

Bhutan's Unique Development Paradigm

The Green School Model of Restorative Learning

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ABSTRACT: This essay, penned by former Minister of Education Thakur S. Powdyel, illuminates the contrast between Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework and the traditional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) metric. Unlike GDP, which fixates on economic output, GNH takes a holistic approach to development, encompassing environmental, social, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. The Green School initiative, a living embodiment of GNH, is not just an educational model, but a comprehensive life-enriching experience. It aims to cultivate well-rounded individuals through the Sherig Mandala, which integrates eight essential elements: Nature, Society, Culture, Intellect, Academics, Aesthetics, Spirituality, and Ethics. The essay underscores how the Green School initiative, guided by the principles of GNH, fosters a comprehensive educational experience that contributes to sustainable development and the well-being of both individuals and society.

KEYWORDS: Gross National Happiness (GNH); Green School Model; Holistic Education; Sustainable Development; Educational Reform

Every nation ought to have its own North Star as much as every man, woman and child must have their own dream to guide them in the direction they want to pursue and to keep them in their orbit. Masters of technology and proud owners of smart equipment of myriad options, the advanced moderns may neither have the inclination nor the time to look skyward and locate the North Star in the giant dome that arches over them. For the ancient mariners lost on the wide-open seas though, the North Star was the never-failing, ever-constant point of reference as they pined for the safety of the shore.

Even for the denizens of the progressive 21st century, in fact, more so for them who find themselves lost in a world where 'things fall apart, and the center cannot hold,' the light of the North Star is crucial to make sense of the mind-boggling developments taking place all around them. And nations most certainly need the benefit of a sense of direction as they assess where they want to be at the end of the next three years or five or fifty or hundred! How else will they make their national plans, direct their minds, optimize their time, and mobilize resources to achieve the desired goal?

For too long, the world has been accustomed to following the hard-beaten path announced by Simon Kuznets and sanctified by Bretton Woods as though Gross Domestic Product was the magic measure of human progress. Governments around the world have used GDP as the

ultimate arbiter of a country’s progress and deluded themselves into believing that the more one produces, the more one consumes, and the more one owns, the better off one is!

The young king of Bhutan, sixteen going on seventeen when he was called upon to steer the country on the sudden demise of his extraordinary father, thought otherwise and introduced a quiet revolution in the way development is to be assessed by declaring that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product”. Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck saw the world and saw it whole and realized that the conventional measure of progress that used Gross Domestic Product as the yardstick told only a part of the story and not the whole story. GDP looks at the physical, material, and objective world and assesses progress from the linear logic of economic efficiency and leaves out other vital, non-material elements that together account for progress that is authentic and, therefore, more reliable.

Young in limbs but in judgment old, Bhutan’s fourth King acknowledged that the most passionate yearning of all human beings across time and space is for happiness and that their most basic needs are not necessarily physical or material. Other elements, including the social, cultural, emotional, psychological, spiritual, ethical, environmental, and beyond economics, give meaning and worth to life and need to be nurtured and cultivated. There is no necessary relationship between the quantity of material possessions and the level of happiness. They could in fact be anti-thetical to each other. That the goal of life cannot be limited to an endless cycle of production and consumption, more production and consumption, at infinitum.

In order, therefore, to obtain a fuller sense of human progress or societal well-being, governments must employ more variables that take into account the role of non-material, non-quantifiable elements in the creation of well-being and happiness that the conventional, highly reductionistic GDP model fails to capture. Unlike the uni-dimensional GDP model, the GNH architecture is founded on what have come to be known as the four pillars that include balanced and equitable socio-economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation of culture, and promotion of good governance. These cardinal pillars are broken down into nine domains that consist of psychological well-being, health, time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standard. These are again broken down into 33 indicators and several indices further down.



Source: Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research

The erstwhile Planning Commission has been re-designated as the Gross National Happiness Commission. It is charged with policymaking, planning, resource mobilization, resource allocation, and monitoring progress against key results areas. All government plans and programs and its agencies have to be GNH-compatible to receive state funding. The Centre for

Bhutan studies carry out regular surveys using a large body of quantitative and qualitative research instruments to assess the status of GNH experience across the country, and results are used to guide public policy and intervention as required.

Beyond Bhutan, the vision of Gross National Happiness as a holistic development paradigm has elicited much interest among thought leaders, innovators, change-makers, and intellectuals around the world as they recognize the limitations of the conventional model and look for alternative ways to organize their societies and economies against the backdrop of an ailing planet plagued by climate change, global warming and a variety of human-induced disasters. On Bhutan's submission, the UN General Assembly endorsed the pursuit of happiness as a basic human goal and declared March 20th as the International Day of Happiness since 2012.

