

## Bhutan: Taking the Middle Path to Happiness

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VENDETTI PRODUCTIONS, LLC

DVD, 57 MINUTES, 2007

Reviewed by Susan M. Walcott

From the opening photos of an idyllic remote setting to friendly young monks to prayer flags whipping in the morning breeze carrying peace prayers, you know where to find Shangri La. That is the strength and weakness of this beautifully filmed video portrayal of Bhutan. The Exotic Other is colorfully on display, providing a feast for the eye and ear that is fine as far as it goes but is thinner on real world perspective than would make for good classroom discussion beyond the not-untruthful picture presented. Bhutan really does look like that, but missing are the omnipresent urban dogs, the red betel stains, issues with Nepali immigrants, and rural-to-urban migration problems. A bit more background information would also enrich the picture. For example, the back story on the popular song performed throughout the first part concerns a mule who suddenly informed his master that he is a reincarnation that was previously human too, and the master better treat him well or risk coming back a mule!

The film does quite well with its major theme of explaining the four pillar precepts of Gross National Happiness (GNH), particularly its linkage with the basic tantric Buddhist and indigenous belief system that makes this non-materialistic approach to modernization so unique but suitable in its cultural setting. One wishes them well, but challenges presented by the belated introduction of TV (1999) and Internet (2000) links are also illustrated.

Some “social problems” are of the expected nature, while others agitate a particularly Bhutanese/Buddhist sensitivity, such as the criticism of advertising for breeding desire, which leads to suffering. An interesting angle on getting rural residents to accept modern health practices includes the use of monks to convey a credible message. Visual images, such as pairing pictures of high-tech hydropower plants with traditional water bells, effectively send a message of the possibility of coexistence of tradition with the new and energy with environmental conservation—and high-tech bows giving a competitive edge in the national sport of archery for those who can afford them. The prime minister (at the time of filming) is interviewed to provide the government’s goal of “development with a human face” and the importance of distinguishing modernization from Westernization—a reference to the GNH pillar of cultural preservation.

Just as Japan did in its rapid conversion to a modern nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—without the disastrous turn to militarism, accentuating the samurai side—Bhutan has been involved in an intense national discussion over which elements should be maintained and how they should be maintained, codified in the “One Nation, One People” law at the turn of the twenty-first century. The presence of internal diversity is mentioned, along with a predisposition—at least philosophically—to accept change because of the key Buddhist precept of impermanence, but a more pointed discussion of the excellent images presented would bring out these points that are only quickly presented here. The montage of faces displayed covers the Laya northern nomads with their distinctive cross hats, the Nepali migrant Lhotshampas, and a more Tibetan and a more indigenous Bhutanese couple. However, the unfamiliar eye would benefit from identification of these differences among Bhutan’s population of just under 700,000 souls.

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*Bhutan: Taking the Middle Path to Happiness.* Screen capture of the film trailer. ©2007 Vendetti Productions.

The script at times overdoes the exotic Shangri La aspect. Buddhist cosmology, as illustrated by the famous intersecting circles model painted on walls, is less an accurate intimation of orbiting planets than a highly abstruse visualization that is not supported by modern science. Schools are present in rural areas, but long hours of dangerous mountain hiking by small children present problems Bhutan is still trying to address. Education is not compulsorily enforced, but the Meena stamps and similar billboards do stress the importance of female education. Training for females that both preserves traditional arts and provides an income is a particular royal concern.

A topic for possible classroom discussion is the importance of a good role model monarch, such as the fourth dragon king, who served from 1972 until his abdication in favor of his eldest son in 2006. The fourth king’s father was responsible for coming up with GNH and beginning to open the country; the fourth king forced a constitution and parliamentary government on his people. The role of international aid agencies and the danger that Bhutan might suffer the same fate as its neighbor Tibet and be overwhelmed by a larger power are both addressed in the film and are potential classroom discussion topics. Several carefully chosen pictures show the fourth king and his son, who is the fifth king and current monarch, mingling with the common folk and children almost as one of the crowd. This is actually an accurate picture reflecting the personality of the regents and their veneration by the people.

One suggestion would be to have the class read articles on Bhutan before seeing the DVD, then go into a deeper discussion of what works where and why. Even if “happiness is in your mind,” perhaps the folks in the film wouldn’t mind more fruit, vegetables, closer schools, and more modern medicine. Philosophical precepts on the intrinsic link between interdependence and change help, but the speed of change and managing what comes with it are human management challenges. As the Dalai Lama observes in his elegantly simple, understated ending comment, happiness comes from realizing our “own inner potential—that’s all!” ■

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