THE HAPPINESS INDEX

Putting people before profit in Bhutan

GRETCHEN LEGLER

FROM THE FORESTED HILLSIDE above us, a bulldozer sends giant rocks and tree limbs sailing down onto the hundreds-of-years-old footpath leading us from the Paro Valley floor to Dra Lhakhang, a cliffside temple where the six of us plan to sleep on the first night of our three-day hike to Dragipangtscho, a lake considered holy. Karma Wangchuk, the leader of our hiking party, blows his pocket whistle and screams along with the rest of us, hoping our distressed voices will penetrate the roar of the machine. Finally, the bulldozer stops and the road crew hollers and waves down to us in acknowledgement, oblivious to our peril.

It is the week before final exams at the Paro College of Education, and Karma, a teacher of Shakespeare and advisor to the drama club, is guiding five of us—my partner and me and three students—to the holy lake whose name, translated into English from Dzongkha, the official language of Bhutan, means “in the lap of the mountain,” or “in the lap of the guru,” the guru being Guru Rinpoche, who brought Buddhism to Bhutan in the eighth century.

As a visitor here, teaching for nine months on a Fulbright fellowship, so much of this country is surprising to me. But this is a surprise even to my Bhutanese friends: on our way to this very holy site, where ordinary Bhutanese, let alone Westerners, seldom tread, we have come across a scene of demolition, or perhaps you could call it progress. This first day of our journey has thrust us unapologetically into a collision of competing desires that marks Bhutan’s own journey from an isolated, largely self-sustaining Buddhist kingdom to a modern democracy. Karma cannot believe there will be a road to the cliff temple, and if that comes to pass, a road to the holy lake, the ultimate destination of our hike, may not be far behind. “Oh, the road,” he says with a groan. “The road means so many things. This is what is happening. It is the thirst of people for an easier life. But there is a trade-off between peace and convenience.”
A few more yards and we emerge from the forest onto the raw, red dirt swath that is the beginning of the new road. There to greet us is Sangay Dorji, the temple caretaker. He has been contracted to bring the road crew a daily hot lunch and a thermos of suja, or butter tea. He cooks the meat, lentils, rice, and ema datshi (Bhutan’s signature dish of hot chilies and melted cheese) in his kitchen at the temple over a wood fire, pours the tea into an enormous thermos, packs the food into plastic insulated tiffins, and hauls the meal an hour down the steep mountain in a basket strapped to his back. His legs are braided steel rope; his face is lined with wrinkles, his mouth ringed red from chewing doma — betel nut and lime paste wrapped in a waxy leaf. Sangay Dorji’s outfit is that of a Bhutanese country rustic — camo-patterned long johns and a tattered red t-shirt, a man’s striped button-down oxford pushed up at the elbows, the sleeves of his traditional gho tied around his waist, and on his feet what the Bhutanese call “China shoes,” olive-drab canvas high-tops smuggled over the border from Tibet.

By the following month the road crew will be at the doorstep of the temple, Sangay Dorji tells us, laughing with delight. He can simply invite them in for lunch! It was he who made the dream of the road a reality. He regards this act as one of his greatest achievements, accomplishing it by convincing local officials (and gifting them with generous hunks of fresh butter and cheese) that the road is vital for the community. The small village at the bottom of the mountain holds all of its important rituals at this ancient, mist-enfolded dwelling mind-bogglingly perched on the side of a cliff. The temple is built in traditional Bhutanese style with thick, earthen, whitewashed outer walls, dark heavy timbers, gently curved tiled roofs decorated with gilded dragon’s head cornices, its woodwork adorned with the painted signs and symbols of Bhutanese spiritual life — the fish, the wheel, the lotus, the conch. Now it will be easier for everyone to attend the ritual offering ceremonies, or pujas. No more huffing and puffing up the mountain with one hundred pounds of rice on your back. No more horses. Even the old people can come, by car!