Bhutanese policymakers and planners are not in any illusion about the challenge of pursuing a vision as profound as Gross National Happiness, as opposed to following the well-trodden path of the Gross Domestic Product model, as inadequate as it may be as a measure of progress. The success of GNH depends upon mindful planning, sensitive implementation, and a wide-awake approach to the assessment of progress, taking care of the claims of diverse elements that have legitimate rights to benefit from the finite resources of our Planet Earth against the unlimited wants of humans.

Anything, including human beings, which produces goods and services that have an economic value is the favored haunt of GDP – never mind the harm done to the life-sustaining Mother Nature as indeed to the legitimate claims of future generations. GNH is a demanding goal to pursue, but it is a worthwhile goal befitting the human of the species, given the unsustainable global scenario that the GDP-fuelled model has unleashed. But, living in a GDP-dominated world, GNH must deal with multiple challenges. The North Star awaits the seeker still...



Gross National Happiness is the call of the North Star, the vision of a life more beautiful, a world more meaningful. GNH is a dream, a plea, a prayer...

If a nation has a dream, it falls upon the noble sector, otherwise called education, to embrace and advance that dream. But just as GNH is a refreshing departure from the dominant economic model of development, the country's education system must also follow a new paradigm that combines the need to sharpen brains and skills with the need to build faith and character. Therefore, at the beginning of 2010, Bhutan's Ministry of Education launched a nationwide reform program called Educating for Gross National Happiness to be achieved by nurturing Green Schools for Green Bhutan.

A green school engages and empowers all the elements of the learner, including the natural, intellectual, academic, social, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, and moral, producing, in effect, a GNH graduate who displays the qualities of usefulness and gracefulness and more! When such a graduate enters the larger society upon graduation, he or she should be able to release much goodwill and positive energy and make the world a better place to live in. It is the vision of a more hearing, more seeing and a more feeling world built on a new ethic, a new educational civilization, if you will.

My Green School presents a holistic pathway for restorative learning. This model of education is born out of a realization that the notion and practice of education around the world today trivializes this most important instrument for human and societal flourishing to respond primarily to the call of the market and leaves out other vital elements that constitute the life of the learner and which invest the process of teaching and learning with meaning, purpose, and integrity.

Deriving its life force from Bhutan's harmonious development vision of Gross National Happiness, My Green School presents a holistic model of education and seeks to reinstate this most vital medium of public good to its essential function as the Noble Sector. The Sherig (meaning deep learning) Mandala that lies at the heart of My Green School represents the eight vital elements, including Mother Nature, Society, Culture, Intellect, Academics, Aesthetics, Spirituality, and Ethics, that have a compelling claim on education, education systems and practitioners of education to make the experience of learning more authentic and fulfilling.



The Sheriq Mandala

Green is a color, but, more importantly, it is a metaphor. Green is a metaphor for anything and everything that supports and sustains life in all its infinite variety – human, animal, plant, bird, reptiles - in the sea, on land, in the air, and everywhere in between. So we can have a green school, green organizations, green economy, green business, green administrations, green policies, green legislature, green executive, green judiciary, green diplomacy, green farming, green minds, green outlook – anything that supports life and living.

What are the elements or features of a green school?

Firstly, and obviously, green institutions are naturally or environmentally green. The physical presentation, the general layout, the ambience, and the objects that create the school's external life are critical.

So said the high priest of nature:

My heart leaps up with joy

When I behold a rainbow in the sky!

The impact of the external stimuli on the human heart is overwhelming. And this psychological response to the physical environment is not only Wordsworthian but universal. Let the school campus be green and laden with plants, flowers, and fruits. Birds will come, build their home, raise a family, and share love. Animals, reptiles, and insects will favor this spot. Let the soil and spring be tended and air fresh and clean. Let school property be cared for and looked after; may there be no litter, rubbish, and the bane of plastic. Let the school be drug-free, graffiti-free, junk-free, and waste-free.

Such an environment is welcoming to the eyes and the mind. It lifts the heart and sharpens the sensibilities of the viewer. Learners feel invited and welcomed. This human-environment bond enriches the experience of living and learning. This mutual support system sustains life and living. The color and character of school change with the seasons and delight the givers and the receivers of nature's gifts.

The sights, sounds, smells, touch, and taste of Nature open our senses to our surroundings and extend the range of our lives. We become more awakened and sensitive. Teaching and learning in such an environment become an experience of joy. And all our seats of learning become naturally green. Any country can be a natural paradise.

