EXPERIENCING 

AND SPIRITUALITY

By Dr Simon Teoh

VISITING Bhutan is a remarkable experience. Bhutan is full of surprises. It is like stepping back in time, into a remote or forgotten bygone era, outside of the modern world of consumerism. Steeped in its Mahayana Buddhist beliefs and traditions, this mysterious, small kingdom opened its door to the world only four decades ago. Little was known about Bhutan until its entry into the world’s economy and modernity in the 1970s when the Fourth King of Bhutan declared that Gross National Happiness (GNH) is more important than Gross National Product (GNP), thereby setting its development philosophy. Its mystical charms have attracted many travellers and academics to explore Bhutan and learn about the concept of GNH.

And so my journey to Bhutan began as an academic, amongst the many who are attracted to
the concept of GNH. What is GNH? Is it measurable? GNH is premised on Four Pillars: equitable and sustainable socio-economic development; preservation and conservation of the natural environment; cultivation and promotion of culture; and good governance. The GNH Pillars are embedded in Bhutan’s development policies that are screened by the GNH Commission to ensure a holistic approach that aspires an outcome of happiness and wellbeing amongst its people. GNH is measured using a multidimensional approach through an Index of 33 indicators. The 2010 GNH Survey identified four groups of people: the unhappy, narrowly happy, extensively happy and deeply happy of a population of 7,142 participants, revealing that 41 percent of Bhutanese are happy (extensively and deeply happy), and 59 percent are not-yet-happy (narrowly happy or unhappy).

As such, the concept of GNH remains aspirational given that there is still much to be achieved to close the gap in happiness and wellbeing. In this sense, Bhutan is unique...
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In adopting an approach to societal development and progress aimed at achieving happiness and wellbeing through the four GNH Pillars.

Putting GNH aside, Bhutan has a lot to offer to travellers. My recent, and the fourth, visit to Bhutan in March 2016 took me and my companion, to the iconic Punakha Dzong that is the seat of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (founder of the Bhutanese nation state). It is located about 77 kilometres to the north of the capital Thimphu, at the junction of the Phochu (male) and Mochu (female) rivers. To get there, a windy road journey lasting about three hours, past Dochula Pass at 3116 metres, is required. Currently, road-widening works are underway.

At Punakha Dzong, I entered the Kuenray (main chamber) where His Majesty the King was crowned in 2008 and wedded in 2011. I immediately felt an air of sanctity. The air inside seemed to be charged with high energies, there was some sort of vibration in the air. I sat in front of three gigantic statues of Guru Rinpoche, Buddha Shakyumuni and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. I closed my eyes to meditate for a few minutes. After a few minutes, I felt a sense of peace and calm
and I was uplifted with positive energies around me. I felt spiritually enlightened.

After Punakha Dzong, we travelled to Phobjikha Valley, which took another two hours. Phobjikha is famous as one of the roosting grounds for the endangered black-necked cranes that come from the Tibetan Plateau between late October and mid-February to escape the harsh northern winters and roost here. Our tour operator warned us that we would most likely be disappointed, as by March the cranes would have left. However, as karma would have it, we were blessed with a rare close sighting of three black-necked cranes still present. We were later informed by my tour guide that there was a fourth crane that was ill, and that the three others stayed back to forage for food to feed the ill crane and nurse it back to full strength, so that they all can migrate back to the Tibetan Highlands for the summer season. In this context, we can obtain some lessons about caring for one another from these elusive black-necked birds.

The next morning, on our way to Bumthang, we stopped at Gangtey Monastery. It was built in 1613 as the main seat of the ‘treasure revealer’ Tertoon Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) an incarnation of Guru Rinpoche (the Precious Master) who brought Buddhism to Bhutan in 747AD, and is an important centre of the Nyingmapa School of Buddhism. It is said that the black-necked cranes circle around the monastery three times on arrival to and departure from Phobjikha Valley. When we entered the Monastery’s temple, we could hear monks chanting in their chambers. Our tour guide informed us, that invocations were being recited to invoke a deity. It was deemed inappropriate to disturb the ceremony and I was not allowed into the temple. However, we were able to light some candles as offerings outside the temple.

Along the way to Bumthang, we came across a yak herder with his herd. Apparently, we were informed that the
During the third quarter of the night, the Buddha drew his disciples around him and three times enquired whether they had any remaining queries concerning his teachings or the rules of discipline.

yaks were still in the lowlands because it was still too cold for the summer migration. Even yaks can tell us a thing or two about climate change!

In Bumthang, the green vegetation around me with the high mountains and river valleys made me feel as if I was in Switzerland. One particular highlight was the visit to Ogyen Choling in the village of Tang, which is about two hours’ drive from Jakar, the main town in Bumthang. The Ogyen Choling Palace, which is now a museum (since 2001), offered an interesting insight into the feudal system that prevailed up until 1958. We were told by the museum guide how grains and salt were brought from afar, stored and distributed. We were shown old swords, artillery and amours used in military wars wedged during the feudal period, as well as the old printing system used to print the Buddhist Sutras (texts).

A most humbling experience was to be served lunch by the descendent of Ogyen Choling Palace, Ashi (Princess) Kunzang Choden, who is an established and celebrated author. Humility is one lesson learnt during this trip!

Another highlight was our visit to Kurje Lhakhang, regarded as one of the sacred
places in Bumthang. It is here Guru Rinpoche mediated and left an imprint on a rock cave and later a temple was built. The air inside this temple felt sacred and seeing the Kurjey (body imprint) further enhanced my spiritual experiences. One can never be saturated by the holiness of the many temples and monasteries. However, it was time to head to our accommodation at the Swiss Guest House. On our way, we came across three school girls dressed in their national costume Kira walking home, who so kindly allowed us to take a photo of them.

Travelling to Bumthang takes time because of the narrow and winding roads through the mountains and river valleys.

The widening of the roads, when completed, will shorten travelling time. We wanted to save time by taking a short half hour flight from Bumthang back to Thimphu by Drukair, instead of 8-10 hour road journey.

Experiencing GNH to me was not about the percentage of happy or yet-to-be-happy people, but the overall experience of Bhutan’s sanctity, its spirituality, rich cultural heritage, rich architecture and its happy or yet-to-be-happy people. There are lessons learnt in humility, climate change, spirituality and the bygone feudal system of Bhutan.

Bhutan’s mystical charms remain for me an attractive journey of discovery to experience spirituality, in the shadow of Bhutan’s majestic peaks, along with its GNH philosophy that continues to attract travellers and academics alike.

The author is a tourism researcher at Murdoch University in Perth, WA. He obtained PhD in tourism, with a focus on GNH tourism model in Bhutan.