
An Analytical Study of the Relationship Between Gross National Happiness (GNH) of Bhutan and Buddhist Peaceful Means

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between Gross National Happiness (GNH) of Bhutan and Buddhist Peaceful Means through a documentary analysis approach. The research focuses on three objectives: (1) the concepts and theories of GNH, (2) the role of Buddhist Peaceful Means in fostering happiness, and (3) the interconnection between GNH and Buddhist principles. Data were collected from primary Buddhist scriptures, Bhutanese policy documents, and scholarly literature, and analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis.

Key findings:

1. GNH concept and theory. GNH frames development around four pillars: good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation, and uses nine domains to measure multidimensional well-being; the 2008 democratic transition institutionalized these principles in state policy.

2. Buddhist peaceful means. Core practices, ethical conduct, mindfulness, loving-kindness (mettā), and bodhicitta, address the Three Poisons (desire, hatred, ignorance) and foster individual and communal well-being.

3. Interconnection. GNH and Buddhist peaceful means are mutually reinforcing: policy instruments reflect Buddhist ethical priorities, while contemplative ethics support the social conditions necessary for GNH outcomes.

The study concludes that Bhutan's model exemplifies a reciprocal integration of institutional design and moral formation, suggesting that durable national well-being depends on coordinated policy instruments alongside programs that cultivate ethical and contemplative capacities. Future research should employ mixed methods and field-based inquiry to assess causal pathways from spiritual practice to measurable well-being outcomes.

Keywords: Gross National Happiness (GNH); Buddhist Peaceful Means; Holistic Development; Governance and Spirituality.

Introduction

Happiness and well-being have long occupied central positions in philosophical, psychological, and policy debates. Classical accounts, most notably Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia, connect human flourishing to virtue and purposive activity, while contemporary psychological frameworks distinguish hedonic pleasure from eudaimonic functioning and emphasize autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In policy terms, however, national progress has traditionally been framed by single-dimensional economic metrics such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) constitutes an influential counterproposal: first articulated by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1972, GNH reconceptualizes development by prioritizing collective well-being and sustainability over narrow economic growth (Ura et al., 2012a).

Operationalized through four pillars, good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation, alongside nine domains and multiple indicators, GNH offers a multidimensional measurement architecture that integrates subjective and objective aspects of welfare (Ura et al., 2012). The framework's prominence has grown beyond Bhutan; international agencies and scholarly commentators increasingly cite GNH as a normative and practical alternative to GDP-centric policymaking (UNDP, 2019). Nonetheless, scholarship to date has mainly examined GNH's institutional design, measurement properties, and international diffusion, leaving under-explored the doctrinal and practical role of Buddhism in shaping the moral foundations of Bhutanese governance.

Buddhist peaceful means, understood here as ethical conduct, meditative cultivation, and the altruistic orientation of bodhicitta, constitute a significant component of the normative ecology that informs Bhutanese public life. Canonical and post-canonical texts emphasize practices such as loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karuṇā), and restraint from harmful actions as dispositions that reduce suffering and foster social trust (Rinpoche, 1998; Śāntideva, 1997). Empirically, Bhutan's policy instruments, ranging from curricular reforms to environmental stewardship programs, reveal an institutional reciprocity between GNH metrics and Buddhist ethical norms (Thinley, 1999).

This study, therefore, interrogates the conceptual and practical consonances between GNH and Buddhist peaceful means. Specifically, it (1) traces the theoretical foundations and policy evolution of GNH, (2) analyzes Buddhist ethical and contemplative practices as mechanisms for individual and communal well-being, and (3) assesses the extent to which Buddhist values are operationalized within Bhutan's governance architecture. By bridging

development theory, religious ethics, and policy analysis, the research contributes to debates on alternative development paradigms and offers empirically grounded insights into how spirituality and institutional design can be integrated to promote sustainable, culturally resonant well-being. Given contemporary challenges, urbanization, youth unemployment, and cultural change, understanding this integration is both timely and policy-relevant for states seeking more holistic measures of progress (Dorji, 2021).