At a time like today, when issues of global warming and climate change with their unimaginable consequences on life and the well-being of our planet are rife, appreciation of the interdependence between us, human beings, and Mother Nature becomes imperative. Given the looming catastrophe that environmental scientists warn us about, respecting the mutual relationship between us, the human species, and the macrocosm of the natural world should be the primary principle of education at all levels.

Next, we consider social greenery. Institutions of learning are more than space and structures, more than matter and materials. They are an objectification of a dream, a need, a prayer. They carry the impressions of many people's wishes and work. When learners and educators converge here, they build a community, a common space, a shared facility in which to learn, and to grow, and to develop.

Children and teachers come from many homes, towns, and hamlets and have different beliefs and backgrounds, unique aims, and aspirations. They meet people they would have never met, build friendships, and develop understanding. Once they are here, they merge their individual selves and embrace the values and visions of their seat of learning. They share the earth, the sky, the moon, and the stars. They breathe the same air and look at the same rainbow and the horizon. This shared experience for extended periods of time must yield some deeply fulfilling consequences.

We learn to live together and learn together, respecting our uniqueness and our commonality. We learn to care, share, and succeed together. If somebody is lagging behind and feeling down, we give them courage and bring them along. If somebody has reasons for joy, we celebrate it together. Our goodness and grace shine across the campus and over the wall to the community beyond.

This virtue of our minds, hearts, and hands that we develop and share in our seats of learning is crucial for the unity and strength of our countries and for the integrity and well-being of the environment at large.

Social greenery is how we feel, think, and relate to each other. It is the sum total of the goodwill and positive energy we create and release to society individually and collectively. We are in school for a purpose far larger than simply completing a course, collecting a certificate, and moving on. Our ability to build social greenery will determine how we will survive and

sustain as a people, nation, and planet. That is why what we do in our institutions of learning is critical.

How about cultural greenery? As humans, we are all cultural beings. Culture is the way we are and the way we proclaim who we are. It is the mode by which we proclaim our sense of self, identity, and uniqueness and acts as a point of reference. Culture expresses itself obviously as well as subtly, verbally and non-verbally, consciously and unconsciously or subconsciously, tangibly and intangibly. It shows how we dress, speak, sing, dance, play, pray, and conduct our rites and rituals. We see it in our art and architecture, language and literature, our faith and philosophy, our sense of wonder and delight, and our aspirations and worldview.

Culture is often defined as the cultivation of sweetness and light, a pursuit of perfection and civilization. Our seats of learning must understand the value and purpose of culture in all its many creative dimensions. When we are in school, we need to create space for the expression and celebration of our cultural experiences and diversity and cultivate gracefulness and civility, which are the hallmarks of a cultured person. The kind of culture children learn in school will be the standard for our countries as today's youth become tomorrow's leaders.

Next, a few words about intellectual greenery. Cultivating the gifts of the mind is the reason for being in school. Intellectual greenery refers to the life of the mind that informs and defines the integrity of a seat of learning. We may have fabulous facilities and abundant resources, but the ideas and thoughts circulating inside those facilities truly give life to the institution.

In school, our minds must be fertile and open to new ideas and knowledge. Our mind must be the fertile soil where novel thoughts and understanding can flourish. Teachers and students should, therefore, aim to build and maintain healthy intellectual greenery. If the mind is not charged and the intellect remains unengaged, mere schooling is a waste of time. Our schools becoming intellectually green, our profile as a nation will be that much more secure.

The human mind being the home of ideas that move nations and propel the progress of our societies, our seats of learning ought to create spaces for the exploration and celebration of the great ideas in diverse fields that have advanced human and societal development over time and leave the learners with a sense of wonder about the unfinished business of our evolution.

Let's move to academic greenery if you will. We have become accustomed to following a set of subjects according to a defined syllabus built around what the state considers important at a certain point in time. We have hardly asked why we must spend nine months out of twelve studying physics, chemistry, or history. Nor have we ever asked why a sonnet or a story should claim a space in the curriculum! However, each of these disciplines is a vast continent of ideas and knowledge. If we devote our lives and time to the study of geography, for instance, we might as well pursue treasures in geography, literature, or mathematics.

As educators and learners, we must discover the grace of great ideas that inform and sustain the different fields of study - generation upon generation. We must be the treasure-revealers both as teachers and students. Otherwise, we scratch the surface and move on. The subject does not speak to us, and we are content with the shadow. This is not learning. We

want our seats of learning to be academically green if we want to secure a place in the sun. There are implications of untold magnitude.