Druk Yul, the Dragon Kingdom, has been incognito for a long, long time. A country roughly the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined, but with less than half the population, it sits sandwiched between its giant neighbors, China and India. It has never been colonized by a foreign power and was only once unsuccessfully intruded upon by the British. It has remained a place apart — a secret, secluded jewel of a Buddhist
kingdom in the lap of the Himalayas, ruled by a family of kings and queens whose pictures adorn nearly every household. Suddenly, however, it has burst upon the global scene, not only as an elite tourist destination, but as a champion in the quest for human happiness and sustainable economics, its leaders making international headlines as they invite other nations to wake up and get on board with the pursuit of Gross National Happiness.

GNH, as the Bhutanese call it, was conceived of by the country’s fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who, in the mid-1970s, realized Bhutan could no longer remain hidden from the rest of the world like a real-life Shangri-La, but would need to modernize or risk being erased entirely. How could this be done without wrecking Bhutan’s diverse and precious natural resources, subjecting its people to unfettered capitalism, or prostituting its complex and rich Tibetan Buddhist culture to tourism? His answer was Gross National Happiness, and he is famously quoted as saying, “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.”

GNH is both a development paradigm and an instrument being offered as a more holistic way to measure material as well as nonmaterial indicators of well-being. Most nations of the world use GDP, or Gross Domestic Product, to measure their economic health. GDP, developed in 1934 by economist Simon Kuznets, measures the market value of all the officially recognized goods and services produced in a country within a given amount of time. The higher the GDP the better, from an economist’s point of view, because that means a country is better able to provide those things to its citizens that are deemed necessary for a happy life, such as education and health care. But even GDP’s inventor warned that it was a blunt instrument with which to measure “economic welfare” because it only measures material aspects of human life. Economists stick with it, however, because nonmaterial aspects are so hard to measure.

With a GDP of just $1.8 billion, Bhutan is an undeniably poor country whose economy hasn’t caught up to much of the rest of the world’s. Bhutan held fast against the introduction of television and the internet until 1999. ATMs have just arrived, credit cards are nearly nonexistent, the first domestic air service started in 2012, there are no trains, loans and savings accounts are unfamiliar accoutrements of another world, and as recently as fifty years ago a cup of salt was the price for a bolt of hand-woven cloth. Perhaps, the king of Bhutan might have imagined, there was a development indicator that might measure other qualities of life in which Bhutan might be considered rich, in which it did not need to “catch up,” but in which it was already sufficient. Bhutan’s GNH index was born from this idea—that there must be a way to define well-being more broadly than in terms of dollars.

Westerners, in their dawning realization that money can’t buy happiness, often misinterpret GNH, holding out hope that Bhutan alone knows one last magic trick that will rescue us all from the dystopia of late capitalism. But GNH is more complex than that, and Bhutan is more than a Himalayan Disneyland. GNH is part of Bhutan’s plan for negotiating the wilderness of modernization without losing its soul. Every schoolchild, public policymaker, teacher, citizen, and civil servant has been asked to help create a society based on the four pillars of GNH: sustainable and equitable economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance.

Another thing that confuses Westerners, says Nyingtob Pema Norbu, a GNH Commission planning officer, is the very word “happy.” In Bhutan, happiness is not a perfect life softly cooed in pillows of cleanliness, security, and abundance. “I like to start by translating what happiness means in our language,” he says. “Ghappy—the first syllable, gha, is a word that you can use when you say you like something, when you say you love someone; it can also be used to describe a state of elation. The second syllable, key, means peace. When we refer to happiness, we are talking about harmony, striking a balance, so you’re not just focusing on individual emotion but the enabling conditions that will facilitate an individual pursuit of happiness.”

Can a country that claims in its brand-new constitution that happiness is more important than money survive, let alone thrive, in a global economy that measures everything by the dollar? How do you measure happiness? Can governments actually help people be happy? Can this tiny hermit kingdom really serve as a model for change for the rest of the world? You could argue that these are some of the most vital questions of our time.

