

Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Preserving Culture for Human Progress

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The Buddha proclaimed that all conditioned things are impermanent and constantly changing. Around the same time, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus is said to have claimed that the only constant in life is change. Our entire existence is a process of continuous change, but societal change has never before been as palpable as it is in our times. Modernisation brought massive changes to the agrarian society since the 17th century, and industrialization and technological advancement heightened the process. Yet, the intensity of changes and societal disruption we witness today through globalisation and digital revolution is unprecedented and most unsettling.

As we go through such tumultuous change, it is helpful to heed the Buddha's advice to be mindful of change. "The mindfulness of change", he declared, "is the supreme mindfulness just as the footprint of an elephant is the supreme footprint." Just as an elephant's footprint is a striking imprint giving a clear direction to follow, the mindfulness of change helps us to have the clear sense of direction. Through being aware and mindful of the changes we can become more responsive and astute in our responses.

The world has seen tremendous changes in the past few decades. The global urban population has increased from about one billion in 1960 to 5.4 billion today.¹ World trade went from about USD 1.25 million in 1960 to some 31 trillion.² We have seen the economic rise of the Global South leading to shifts in the geopolitical discourse and development paradigms.³ Health challenges such as HIV and Covid-19, though largely overcome, have altered people's lives and behaviours. Meanwhile, climate change continues to wreak increasing havoc through glacial melting, forest fires, furious floods, etc. and rapid advancement in digital and bio-technology is taking humanity into an unnerving and unpredictable future. Above all, internet, which began only thirty years ago, and having only about 360 million user at the turn of the century, now has 5.4 billion users.⁴ Social media, which barely began twenty years ago and now has 5.17 billion users, is having far-reaching impacts on people's daily lives and cultures.

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL> Retrieved on 25 October 2024.

² https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/gatt_international_trade_1960.pdf

³ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/8cebcebd-6255-5d3a-94ff-2518144fe11a/content>

⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?end=2023&start=1960&view=chart>

Bhutan: A Country in Transition

No doubt big changes and the attendant social frenzy and restlessness are global phenomena. However, the intensity and impact of change in a small country like Bhutan, which has only recently embarked on the process of modernisation, is considerably greater than other places. Secluded from the rest of the world by its remote geographic location and rough terrain, Bhutan with a population of roughly 0.7 million has remained an isolated medieval society until the middle of the twentieth century. With no major internal social disruption, external colonisation, or natural calamities, the country enjoyed remarkable continuity of its traditions and cultures. Life in traditional Bhutan was primarily informed by its nature-based pre-Buddhist belief system and the mind-centred Buddhist religion. Both of these traditions helped cultivate a strong connection to the natural environment and a strong culture of communal harmony and spiritual wellbeing. Thanks to such a cultural ethos, Bhutan has come to be seen as the last bastion of Himalayan Buddhist civilisation and has also emerged as a paragon of environment conservation.

However, Bhutan's hermetic status changed with the process of modernisation starting around the same time Ramon Magsaysay Award was instituted. It was only from late 1950s that active programmes of modern development started in Bhutan with the promotion of mainstream school education, biomedicine, communication facilities, and modern system of administration. Today, Bhutan has moved from being an isolated kingdom to becoming a full member of the global community. Tourism, television and internet has brought the world to Bhutan, and Bhutanese in thousands are emigrating to other parts of the world.

I grew up in my small village with a common saying: Gyatsa is the end of sky (*Gyatsa nami thama*). Ura, my village, is at the eastern end of Bumthang, and Gyatsa is at the western edge. Most people never ventured out of Bumthang, thus Gyatsa was the end of sky. Gyatsa is now only one and half hour's drive from my village on the new highway. The Bhutanese world has exploded; I found out in 2018 I have more first cousins in New York city than anywhere else.

Bhutan was an entirely rural community with no towns 60 years ago and today almost half of the population live in new urban settlements. Economically, Bhutan has moved from subsistence farming and being food secure to a consumerist market economy with most basic commodities imported from outside. Politically, Bhutan adopted a constitutional monarchy and had its first democratic elections in 2008.