Research Objectives

1. To study the concept and theories of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan
2. To study Buddhist Peaceful Means in promoting happiness and peace
3. To analyze the relationship between Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Buddhist Peaceful Means

Literature Review

The literature on Gross National Happiness (GNH) and its philosophico-ethical foundations converges on two interrelated claims: first, that GNH provides a multidimensional alternative to GDP-centred development metrics; and second, that Buddhist ethical and contemplative traditions constitute a normative substrate that both informs and legitimates GNH in practice. Foundational work by Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, and Wangdi (2012a, 2012b) frames GNH as a policy architecture designed to measure and promote collective flourishing by integrating material and spiritual dimensions of life. In *A Short Guide to the Gross National Happiness Index*, Ura et al. (2012a) argue that GNH “measures the quality of a country more holistically than Gross National Product” and operationalizes this claim through four pillars and multiple subjective and objective indicators. Their extended analysis further documents how successive political actors have invoked GNH as “development with values,” thereby codifying ethical considerations into institutional practice (Ura et al., 2012b, p. 43).

Bhutanese political actors and policy documents reinforce this intertwining of values and governance. Former Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley’s public addresses emphasize the distinction between transient affective states and enduring forms of happiness grounded in service, harmony with nature, and cultivated wisdom (Thinley, 2009). Thinley’s formulation both echoes and operationalizes the claims of GNH advocates by linking ethical dispositions to concrete policy arenas such as education and environmental stewardship.

Scholarship examining the doctrinal underpinnings of GNH points to classical and modern Buddhist sources that foreground altruism, ethical discipline, and mental cultivation as prerequisites for social harmony (Patrul Rinpoche, 1998; Śāntideva, 1997). Patrul Rinpoche's instruction on boundless impartiality and loving-kindness highlights the psychological mechanisms, reduction of self-centred desire, cultivation of care, that plausibly translate into prosocial behaviours and civic trust. Such textual materials provide a moral psychology that complements the institutional measures advanced by GNH architects: whereas the index quantifies domains of welfare, and Buddhist practice addresses the dispositional causes of well-being.

Broader philosophical treatments of happiness further situate GNH within a cross-cultural discourse on virtue and self-transcendence. Popular syntheses such as *The Philosophy Book* (Buckingham, 2011) collect classical aphorisms linking happiness to ego-transcendence and self-knowledge, thereby resonating with Buddhist emphases on reducing clinging and cultivating insight. These philosophical parallels strengthen arguments that GNH is not an idiosyncratic policy fad but part of a longer intellectual lineage organizing ideas about flourishing.

Despite this convergence, the literature also reveals important gaps. Empirical evaluations of how Buddhist ethical education, monastic practice, or contemplative programs concretely affect GNH indicators remain limited. Similarly, comparative work that tests the transferability of Bhutan's value-driven model to pluralistic or secular contexts is nascent. Collectively, the reviewed sources establish a persuasive theoretical synthesis, linking institutional design and moral cultivation—but they also point to the need for mixed-methods research that can trace causal pathways from spiritual practice to measurable social outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the research article exhibits the significant research process in terms of input, process, and output, as shown in Figure 1.