The road is just one material manifestation of Bhutan’s entrance into the modern world, one of the hard knots that GNH policymakers must untangle. In many ways, the road creates more happiness. The road represents mobility, which creates knowledge and opportunity. The road opens the possibility for cars, which represent status, ease, and a means to make a living.
The road lays a groundwork for equality. The road also means people walk less, which has repercussions for personal health. The road means more garbage. The road is a threat to wildlife. The road greases the wheels for tourism and its potential to erode indigenous culture. The road resonates metaphorically. It is the thin, delicate strand of a spider’s web that connects many other issues Bhutan faces as it assumes a more visible role in the international imagination and economy.

**Before 1961**, Bhutan had no motorable roads, only foot and mule paths and yak trails winding their way across the rugged green accordion of its eighteen thousand square miles. What isn’t a mountaintop in Bhutan is either a precipitous slope, a sharp V-shaped valley filled with a crashing glacial river, or the rare expanse wide and flat enough for the cultivation of barley or rice. Decades of road building, sponsored by the Indian government and carried out by crews of barefoot Indian laborers, have now tenuously linked the western and eastern ends of Bhutan (a span of about 190 miles), and provided four often treacherous routes that cover about half of the ninety-mile distance from Bhutan’s border with India in the south to its border with Tibet in the north. For now, most of Bhutan remains inaccessible by car; people get where they are going the same way they have for hundreds of years—by walking, hauling their goods on their own backs or on the backs of horses and yaks. But not for long.

Phurpa is a senior at Paro College and one of our hiking companions, along with her friends Tandin and Shacha. She echoes Karma’s lament about the road: “It’s coming. It’s coming . . . everything is coming,” she says. “If I had the power, I would stop it now.” She holds a seemingly conservative view for a woman under thirty who stands to benefit from her country’s entrance into the modern world. “I would like to see at least some part of Bhutan undeveloped. We could do it,” she adds. “Just as we have for so long. We can manage. We can get by.”

Unlike the muscular, forthright Sangay Dorji, our friend Karma is soft-spoken, shy, and slight, so slight that I worry he might crumble under the weight of his pack, stuffed as it is with five kilos of rice, fresh potatoes, two liters of milk, a sack of lentils, and a cast-iron frying pan. A lover of literature, a poet, an artist, an orchid botanist, an expert on Bhutanese butterflies, and something of a recluse, he feels the changes coming to Bhutan—of which the road to the cliff temple is only the beginning—as personally and painfully as a physical ailment. It isn’t stubborn nostalgia that fuels his melancholy outlook, but a fear that what has made Bhutan Bhutan, and not India or Nepal or Tibet, might disappear before his very eyes.

“Before, our society was based on traditions and nature,” Karma says. For example, when he was a student at Sherubtse College in eastern Bhutan, before he went to India to get his master’s degree in English, he would visit his home in Deothang on vacations, and on the way back to college on the bus, he’d carry his lunch in a round, two-sided bamboo basket called a bangchung. His auntie would line the inside of the basket with banana leaves, spoon in rice, make an indentation in the rice, fill it with a dry curry, then cover it with more rice. The two sides of the basket would then be snapped together, one flexible bamboo ridge inside the other, and it became Karma’s lunch box and plate. Opening it, he says, “was like unveiling a special treasure.” When he says this, his sad face lights up with pleasure.

Now, traditions and nature, in Karma’s eyes, are taking a back seat to convenience. Plastic insulated containers made in China, exported to Thailand, flown to India, and trucked over Bhutan’s southern borders have replaced the bangchung for everyday use. The artisans who used to weave the baskets now make 300 ngultrum a day doing roadwork for their local municipality, versus the 200 ngultrum they would get from selling a basket. And to make a bangchung means spending a night in the jungle collecting bamboo and two days weaving.