Most people were illiterate and passed down their values, knowledge, and skills in oral forms. Today, literacy has increased to almost 80% but before the literary culture got established, the audio-visual culture swept across the country so much so that one could say Bhutan has moved from an oral past straight to an audio-visual future. Social media platforms such as Telegram, Whatsapp, Wechat, Tiktok and Facebook

are now popular even in the distant corners of the country. With the rise of AI, we are yet to know its full ramification. In one recent report on ChatGPT, Bhutan ranked top with approximately 15.96% of its population using the AI tool.⁵

Yet, the most fundamental change with far-reaching consequences is in the domain of culture involving people's worldview and mindset. Bhutan may appear as an idyllic pristine society enjoying its cultures intact judging from its relatively well preserved material culture. However, there is a major transition occurring from its traditional nature-based pre-Buddhist and mind-centred Buddhist system to a more secular scientific worldview, from a spiritual outlook to a materialistic pursuit of life, from a god-fearing society to anthropocentric mindset, and from communitarian values to individualism.

The point I wish to make is not just that Bhutan is changing. I wish to highlight the pace at which Bhutan as a society has been changing. Most Bhutanese of my generation have seen motor road, electricity, television, internet and social media all arrive in our communities in our lifetime. As a cultural historian, I can say that Bhutan has changed much more in the last sixty years than the 600 years before that. Such rapid and sweeping changes in a society come with a great deal of tension, stress, apprehension and confusion, which often become manifest through social ills such as substance abuse, depression, and suicide.

In the midst of such chaotic change and confusion, one needs a developmental compass to find a sense of direction. This came in the form of Gross National Happiness when our visionary king, the 4th Drukpa Gyalpo in 1970s pronounced: "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product". He crystallized in this concept and term the Bhutanese ethos of being connected to nature and one's inner spiritual wellbeing, which remained diffused in the society. He ruled the country in this spirit but it was only at the end of the twentieth century that our first Prime Minister, Jigme Y Thinley, formulated GNH as Bhutan's development philosophy with the four pillars of socio-economic development, good governance, cultural preservation and environment conservation. The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies took this further in the past two decades to break down the four pillars into nine domains of health, education, living standard, time use, psychological wellbeing, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, good governance, and ecological diversity and resilience, and measure them through 33 indicators. They have carried out five surveys which showed that 40.9%, 43.4% and 48.1% of the population were extensively or deeply happy in 2010, 2015, and 2022 respectively.⁶ This is different from the World Happiness Report which by the way ranked Bhutan 95 out of 156 countries in 2019.

⁵ <https://coinjournal.net/news/the-most-chatgpt-addicted-countries/>

⁶ Ura, Alkire, et al. *GNH 2022*, Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies, 2023.

In brief, Gross National Happiness, as His Majesty, the 5th Druk Gyalpo has aptly put, is a pursuit of development with values. It is an effort to balance tradition with modernity, economic development with environmental conservation, and external material comfort with spiritual wellbeing. Bhutan is far from reaching such a goal but is striving to be on the path to such sustainable and wholesome progress in the face of many challenges brought by modernization, globalisation and the digital revolution.

The Loden Journey

As a conscious citizen and researcher, I have been closely studying the changes and course of development in Bhutan, and inspired by my upbringing and education, I have also tried to spot and take up opportunities to steer the changes in a direction aligned with Gross National Happiness. One such opportunity came when I was studying at Oxford and my friend, Robert Miles, the head porter of my college, shared how he could not finish school due to financial difficulties and would like to help a child with a similar difficulty. His contribution of £50, which we used to support our first student beneficiary, led to the establishment of Loden Foundation in 1999. Tenzin Pelmo, who was six years old then, came from a family of seven daughters and is now a history teacher, mother, and also member of the Loden board. As many children with poor financial background would drop out of school because their families cannot afford additional costs for uniforms, stationeries and travel. although tuition is free in Bhutan, our student sponsorship scheme helped many children from poor economic background obtain basic education.

With growing awareness of the importance of early childcare and development, we launched free preschools in clustered rural communities as such commercial services only existed in urban areas. Today, we continue to run three of these preschools after handing over two to the government.

