

DHAMMA AS NATIONAL IDENTITY: BHUTAN'S SPIRITUAL HERITAGE IN GLOBAL DISCOURSE

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Bhutanese culture is inseparable from its Buddhist tradition, with over 75% of the population adhering primarily to Mahayana Buddhism. The teachings of Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), revered as the second Buddha in Bhutan, have laid the spiritual foundation that permeates Bhutanese governance, festivals, education, and social cohesion. Bhutan has emerged as a unique global exemplar of how spirituality and governance can intertwine to promote genuine happiness and sustainable development. Central to Bhutan's identity and national philosophy is its profound Buddhist heritage, particularly the Vajrayana tradition, which has shaped the country's approach to wellbeing, culture, and environmental stewardship through the pioneering concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Introduced by the visionary Fourth King, Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in the 1970s, GNH redefines development beyond mere economic growth or Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It embraces a holistic model prioritizing four pillars: sustainable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance. Unlike measures that assess success only in terms of material wealth or productivity, GNH embraces a multidimensional approach rooted in Buddhist ethics and the principle of the Middle Path (*majjhimā paṭipadā*). These pillars expand into nine domains, ranging from psychological well-being and education to ecological resilience and time balance, illustrating how happiness is cultivated through harmony rather than accumulation. Guided by compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*paññā*), and contentment (*santutthi*). The Buddhist vision views life as a continuum of inter-being, where caring for the earth reflects one's progress toward enlightenment and collective well-being. These pillars are all deeply rooted in Buddhist values such as compassion (tsewa), interdependence, mindfulness, and ethical living.

What makes Bhutan's model particularly compelling is its operationalization of Buddhist teachings at both the policy and societal levels. The constitution mandates maintaining at least 60% forest cover, translating the Buddhist ethic of non-harm and reverence for all sentient beings into concrete environmental protection measures. The integration of mindfulness and meditation practices into daily life and education fosters emotional resilience and mental health, vital components of Bhutanese individual and collective well-being. National festivals such as *Tshechu* encapsulate Buddhist values through vibrant dances, rituals, and communal celebrations that reinforce shared identity and social harmony.

Forests are considered sacred, associated with deities and ancestral spirits, engendering community stewardship through collective forest management and wildlife tolerance initiatives. Bhutan's success in remaining carbon negative, achieved through hydropower development and reforestation, stands as a testament to how Buddhist values can inspire global leadership in sustainable living. These early eco-ethical codes reflect mindfulness and responsibility toward public resources and non-human life. In modern contexts, these principles inspire Buddhist communities to engage in renewable energy use, waste reduction, and habitat protection. Education programs emphasize environmental awareness grounded in Buddhist interdependence, ensuring future generations uphold the delicate balance between human needs and natural preservation. The harmony between tradition and modern ecological science offers a blueprint for other nations confronting climate challenges.

Governance in Bhutan is notably influenced by Buddhist principles of harmony, collective welfare, and moderation. The peaceful transition from monarchy to parliamentary democracy reflects Buddhist ideals prioritizing non-violence and societal stability. Economic policies emphasize self-reliance and sufficiency rather than rapid industrialization, further embodying the Buddhist middle path. Environmental conservation in Bhutan transcends policy, reflecting a cultural and spiritual ethos that venerates nature. While Bhutan's integrative model offers a hopeful vision, it faces challenges including cultural preservation amid globalization pressures, inclusivity in an increasingly pluralistic society, economic scalability, and climate change vulnerabilities. Its success, however, lies in the adaptive strategies that remain faithful to Buddhist ethics

While innovating practical solutions. Bhutan's unique integration of Dharma into governance illustrates that economic development need not be at odds with spiritual wellbeing or cultural heritage. It proposes a development paradigm focused not merely on material wealth but on enhancing life quality, social cohesion, and environmental harmony, reminding us that true progress integrates spiritual wisdom with modern challenges to foster lasting happiness and planetary stewardship.

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