While the road is a key element of well-being because of its capacity to enhance quality of life, cultural preservation is also one of GNH’s four central tenants. The bangchungs are an age-old art in Bhutan, and part of its heretofore sustainable food culture. Already the baskets are becoming mere artifacts, divorced from their original use, primarily peddled to tourists in the capital city of Thimphu.

Sangay Dorji has sped ahead of us, and long before we have reached the temple on the side of the cliff, he has brewed a pot of butter tea, also known as suja ja amn—the mother of all teas—made of tender oak leaves and bits of other forest plants, mixed with water, butter, salt, and milk. He welcomes us into the temple with the tea and a basket of crackers and shows us where we’ll sleep—a large room with wood-shuttered windows overlooking the valley below, through which thick evening mist is already floating. The gray floorboards are wide and thick and oiled with age. One side of the room is stacked with bamboo baskets and earthen and iron pots and wooden utensils, all used in
the production of food and drink for hundreds of villagers who come here for funerals, national holidays, and religious celebrations. Against another wall are piles of richly scented horse blankets that we will spread out as our beds. In the kitchen, the wood stove, or bukhari, is lit, and beside it two cats and the temple’s monk, Sonam, relax in the gathering dark.

For our Bhutanese companions this magical evening is only a slight variation on normal life. For me, it feels at once completely foreign and deeply familiar. The physical exertion, the mountain setting, the mood, and the human companionship have been a passage to a place of deep joy. There is also a sonorous ache born partly of nostalgia for the beautiful fantasy of Shangri-La, the land that time forgot, which, as a girl, I was seduced by in James Hilton’s novel Lost Horizon and the Frank Capra movie of the same name. The ache is also born of the growing conviction that I have spent my life in pursuit of questionable goals—money instead of time, self-advancement instead of community, pampering of ego instead of compassion, doing instead of being. This Bhutanese life, I think, watching Karma as he sketches the scene in his notebook—the furry haunches of the sleepy cat, the slant of fading light stretching across the wooden floor, the pot of rice steaming on the rustic stove, a bowl of potatoes—is not a primitive life or an exotic life, not a life lived in the past, a life ignorant of the benefits of modernity, but a different life, an alternative to what many in the West have assumed is life, or the way life should be. For all of our sakes, I want Bhutan’s GNH paradigm to take hold, to transform the world’s imagination, but I also harbor doubts. Has any country ever become “modern” and not fallen prey to the infinite ills that such a state brings?

For a long time no one took much notice of Bhutan’s philosophies regarding happiness, until the country’s leaders started talking numbers. Ever since Bhutan developed its Gross National Happiness Index in 2008, the first country ever to do so, and launched its happiness survey in 2010, the rest of the world has been more “in the mood of listening,” a former prime minister has said, adding, “There’s no way this material world would accept the concept of GNH if happiness could not be measured; unless it is a measurable value, it will otherwise remain utopian.”

The first step in putting GNH into motion as a national policy was determining how happy, or unhappy, the Bhutanese really are. To do this, Bhutan created an “official measure of happiness,” which calculates life satisfaction in nine happiness domains: psychological well-being, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, living standards (which includes economic well-being), and good governance. Under those nine domains are thirty-three additional indicators that allowed census takers to record and then measure how a citizen scored in a particular domain.

While economic well-being is still a very important aspect of GNH, other aspects of well-being also were emphasized when Bhutan’s happiness census workers went from house to house. Census workers asked questions such as: How many healthy days do you have in a year? Do you know local folktales? Do you know what the constitution is? Do you know how HIV/AIDS is transmitted? How seriously do you take the Driglam Namzha (the national code of etiquette and conduct, which prescribes, for instance, how one folds the sleeves of one’s gho, and just how low to bow when one meets the king)? Do you speak your native language, know how to weave, paint, carve, or work with gold and silver? Do you meditate and pray regularly? Do you trust your neighbors? Do you have a toilet, electricity, a metal roof? Do you believe in karma?