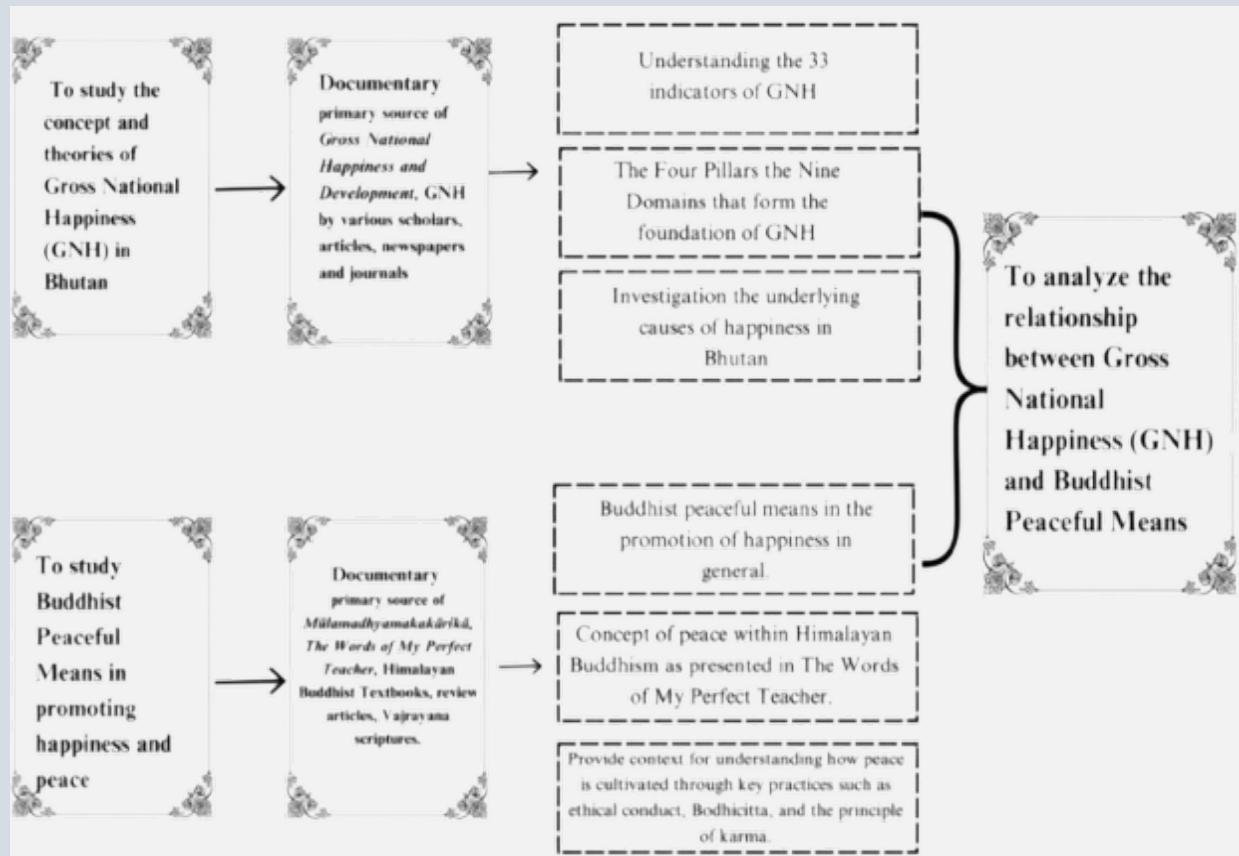


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

The researcher is going to break down the research methodology into the following three sections for simplicity of comprehension:

Research Design: This research project is a specific kind of textual investigation, and the researcher will utilize the documentary research methodology

Data Collection: Document search and data collection from the primary source of *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Commentaries and Sub-commentaries. As well as Himalayan Buddhist textbooks (review articles, online database), research works, and journals, respectively, together with the later interpretation from modern scholars, e.g., both in the Dharmic and English languages. This is to survey the viewpoint from later literature in a detailed explanation for clearer comprehension.

Study and Analysis: This section involves analyzing and synthesizing the raw and collected data to identify the most compelling insights. Through this

analysis, the research will determine the relationships, differences, and shared values between Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Buddhist peaceful means, shedding light on the broader implications for Bhutan's guiding philosophy and Buddhist practices.

Outline Construction: Developing a structured outline that aligns with the study's objectives, covering key dimensions of Buddhist peaceful means, GNH, and their interconnections for systematic analysis and synthesis.

