

## UUMAN

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*Far Enemy, Near Enemy*

Words to enrich the spirit...

*The State shall strive to promote the circumstances that will enable successful pursuit of Gross National Happiness (GNH).* —Article 9 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan

Sermon: *Far Enemy, Near Enemy*

Bhutan is half the size of Indiana. It sits between India and China, but its closest border is with Tibet. 740,000 or so Bhutanese dwell between the country's 300 to 24,000 feet above sea level. Citizens of Bhutan speak Dzongkha, a language close to Tibetan. Like Tibet, Bhutan's state religion is multi-deity Vajrayana Buddhism. Bhutan has never been colonized.

The Vajrayana tradition is tantric. After many turns of the karma wheel, a Vajrayana practitioner can become a *bodhisattva*... one incarnation short of Buddhahood. Out of pure compassion, a *bodhisattva* forgoes nirvana, choosing instead to stay on earth and serve others. The premise is that human enlightenment is innate—an original blessing. So long as we engage the state of the world in a spirit of ultimate truth, we can progress toward full Buddhahood without leaving the ground, so to speak.

The tantric premise echoes the Transcendentalists' belief that each of us is born with a seed of divinity inside, and that our earthly job is to nourish that seed into fruitfulness. There's ample evidence suggesting that eastern religious thought made its way to America *via* the Transcendentalists of Boston, notably Ralph Waldo Emerson and his circle, a number of whom were Unitarians.

In 1972, the 16-year old Fourth Dragon King of Bhutan succeeded to his father's throne. As promised, he gave up that throne in 2006 to make way for democracy in the form of a constitutional monarchy. Article 9 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan declares that, *The State shall strive to promote the circumstances that will enable successful pursuit of Gross National Happiness (GNH).*

GNH rests upon the Four Immeasurables of Vajrayana Buddhism. They are *loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity*. These correspond to a *four-pillared* vision for Bhutanese society: *good governance, sustainable socio-economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation*. Ironically, Bhutan's goal is to be able to *measure* the Four Immeasurables with an eye toward becoming a *nation of bodhisattvas*. I'm not making fun. A nation of *bodhisattvas* sounds good to me.

Gross National Happiness is a tongue-twister. GNH is what the Bhutanese themselves call it. Here's a glimpse of what GNH looks like in practice. 60% of tiny Bhutan must remain forested forever. With booming urbanization going on right now in previously sequestered Bhutan, that figure is holding at 80%. Workers in Bhutan get sixteen public holidays off and numerous local festival days. Capital punishment was abolished in 2004. The government bans plastic bags. Homosexuality is on the books as illegal, but the law is ignored.

Public policy proposals are subject to a Gross National Happiness screening tool. For example, Bhutan did not join the World Trade Organization (WTO) when its membership requirements would have compelled the opening of Bhutan's economy to franchises such as McDonald's and Domino's Pizza. Said a government spokesperson, *The decisions we make are very much influenced by the framework we use.* That framework is The Four Immeasurables, captured in Bhutan's vision for a good society: *good governance, sustainable socio-economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation.*

Bhutan's geography is intimidating to development. Older villagers living distant from the capitol of Thimpu say GNH is a simple matter: *Happiness is to be good at heart.* As one lama put it, *You have to brew [happiness] in yourself... we choose to be who we are.* True enough, but urban Bhutanese, especially young people, are increasingly choosing consumerism as their pathway to happiness. If you want to connect with someone in Bhutan, check first to see if they're on Facebook.

My Bhutan story comes from an article by travel writer Madeline Drexel titled *The Happiness Metric*. Drexel writes about the difficulty modern Bhutan has fitting the *metric of material into metrics of the spirit*. With Bhutan's modernization boom, and a restless generation of young people, will the Gross National Happiness standards erode? Can a nation be happy if the individuals in it are not? Can *individuals* be happy when their next door *neighbor* suffers from a lack of basic modern wants available nearly everywhere else in the world?