The 2010 Bhutanese Happiness Survey charted responses from 7,142 of the country’s 750,000 citizens. As a nation, Bhutan scored 0.743 on its Real GNH Index. So far, no other country has used Bhutan’s GNH formula, so there is no way to directly compare Bhutan with other nations, but the survey did show that just over 40 percent of Bhutanese are “happy” or have “sufficiency in six or more domains.” The 59 percent of Bhutanese who are “not-yet-happy” “lack sufficiency” in 43 percent of the domains.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies takes pains on its GNH website to make the numbers accessible. “Dorji has sufficiency in seven domains, so he is happy, while Tashi has sufficiency in four domains, so she is considered not-yet-happy,” the website reads. “Think of these domains as nine offering bowls,” the explanation continues. “To be fully happy, six or more bowls should be full for every person.”

Once the survey results are obtained, Bhutanese leaders say, the next step is to figure out how the government can assist its not-yet-happy citizens in increasing their sense of well-being. But it doesn’t stop with the government; individuals are also
encouraged to play an active role in promoting GNH values: "As a person," the GNH website urges, "think of the nine domains in your life. Which bowls are full? Which are empty? How can you fill the empty bowls more?...Think of your family, your friends: how can you help them to fill their offering bowls?"

The current tensions in Bhutan among economic growth, modernization, quality of life, and tradition are tensions every society has faced: how to make sure everyone has enough — and how to balance the needs of the individual and the needs of the community. It was all a lot easier in Bhutan, some Bhutanese reflect, when their king lovingly told them what to do. But those days of paternalistic rule are over.

The changes that roads are making to the fabric of Bhutanese culture and geography are inescapable, and they are linked inextricably — for better or worse — to this shift in governance. Dr. Lam Dorji, head of Bhutan's Royal Society for the Protection of Nature, the country's main advocacy body working on behalf of the environment, says that it's not roads that will prove the biggest threat to Bhutan's environment in the coming decade, but democracy.

Lam Dorji remarks that road construction has skyrocketed since the country's first ever democratic elections were held in 2008 by decree of the fourth king, who shocked the nation by stepping aside in order to usher in a new era of democracy ruled over by a newly elected parliament and guided by his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, a handsome, charismatic Oxford-educated monarch who has caught the attention of W magazine and Vanity Fair.

Lam Dorji doesn't want to be pegged as one who thinks Bhutan should be kept rural-picturesque for the sake of tourism, but he argues that progress must be metered — some communities don't need roads, or could wait for roads. But the Bhutanese seem a little road crazy — eager to get in their cars and drive. One area in Bhutan's southwest corner ranks as having the highest per capita automobile ownership in the country, despite the fact that, as of yet, not a single road leads there.

Bhutan's roads are dangerous to build and difficult to maintain; because of their steepness, they are prone to rock and mudslides, often cutting people off from travel for long periods of time. In Lam Dorji's mind, roads can actually be a detriment to GNH in terms of human well-being and environmental health. He also suggests that in this new democracy roads are being used as bait to get people's votes. "It's very interesting," he adds, "that in the first four years of our democracy a large percentage of our environment has been compromised."

Democracy, what many see as the fourth king's greatest gift to Bhutan, could also be its greatest burden. "Human beings always look for what they don't have," says Lam Dorji. "Bhutan has 72 percent forest cover, which provides, among other things, biodiversity. Biodiversity will not be on the priority list of the Bhutanese. Sixty-nine percent of our people live in rural areas and environmental preservation may be part of their tradition, but it's not necessarily what they would like to have. Environmental preservation won't be on the list...the road is on the list."

Sangay Dorji is eager for us all to see the altar room upstairs in the temple. In his bare feet he leads us up the smooth rungs of a steep, narrow wooden ladder, burnished by the hands and feet of worshippers over hundreds of years. One of the most prominent figures in the altar room is Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, whom we can clearly see, thanks to the electric light that Sangay Dorji turns on with the pull of a string hanging down from the ancient rafters. Click! Along with the road to the cliff temple has come electricity, Sangay Dorji's second major accomplishment.