In spite of the success in school education, skilled human resource remains a major challenge in Bhutan. To ease this problem, we began the Loden scholarships to support deserving youth seek higher education in universities and technical training institutes, mainly for expertise which Bhutan stands in need. As a young boy, I had strong ambition to become a medical doctor. However, I failed to realize the dream as I left high school and became a monk at the age of 16. To make up for this unfulfilled dream, I pledged to raise resources to fund at least 10 MBBS students. Today, I am very pleased to report that through Loden scholarship programme, we have funded 27 MBBS students and 35 nursing, pharmacists and other health professionals although Bhutan is still far from meeting the WHO requirement.

At the turn of the new century, Bhutan faced a new challenge of youth unemployment. When my friends Anne and Gerard Tardy asked me what they can do for Bhutan on

a Christmas walk in the Alps, I suggested we start a business education programme to help reduce youth unemployment. This led to the launch of Loden Entrepreneurship Programme, which helps inspire, motivate, train and fund start-ups so young adults can become job creators instead of job seekers. We trained nearly 6000 aspiring entrepreneurs and funded 301 social enterprises with collateral free and interest free capital, while also encouraging them to pursue not only the single bottom line of making profit but a greater cause to benefit society through job creation, import substitution, value addition, and social innovation. Batch by batch, we strive to groom a community of conscientious Bodhisattva entrepreneurs who wish to benefit both oneself and others. As Bhutan's fledging private sector grows, we hope to foster a culture of intelligent business, which is socially responsible, culturally sensitive and environment friendly, and contribute to building a caring, wholesome, and sustainable economy - a GNH economy.

Leveraging the Cultural Capital

The values of wisdom and compassion that Loden imparts through our education and entrepreneurship programmes undoubtedly come from Bhutan's cultural heritage, particularly its Buddhist tradition, which I had the fortune of studying and experiencing for most of my life. When I finished my studies at Oxford, I was offered a job to work on Buddhist manuscripts in the top three UK libraries. These manuscripts were brought out of Tibet by the Younghusband Expedition in 1903 and being properly digitised and studied in 2003 as part of the centenary commemoration. My work at the UK libraries revealed to me the need and opportunity to preserve the numerous monastic archives in Bhutan, which remain prone to damage, theft and destruction, and inaccessible to wider readership, as well as the efficacy of the new digital tools to do so relatively easily. In 2003, I undertook the task of digitising a 46 volume collection of beautiful manuscripts at Gangteng monastery using one of the earliest digital cameras in the market. This began the successive projects of digitising entire temple and family archives to both preserve the archives in digital surrogates and make them available to wider readership, and at the same time help safeguard the original manuscripts. Funded mainly by the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library, our team has now finished digitising 75 libraries containing almost five million pages of manuscripts.

When I and the team journeyed to digitize the Neyphu temple archive in 2010, the road was washed away by monsoon showers. My friends went to look for help to carry the equipment while I waited at the roadside wearing my bamboo hat. An old man of around 80 years waddled towards me and seeing my bamboo hat chanted:

*shar dagar shar gyi boe lo // nyim shar tse rang gi boe lo bey // chhap chapse ro gi boe lo mey //
chharp chapse ro gi boe lo ben // nyim shar tse rang lu jye min du //*

The bamboo hat from eastern Daga region,
You are my bamboo hat during sunny days
But someone else's during rainy days.
If you are someone else's during rainy days,
What use do I have for you during sunny days?

“You chant this to an unfaithful partner”, he said.

Impressed by his short ballad, I asked him for more and he agreed to chant over a drink although he was already a bit tipsy. We sat by the roadside and he chanted many more beautiful ballads. The encounter made me worry that when he dies, the wealth of oral literature he possessed would likely die with him. It dawned on me how our rich and unique oral traditions could vanish easily while the nation is enamoured by what is popular and common across the world. Moreover, given only some twenty percent of Bhutanese were literate in the past, relying solely on texts in our efforts to study Bhutan's past would leave us with only a limited understanding. Thus, feeling the urgency to document and study the oral traditions, which are far more endangered than the texts, we launched a five-year nationwide project to record oral and intangible cultures with support from Arcadia Fund and the University of Virginia.

While it is common to find the postulation among Bhutanese that in the absence of military might or economic power, Bhutan's sovereignty rests on its unique cultural identity and that culture serves as a bulwark against the negative influences of modernisation and globalisation, very few people have closely studied Bhutan's cultures to unravel the assumptions and assess its significance as a whole. The extensive documentation of written and oral traditions and our close interaction with cultural practitioners helped us delve deeper into understanding Bhutan's cultural elements and practices, create a comprehensive inventory and map of our cultures, take stock of their situation, and write short descriptions and essays on them so as to make them accessible to our youth.