Problem Discussion: Discussing the problems encountered according to the significance of the studies.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The research will conclude with key findings and recommendations for further research.

Research Results

Objective	Focus	Key Findings
Objective 1	Gross National Happiness (GNH)	Introduced in 1972; emphasizes holistic well-being over GDP; structured through 4 pillars and 9 domains; integrated into Bhutanese governance and internationally recognized.
Objective 2	Buddhist Peaceful Means (BPM)	Emphasizes ethical conduct, Bodhicitta, mindfulness; derived from texts like <i>The Words of My Perfect Teacher</i> ; integrated into Bhutanese culture and policies.
Objective 3	Relationship between GNH and BPM	Both share core values: ethics, well-being, sustainability; differ in methods (quantitative vs. qualitative); together form a holistic model blending governance and spirituality.

Figure 2: Objective, focus, and key finding

Objective 1: This objective examines the historical origins, conceptual architecture, and operational modalities of GNH. The analysis traces the phrase and guiding commitment to GNH to the reign of the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, and documents how the philosophy was formalized into an index and policy toolkit by the Centre for Bhutan Studies (Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, & Wangdi, 2012). The objective explicates the four pillars (good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation) and the nine domains used in the GNH Index, and it

interrogates the index's mixed use of subjective (self-reported) and objective indicators to capture psychological well-being, health, education, and ecological resilience (Ura et al., 2012; OPHI, n.d.). It also assesses the constitutional and institutional embedding of GNH, most notably its recognition within the post-2008 constitutional framework and related governance instruments, to evaluate how GNH has been translated from royal guidance into formal policy apparatus (Congress Research Service, 2023). Finally, this objective situates GNH within global debates on development measurement and assesses claims about its influence and transferability in international policy fora (Ura, 2015).

Objective 2: The results showed that Buddhist Peaceful Means play a crucial role in promoting happiness and peace by emphasizing ethical conduct, non-violence, and mindfulness. The study revealed that Buddhist teachings, particularly as outlined in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, encourage practitioners to cultivate Bodhicitta (the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings) through ethical living, compassion, and wisdom.

The research identified core Buddhist ethical practices, such as avoiding the Ten Negative Actions, taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and understanding the Law of Karma, as essential for fostering personal and societal peace. It was found that Bhutan integrates Buddhist Peaceful Means into its national policies, particularly in environmental conservation and cultural preservation, reinforcing values of respect and sustainability.

Objective 3: The results showed that there is a strong relationship between GNH and Buddhist Peaceful Means. Both frameworks emphasize ethical governance, societal well-being, and sustainable development over material wealth. The research found that while GNH focuses on policy-driven well-being, Buddhist Peaceful Means emphasize personal transformation as a foundation for happiness and peace.

Although distinct in their approaches, the study revealed that these two concepts intersect in their shared values of mindfulness, ethical conduct, and collective harmony. The findings suggest that Bhutan's integration of GNH with Buddhist principles creates a balanced model of national well-being, fostering both external prosperity and internal peace.

Additionally, the study highlighted that GNH and Buddhist Peaceful Means differ in their measurement approaches. GNH uses quantitative indicators like health, education, and governance, while Buddhist Peaceful Means focuses on spiritual progress, including ethics, karma, and enlightenment.

Despite these differences, both share core values centered on ethical living and holistic well-being. Their integration in Bhutan's development model shows how governance and spirituality can work together to promote sustainable national happiness.

Objective	Focus	Summary of Results
Objective 1	Gross National Happiness (GNH)	Introduced in 1972; emphasizes holistic development via 4 pillars and 9 domains; integrated into Bhutanese governance and policy.
Objective 2	Buddhist Peaceful Means (BPM)	Rooted in ethical conduct, mindfulness, and Bodhicitta; drawn from Mahāyāna texts; reflected in Bhutan's cultural and environmental policies.
Objective 3	Relationship between GNH & BPM	Both share ethical and holistic values; differ in methodology (quantitative vs. qualitative); together form a unified development model.