The white light illuminates the faded paintings on the wall, chronicling Buddha's birth and journey to enlightenment. The gleaming bowls on the altar are filled with the traditional offerings of rice, water, and milk, along with the offerings of a new age — small foil-lined boxes of mango juice, crackers, cookies, candy bars, and chips. We can see the rows of butter lamps with their flickering flames; the ornate draperies; the dark corner piled with ceremonial drums, masks, costumes, and horns; the cushioned thronelike chair where a visiting lama would sit; another dim space that houses a small cubbyhole, home to an effigy of the region's fierce protector deity riding a blue horse.

Karma translates for Sangay Dorji, who recites the story of Chenrezig: The bodhisattva saw that humans were in great pain and felt pity for them. Relieving humans of their suffering was such a daunting task, however, that he needed eleven heads and one thousand arms to do the work. Chenrezig sadly realized after a great deal of effort that what he wanted was impossible. He gave up. Suffering is inevitable; it is part of life. Which is not to say that life should be miserable, Karma is quick to explain. It is just to say that life isn't perfect. Disappointments are normal. Death is normal. Nothing lasts forever. Chenrezig's mantra is Om Mani Padme Hung, "May all sentient beings be free from suffering." When you repeat Chenrezig's chant, Karma says, you elevate people who by their karmic circumstance have become stuck along the journey toward rebirth and enlightenment, and you elevate yourself. In other words, we're all in it together.

Early the next morning, as we get ready to leave, the caretaker and the monk tune in their battered transistor radio (which sits on the shelf just below the battered microwave oven) to hear the Tara chants coming in, static and faint, over the airwaves. The Tara is another Bodhisattva of Compassion in female form. Chanting her mantra brings good things — safety, prosperity, and removal of ob-
stables, fears, and worries. Besides chanting this mantra daily, the caretaker performs other spiritual duties, one of which is to sit on the rickety balcony of the temple, perched over the cliff edge, and blow a sacred white conch shell so that the rich sound of the horn echoes out over the valley. The conch is one of the eight lucky objects in Bhutan, symbolizing awakening from the slumber of ignorance.

All day we work toward a cloud-shrouded grassy saddle between peaks. We climb in and out of pines, meadow, and rhododendron forest. Karma flits among the rhododendron following a fire-tailed sunbird; he'd like a photograph to use as a model for a new painting. Phurpa examines the very first tiny buds of Bhutan's national flower, the blue poppy, that are pushing up through the wet soil. Tandin stuffs his pockets with trash. Shacha runs his mani beads through his fingers, murmuring prayers for our safe travel.

When we finally arrive at the holy lake, it is nearly night. The water is dark-green cold glass filling a rocky bowl at the base of mountains that shoot straight up like ragged spears. Rock cairns rise spookily out of the lake near the shore. Prayer flags strung between the cairns hang limply for lack of a breeze. It is damp and still. Karma has trouble starting a fire. There is no backpacking stove—only matches and wet wood. Shacha chops away with his magnificent Bhutanese machete to make kindling. Tandin blows on the weak coals through a hollow metal tube, the scrap of someone's broken tent pole, and fire finally springs up, catching the damp sticks. Phurpa pours a liter of fresh milk into a pot, throws in black tea leaves, sugar, ginger, and pepper, and soon we each have a steaming mug of chai to warm ourselves. But even with the fire and the tea, this is a fierce place. Magnifying the eerie scene is that we are camped in what feels like a garbage dump, surrounded by piles of plastic litchi juice containers, candy and gum wrappers, packaging from dried noodle soups, clear plastic Bhutanese gin and vodka bottles, worn-out trousers, a blue rubber boot.