It's easy to admire the Gross National Happiness clause in Bhutan's constitution, and to sigh as I did, *Gee, I wish the United States Constitution had one of those too.* But to say Bhutan has never been colonized is also to say Bhutan is not a pluralist society. Bhutan's state religion is Vajrayana Buddhism. Bhutan is effectively a *Buddhist* theocracy... a nation with a *particular* spiritual identity at its core to which every citizen is expected to adhere. The United States is a pluralistic *nation*, getting more so all the time. The first question any brave soul who proposes GNH on these shores is likely to hear is *Whose happiness are you talking about anyway?*

For the moment, imagine a miracle. Imagine Gross National Happiness *has* been ratified into the Constitution of the United States. *Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and*

*equanimity... the Four Immeasurables... are now a measure of our success as a nation. Sympathetic joy is a little hard to translate into western terms. Substitute the common good—close enough. To keep our own GNH from eroding, what would the United States have to guard against?*

Mulling over this question myself, I turned to another Buddhist concept Madeline Drexel learned among the Bhutanese: *Far Enemy, Near Enemy*.

Every human virtue has a far enemy and a near enemy. A far enemy is the virtue's polar opposite. Far enemies are pretty obvious. The Far Enemy of compassion is cruelty. Near enemies are trickier. Initially they seem harmless. The near enemy of compassion is pity. Who among us has not pitied and let our compassion go at that? A far enemy of Gross National Happiness is runaway consumerism. The corresponding near enemy is progress.

Parker Palmer worries about the future of American democracy, as indeed we all should. He laments, *Of all the creative tensions we must maintain in authentic democracy, the most difficult is to stand in the tragic gap between reality and possibility.* The tragic gap is where near enemies lurk. The sneaky aim of near enemies is to *foreclose* on possibility by rationalizing that what's difficult is in reality *impossible*, and not worth the risk to our comfort zones. The still, small voice within us doesn't always dispense good advice. Compiling a *Far Enemy/Near Enemy* list—as I did on Friday—calls us to be scrupulously honest with ourselves. This puts our comfort zones at immediate risk.

Recall that at first glance a near enemy seems harmless, sometimes even independently virtuous. There are a couple of ways to think about a near enemy: either as an unexamined assumption propping up an aspect of our identity; or as a less than healthy relationship with something. A single far enemy may have more than one near enemy. Finally, every Far Enemy/Near Enemy list springs from the list-maker's own experience. My list and yours may look very different. In fact, I would expect that to be true.

*The far enemy of optimism is despair. The near enemy is silence.*

*The far enemy of democracy is autocracy. The near enemy is media influence. (Think about your relationship to *all* media: social, visual, broadcast, print. This isn't just about your smartphone habits.)*

*The far enemy of racism is white complacency. So is the near enemy.*

*The far enemy of individuality is conformity. The near enemy is *individualism*, the notion that individual claims outweigh all common good.*

*The far enemy of pleasure is addiction.* The near enemy is hedonism, belief that pleasure is the *highest* good.

*The far enemy of environmental sustainability is environmental degradation.* the near enemy is a heap of plastic water bottles. Unless you live in Flint, Michigan, in which case where your far enemy is probably Gov. Rick Snyder,

*The far enemy of reason is ignorance.* A near enemy is over-confidence.

*The far enemy of the common good is inequality.* A near enemy is the idea that anyone can climb out of poverty who tries.

*The far enemy of understanding is judging.* The near enemy is as close as your own judgment of someone else.

*The far enemy of loving-kindness is hatred.* The near enemy is sympathy.

*The far enemy of religion is bad religion.* The near enemy is thinking all religion is bad, even yours.

Okay, so we're not going to see a United States' GNH anytime soon. Although messy in practice, religious and democratic pluralism are *good* values to have around. But *like* tiny, single-religion Bhutan, the United States faces the same dilemma: how to fit the *metric of material into metrics of the spirit*.

Here is my modest proposal. All religious liberals, progressives and allies should covenant to become bodhisattvas. Since compassion would be our guide, we might extend the shelter of covenant to people who suffer continuing trauma from watching a GOP debate. As the bodhisattva brand spreads, I'm sure we'd attract converts.

Of course we'd have to accelerate the bodhisattva process. The world is in urgent need. We don't have time for karma to run its course. Besides, what would a UU do in nirvana, where presumably there are no debates... no social causes to pursue... and no potlucks.

A nation of bodhisattvas. Sounds good to me. Amen