Similarly, the perception of culture in Bhutan was primarily a conservative one of following the received traditions including some recently invented traditions. Official discourses mainly dwelt on preservation and rarely considered cultural dynamism, creative adaptation and intelligent innovation, which in turn required a more nuanced understanding of the cultures. In order to reappropriate and reformulate the cultures from the past to make them relevant to our present and future, we underscored the need to rethink culture as dynamic process and to classify cultures into what can be sustained as they are, what may have to be skilfully modified or adapted and what

may have to be altogether relinquished. Some cultural artefacts and practices have already lost their value and utility today and may be saved only for historical record, while many others can be continued with minor modification without losing their core values and functions.

More importantly, it is important to recognize that while some cultural ideas and practices are only relevant to Bhutan, most cultural elements and practices can be shared with the rest of the world and could benefit humanity in general. Bhutanese music, art, culinary recipes, textile, ethno-botanical knowledge, etc. can have global appeal as would the values and practices such as the concept of *tendrel* or interdependence, *tha damtshig* or rectitude, *le judre* or law of cause and effect, *neykor* or spiritual travel, the culture of wisdom and compassion, the practice of mindfulness, and the reverence for nature. These cultural values are as relevant to the rest of the world as to Bhutan, both now and in the future. Our project of bringing together villagers, religious priests and scientists to revive Tali lake, which received high praise from UN's sustainability experts, is a good example of powerful role culture can play in nature conservation.⁷

Humanity today stands on the cusp of a tremendous change accelerated by the digital technology. We have become a society craving instant results but the most distracted to achieve them. While our life span may be increasing, our attention span is shrinking. While our expectations are rising, our sense of fulfilment is falling. Material comfort has grown but mental calm has declined. Vanity thrives but virtue is scarce. Traditional values of reflection and contemplation, empathy and compassion, and human intelligence and wisdom to discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood, and reality from rhetoric are overshadowed by our current way of life notable for mindless consumption, reckless production, ceaseless distraction, and an endless pursuit of our insatiable desires.

As we move into the second quarter of this fast-paced century, it is an opportune moment for us to review and redefine our concept of human progress so that our efforts lead to more fulfilling and lasting happiness in personal life, peace and harmony within communities, and human flourishing worldwide. Driven by this concern and conviction, I have devoted the majority of time in recent years to developing the inner skills of contemplation and meditation through my work for the Tsadra Foundation writing content for two websites on [Buddha-Nature](#) and [Bodhicitta](#) (forthcoming) and have also established Bodhitse centre for study and contemplation in Thimphu. It is my hope that this initiative will make a modest contribution towards addressing the escalating challenges in mental health. Recognizing the vital role cultural events play for community vitality, I have returned

⁷ <https://www.undp.org/bhutan/publications/revival-leveraging-cultural-scientific-knowledge-and-practices-environmental-conservation-tali>. Retrieved on 30 October 2024.

annually for the past two decades to help organize my village festival and serve as a bridge between my village and the world. Similarly, seeing the need to design a new sustainable and caring model of economic success and prosperity, His Majesty the King of Bhutan has launched the Gelephu Mindfulness City project, aiming to combine sustainability, spiritual wellbeing, and commercial success. I humbly invite you to join us in these endeavours to unite material progress with spiritual culture and innovation with edification.

As we reflect once more on change, I propose that we transform our perspective on change itself. Typically, we view change through a conservative lens fearing disruption and destruction. We have a pessimistic view of change. Yet, it is change which allows the fresh spring flowers to bloom after an arid winter. Change brings new opportunities and avenues for growth, improvement and renewal. While it may require greatness of spirit and transformative leadership to harness the power of change and build a bold, beautiful future, I believe that even a basic understanding of culture can reveal that answers to some of humanity's most pressing questions and challenges lie in our past – in our ancient knowledge systems and wisdom traditions. I conclude with a popular Filipino proverb which underscores this point.

Ang hindi lumingon sa pinanggalingan, hindi makakarating sa paroroonan.
(A person who does not remember where he came from will never reach his destination.)