I begin to pick up trash and toss it into the fire. Karma stops me in alarm: "No! You must not burn trash beside a holy lake! It will offend and anger the local deities." Nor must we smoke beside the lake, wash our hands in it, relieve ourselves too close to it, cook meat beside it, eat or cook garlic or onions in its vicinity. Every nook and cranny of Bhutan has one or more local spirits who embody the essence of the place and who, in many cases, create what amount to environmental rules and regulations regarding human conduct and use. But while burning garbage beside a holy
lake is taboo, leaving garbage as of yet seems to carry no spiritual repercussions. The incongruity of it hangs over us all.

Trash is a major problem in Bhutan, agree tourism council representatives and environmental advocates, so much so that developing a national consciousness about littering has come sharply onto the radar of tourism officials, who are eager not to offend foreign guests, as they are Bhutan’s second-highest source of revenue, behind hydropower.

Kesang Wangdi, former director of the Bhutan Tourism Council, offered a historical perspective on the issue of trash: “Being here you immediately understand that Europe took over nine hundred years to reach where it is, America five hundred years. We did this in basically fifty years. Because we wanted to maintain our sovereignty and territory, Bhutan adopted a self-imposed policy of isolation, and when we opened up we had a society that for centuries, cons, had lived on organic vegetables, and then suddenly we have plastic and bottles, so here we are in the sudden glare of modernity and we are half a step back.” The problem is not the trekkers who are tossing their juice boxes beside the trail; it is instead the changing consumption habits of the Bhutanese people, who, in the quest for an easier life, have gladly availed themselves of packaged foods, which come to them by the truckload from India and are increasingly transported via the new web of roads into remoter parts of Bhutan.

On the final day of our trek, we climb down out of the mountains, past more temples and shrines, past water-powered prayer wheels set over streambeds, the water spinning the prayer Om Mani Padme Hung—“May all sentient beings be free from suffering”—out into the universe with the ring of a small bell at every turn. Closer to the Paro Valley floor we enter frog-filled rice paddies that we negotiate, wobbly-kneed, in the dark amid the barking of dogs. Our way is made only slightly easier by the narrow beams of our flashlights and the lights that shine dimly from the few electrified farmhouses situated up this wide valley.

I am in a melancholy mood. As with any traveler in a foreign land, I am already thinking about how to make sense of my experience in Bhutan, where I’ve received swift lessons in global economics and development policy, not to mention Buddhism itself, and most of all, the complexity of the idea of happiness. Although I’d like it not to be true, even in Bhutan, the land of Gross National Happiness, there is suffering. There are drunks and pretty young women with swollen faces and black eyes. There are drug-addicted teenagers and unscrupulous politicians. There are lamas who take advantage of the spiritual hopefulness of their followers. There are child molesters, rapists, and thieves. There are students at boarding schools who die for lack of vitamin B, teenage girls who diet until they faint, and piles of garbage in the holiest places. Bhutan has its own share of civil rights issues, discrimination, and prejudice. Its rich are getting richer, and its poor are staying poor. And while most people seemingly embrace the goals of GNH, it’s sobering to know that there are others who deride the program as phony “branding” designed to lure tourists and foreign aid, or as a euphemism for Government Needs Help, or a distraction from Bhutan’s “real issues” of ballooning debt and youth unemployment.

But GNH surveys, number crunching, and criticism aside, the Bhutanese probably are happier than most of the rest of us in the rich countries of the world. For now. Perhaps the golden key that the Bhutanese continue to hold is that, by and large, they embrace two important concepts illustrated in the story that Karma narrated in the altar room at the cliff temple: life includes suffering, and nothing lasts forever. Happiness is not something you achieve, or purchase, and then get to keep. As one Bhutanese friend explained when I tried to pin him down on the matter, “Happiness is a cloud. It comes and goes.” Its elusiveness, however, isn’t stopping the Bhutanese from trying to define it and attain it.

In my mind I hear the low, rich sound of the temple caretaker’s conch shell echoing over the misty valley, awakening us all from the slumber of ignorance. Of course we all already know that more money doesn’t buy more happiness; we’ve known it all along. Perhaps this reawakening is the real gift that Bhutan is offering to the rest of the world.