Aesthetic greenery is another essential element of a GNH school. Aesthetics is the study of the beautiful, the graceful, and the tasteful. Promotion of aesthetic greenery is important, especially now when all kinds of influences brought on by mass media and the advent of smart technology often tend to suck the soul out of our youth. We can easily fall for anything and everything if we do not know how to distinguish between the genuine and the dubious, the authentic and the flashy.

In our seats of learning, we must learn and teach our students to value what is truly good and worthwhile and reject what only panders to our lower-order desires. Aesthetic greenery is the quality of appreciating a beautiful object for what it is, a good deed for what it is, and a fine piece of work for what it truly is. It is the ability to make fine distinctions between appearance and reality. This is what good education is, after all.

Let the learners be creators of their own universe instead of aping the shadows that the smart machine provides to them, often leading to destructive consequences. Instances of crisis of identity and loss of one's integral self, self-harm and inability to cope with life's challenges could be mitigated or minimized if the learners develop self-respect and celebrate their own undivided person.

Let's take spiritual greenery, next! There is an element of the spiritual in all of us. It relates to our belief that as we are, we are not complete, or whole; that there are other beings and presences above and beyond ourselves – greater than us, more powerful than us; that we gain our fullness and confidence in relation to them and cooperation with them.

That dimension of our life that leads us to look into ourselves, lifts us above our mundane selves, and connects us to a higher level of consciousness is our spiritual self. Acknowledging a power above and beyond ourselves allows us to moderate our ego and makes us more humble. Our seats of learning must create moments for children and teachers for creative spiritual experiences that enrich and ennoble them.

Spirituality differs from religion or religiosity. Spirituality liberates and elevates, while religion or religiosity can often constrict and limit us.

Moral greenery is the supreme element of a green school or institution, society, or nation. Morality or ethics is a function of distinguishing between categories of values: right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil or bad. It is the fundamental principle that sets human beings apart from other animals and gives them the authority to make judgments about values. It stands to reason, therefore, that we define education as a process that gently draws the human mind to look for and love what is true and good and beautiful. We discover that education is essentially a moral act of faith. It harmonizes the need to sharpen our brains and skills with the need to build faith and character.

As a normative art, education establishes the laws of good life and shows the pathway for societies and nations. Morality humanizes knowledge, edifies learning, and elevates the learner. Otherwise, knowledge without conscience is futile and unfulfilling, and learning without character impoverishes the scholar and diminishes the light.

A morally green institution fosters goodness over cleverness, cooperation over competition, and fair play over victory at any cost. What values do the teachers and students live by? What principles define their life? The standards set by seats of learning and scholars become the standards of society. People and nations derive strength and sustenance from the integrity of people's thoughts and actions. All systems, small and big, must have high standards both in private and in public life. The place to begin is the family and the seat of learning.

Since the most precious segment of our societies, our future leaders, influencers,, and public figures in diverse fields, are in our schools, colleges, and universities, it is only right that institutions of learning educate the learners to be men and women of integrity who will earn the respect of the citizens by virtue of who they are as people and not by their power or possessions.

A green school looks back for standards, and it looks ahead for vision. On a more immediate level, green schools ensure that no child is left out of the educational opportunities and that learning is worthwhile and purposeful. Such an institution builds and maintains the basic amenities for boys and girls, men and women, ensuring basic safety standards. Schools maintain individual student's personal health status and monitor changes. A green school is open, fair, transparent, and conducive to all learners' growth. There are no double standards in its relation to teachers, students, and the community. There is no place for bullies and show-offs here. It is a community of respect, care, and concern.

A green school institutes powerful strategies for learning and prepares students for the world of work as well as for life. All teachers in a green school live by the standards of the Triangle Noble – an abiding love of children, a deep passion for learning, and a heightened sense of the importance of education as a powerful tool for the transformation of individuals, societies and nations.

A green school builds and promotes an active involvement of the parents and the community in the education of the children. The community and the society beyond are the stronger for the school and the light it sheds around.

At the most basic level, a green school speaks well, reads well, writes well, thinks critically, analyses intelligently, and learns creatively. Imagine our schools that become green in these many ways! Imagine our countries becoming green in these multiple spheres of their life!

The most fervent vision of My Green School is that our children and youth who go through this experience while at school, college, or university and join the larger society upon graduation will be released to society the values and virtues outlined in the Mandala. They will help build a more harmonious society and wiser nations and contribute to a better and more peaceful world beyond.

Translated into some 19 major languages around the world, including Italian, with more translations underway, the core message of My Green School as a vital instrument for human and societal development within mutually supportive planetary boundaries is often hailed as a significant contribution to global education thought today.

Green Schools are indeed the vital satellites of the ever-shining, constant North Star.

Suggested further readings

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