Figure 3: Objective, focus, and summary of results

Discussions

This study's findings situate Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) firmly within contemporary debates about multidimensional development and human capabilities. Consistent with Amartya Sen's capability approach, which foregrounds people's freedoms and substantive opportunities over narrow income measures, GNH reconceptualizes progress as the expansion of conditions for human flourishing rather than as an aggregate of market transactions (Sen, 1999). Colorado Mountain College

By operationalizing four pillars and multiple domains, Bhutan's policy framework aligns subjective and objective indicators to capture a more holistic account of well-being (Ura et al., 2012).

Parallel to this institutional reorientation, the study shows that Buddhist peaceful means provide psychospiritual mechanisms that complement structural reforms. Mindfulness, ethical conduct (*sīla*), compassion (*bodhicitta*), and an emphasis on the preciousness of human life cultivate dispositions that reduce maladaptive craving and hostility, thereby strengthening social trust and civic reciprocity, outcomes that complement policy-level interventions. This

observation resonates with scholarship arguing for the inclusion of psychological and subjective well-being in policy design (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

Furthermore, classical and contemporary Buddhist texts validate the moral and practical plausibility of this integration: practices described in canonical and post-canonical sources encourage inner transformation that produces pro-social behavior and resilience, making ethical cultivation a plausible antecedent of many GNH outcomes (Hanh, 1998).

Empirically, the study's documentary evidence suggests reciprocal reinforcement: institutional commitments to equitable education, environmental stewardship, and culture are more sustainable when accompanied by cultural norms and educational programs that inculcate compassion and mindfulness.

In conclusion, the analysis supports a pluralistic conception of development in which institutional design and inner ethical cultivation are mutually constitutive. For policy, this implies that measures to enhance national well-being are likely to be more durable when economic and governance reforms are coupled with culturally rooted values, education, and mental-health or mindfulness programming. Future mixed-method research should evaluate empirically how specific contemplative and ethical interventions moderate the relationship between policy initiatives and measured well-being.

Knowledge from Research

The integration of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Buddhist Peaceful Means represents a holistic approach to well-being that encompasses both policy-driven national development strategies and individual ethical transformation. This research underscores the interconnectedness between governance and spirituality, illustrating how the principles of GNH and Buddhist Peaceful Means contribute to achieving holistic well-being, happiness, and social harmony. The conceptual framework presented in this study highlights that sustainable development must extend beyond economic growth to incorporate ethical governance, environmental responsibility, and mindfulness-based well-being.

The diagram below visually represents the integration of these two frameworks:

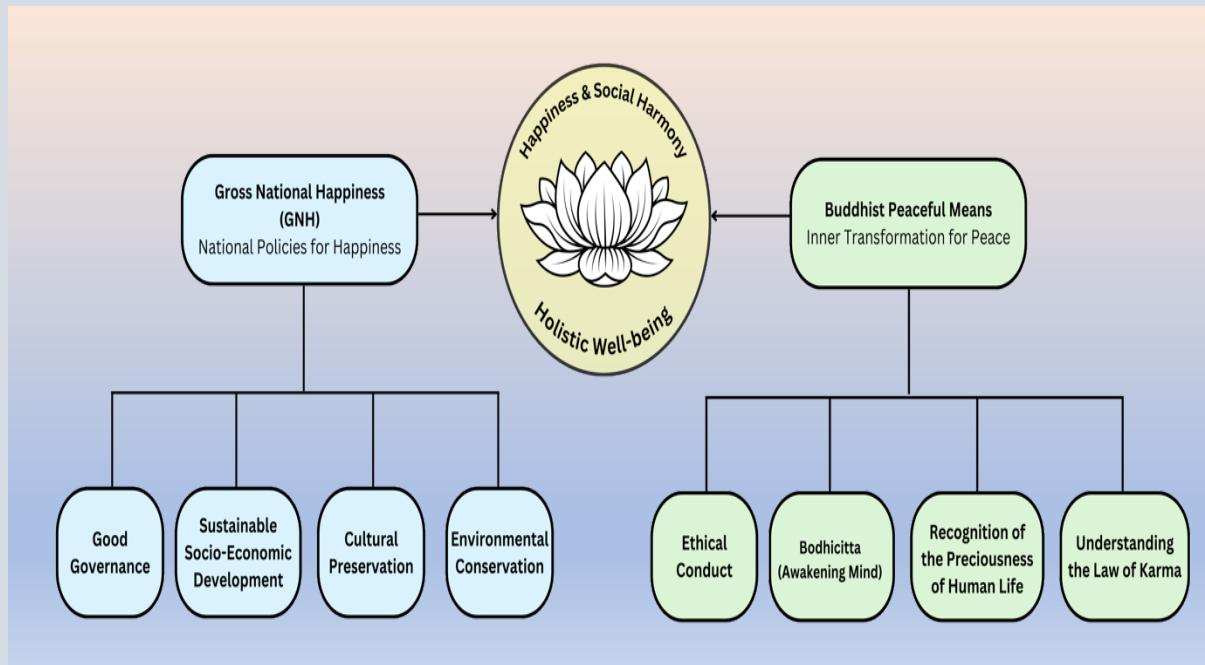


Figure 4: The Integration of GNH & Buddhist Peaceful Means

Gross National Happiness (GNH) constitutes a distinctive development paradigm that reframes national progress beyond narrowly defined economic metrics such as Gross Domestic Product. Rooted in four pillars, good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation, GNH embeds social, cultural, and ecological criteria into public policymaking. By prioritizing human flourishing, community resilience, and long-term sustainability, the GNH framework challenges development models that privilege short-term material growth over collective well-being and social cohesion.

Complementing this institutional orientation, Buddhist peaceful means emphasize interior transformation as a complement to external policy. Core Buddhist principles, *sīla* (ethical conduct), *bodhicitta* (the altruistic intention to benefit others), the recognition of the preciousness of human life, and the doctrine of karma, provide moral and psychological resources for cultivating compassion, restraint, mindfulness, and responsibility. *Sīla* undergirds civic trust and non-harmful social interactions; *bodhicitta* motivates policies that attend to vulnerable populations; a deep appreciation for life fosters gratitude and mental resilience; and karma underscores the long-term consequences of personal and collective action.

The study finds a substantive and reciprocal relationship between GNH and Buddhist peaceful means. Ethical governance is reinforced by values that encourage integrity and accountability; socio-economic strategies informed by compassion tend to promote equity in education, health, and welfare; cultural preservation supports collective identity and psychological stability; and environmental stewardship is sustained by moral commitments to future generations. In short, the convergence of governance structures and spiritual ethics creates mutually reinforcing mechanisms that facilitate both measurable policy outcomes and the less tangible cultivation of social harmony.

This research advances an interdisciplinary model in which institutional design and ethical cultivation operate in tandem to achieve sustainable well-being. For policymakers seeking holistic approaches to development, the findings recommend integrating values education, mindfulness interventions, and culturally informed programming alongside conventional economic and environmental measures. Bhutan's experience offers a transferable exemplar: enduring national happiness depends on coordinated structural reforms and sustained attention to the moral and psychological dimensions of human life.



Figure 5 Framework for Sustainable Well-being via GNH & Buddhist Peaceful Means

The integration of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Buddhist Peaceful Means (BPM) offers a practical framework for sustainable well-being

across key sectors. In academia, the findings can be incorporated into interdisciplinary curricula and published in scholarly platforms. The community can benefit through educational programs that promote mindfulness, ethics, and sustainable living.

