021). Bhutan's forest conservation efforts, contributing to its carbon-negative status, illustrate how cultural and spiritual values can reinforce environmental policies (National Environment Commission, 2021; Allison, 2023).

In conclusion, Bhutan's journey offers a compelling narrative of harmonizing tradition, sustainability, and well-being amidst modern challenges. While its model faces limitations in inclusivity, economic scalability, and environmental vulnerabilities, Bhutan continues to adapt and innovate. The transferability of Bhutan's approach requires contextual adaptation, emphasizing the need for flexibility in applying its principles elsewhere. By critically examining Bhutan's successes and limitations, scholars and policymakers can derive adaptable frameworks for sustainable development that resonate with diverse cultural and ecological contexts.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the intricate interplay between Buddhist tradition, sustainability, and well-being in Bhutan, shedding light on how these elements coalesce within the nation's unique development paradigm. Bhutan's integration of Buddhist principles into its socio-economic framework offers a profound model for sustainable development, emphasizing cultural heritage, environmental stewardship, and holistic human flourishing.

Rooted in Buddhist philosophy, Bhutan's approach provides a robust cultural and spiritual foundation that permeates all facets of its society. This foundation underpins sustainability practices that prioritize environmental conservation and ecological balance, demonstrating the practical application of Buddhist values in modern governance. The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) encapsulates Bhutan's dedication to holistic development, privileging well-being and happiness over traditional economic metrics such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Collectively, these components create a synergistic model of development that highlights the interconnectedness of tradition, sustainability, and human well-being.

Nevertheless, it is critical to acknowledge the challenges and limitations that accompany Bhutan's approach to providing a balanced and nuanced academic perspective. The nation's reliance on Buddhist principles, while culturally cohesive, may inadvertently marginalize non-Buddhist populations, raising questions about inclusivity and pluralism. Additionally, the preservation of traditional values can create tensions with the aspirations of younger generations, who may seek greater integration with global modernity and its associated cultural shifts.

Bhutan's economic philosophy, centered on GNH, also encounters challenges in the context of globalization. The divergence from conventional economic models poses difficulties in attracting foreign investment and aligning with international economic systems. This raises concerns about the long-term economic sustainability and scalability of Bhutan's development approach. Moreover, Bhutan's environmental practices, though exemplary, remain vulnerable to external factors such as climate change and geopolitical pressures, which could undermine the resilience of its sustainability strategies.

The transferability of Bhutan's model presents another critical limitation. The unique cultural, political, and geographical conditions that facilitate Bhutan's success may not be easily replicable in other contexts. This underscores the importance of adapting Bhutan's

principles to align with the specific needs and circumstances of other societies, rather than attempting direct imitation.

In conclusion, Bhutan's integration of Buddhist tradition, sustainability, and well-being constitutes a compelling case study in holistic development. By critically examining its challenges and limitations, scholars and policymakers can derive valuable insights to inform adaptable and context-sensitive frameworks for sustainable development worldwide. This critical engagement not only enriches our understanding of Bhutan's achievements but also enhances their relevance and applicability in a diverse and interconnected global landscape.

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