In society, the research supports mental health initiatives, ethical leadership, and corporate responsibility. The economic sector can adopt GNH-aligned strategies, such as ethical investments and happiness-driven business models. For policy, governments can implement well-being metrics and incorporate Buddhist values into governance, while international organizations can align these concepts with global sustainability goals.

Digital tools like e-learning and mobile apps can further facilitate the application of GNH and BPM in daily life. Effective implementation depends on cross-sector collaboration, making this integration a replicable model for ethical and holistic development worldwide.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework and Buddhist peaceful means through documentary analysis of primary scriptures, policy documents, and scholarly literature. Across the three research objectives, the findings consistently indicate that GNH and Buddhist ethical teachings share a common orientation toward holistic well-being, ethical living, and social harmony; they operate at different registers (policy vs. spiritual practice) and employ distinct mechanisms for achieving similar ends.

First, the analysis confirms that GNH is a comprehensive development paradigm that privileges collective well-being over narrow economic growth. Grounded in four pillars (good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation) and operationalized through nine domains and thirty-three indicators, GNH frames national progress in terms of human flourishing rather than GDP alone. This institutional architecture positions Bhutan as a distinctive case in which normative values are explicitly embedded in state metrics and policy priorities.

Second, Buddhist peaceful means, articulated through principles such as ethical conduct, non-violence, compassion, mindfulness, and the cultivation of bodhicitta, emerge as substantive pathways to individual and communal peace. These practices address the affective and dispositional roots of suffering (e.g.,

greed, hatred, ignorance) and thereby create the psycho-ethical preconditions for stable social relations and civic trust.

Third, the study demonstrates a strong, mutually reinforcing relationship between GNH and Buddhist peaceful means. Bhutan's policy choices in areas such as education, social welfare, and environmental stewardship exhibit clear consonance with Buddhist values, suggesting that spiritual commitments have informed practical governance strategies. At the same time, GNH translates moral and contemplative ideals into institutional instruments, enabling scalability and accountability in the pursuit of national well-being.

The implications of these findings are twofold. Theoretically, they underscore the viability of value-driven development models that integrate ethical and spiritual resources with policy design. Practically, they suggest that embedding principles of compassion, mindfulness, and ethical governance into public programs can strengthen social cohesion and sustainable development outcomes.

In sum, this study reinforces that Bhutan's GNH is not merely a policy innovation but a lived synthesis of governance and spiritual practice: a pragmatic example of how ethical governance, compassion, and mindfulness can inform national strategies for collective happiness.

Suggestions

This research has found that Buddhist peaceful means play a fundamental role in shaping Gross National Happiness (GNH) by integrating ethical conduct, mindfulness, and compassion into national well-being policies. The important thing is that GNH is not merely an economic or policy framework but a holistic development approach rooted in Buddhist principles. This understanding can be applied to developing governance models that balance material progress with ethical and spiritual well-being, ensuring that economic growth does not come at the cost of cultural preservation and environmental sustainability.

Limitations of this research include its reliance on documentary sources and the consequent lack of primary empirical data on the lived experiences of GNH policies. Future research should undertake mixed-methods and comparative studies, including fieldwork, interviews, and longitudinal assessments, to evaluate how Buddhist peaceful means translate into measurable improvements in well-being and to test the transferability of Bhutan's model to other socio-political contexts.

Furthermore, greater importance should be given to the practical application of Buddhist peaceful means in contemporary policymaking, social conflict resolution, and mental well-being programs. Integrating Buddhist ethical teachings into education, workplace ethics, and leadership training could enhance societal harmony and sustainable development.

For the next research issue, further studies should explore how other nations can adapt the GNH model while considering cultural, political, and economic differences. Additionally, research should be conducted on the long-term impacts of GNH policies on Bhutanese youth, economic sustainability, and globalization challenges, ensuring that GNH continues to serve as an effective development model for future generations.

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