

Rethinking Development
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Thank you for the privilege and pleasure of attending this gathering and offering a few reflections on rethinking development.

Kuzo zonpola

I am moved by the efforts to realize an effective approach to gross national happiness. I am grateful to the Bhutanese for their commitments and insights, for the wealth of international endeavours, for the Canadian contributions and Dr. Ron Colman. My comments address the role of spirituality and religion in rethinking development.

What could be more pressing than to rethink some basic orientations of the dominant cultures of the world? Issues of gender equity and autonomy, of colonialization and cultural imperialism, of globalization and sovereignty, violence, and ecological devastation.

Signs of our times.

And there are other sign of our times... a new consciousness is arising, represented here and elsewhere, in these intense efforts to rethink happiness, development, and well being.

A new consciousness is urgently needed. These massive and complex problems cannot be solved with the familiar solutions.

Problems cannot be solved at the level of consciousness in which they were created, as noted Albert Einstein. A genuinely new consciousness is required: one that integrates spiritual insights.

The many dimensions of gross national happiness explicitly come from Buddhism: a well spring of teachings and practices much needed to open the mind to new possibilities.

Spiritualities come from the realm of insights rather than data. Spiritualities are teachers of consciousness: a path with no end. It is like immersing oneself into a bottomless pool of refreshing water, of intuiting a great mystery that envelops all life... and yet remains ineffable.

Spirituality is like breathing, as intimate and as vital as breath. It is about desire, a zest for life. The ability to feel awe and wonder. Or to experience reverence in the face of the immensity and elegance of existence.

Spirituality is the fires of life, within us and in every molecule in the universe. We cannot be naive about this energy.

Developing a spiritual consciousness is often described as moving from death to life, from sleep to awake, from illusion to enlightenment, from confinement to liberation, from confusion to clarity.

Spiritual transformation is a change of perception: everything changes. Spiritualities discern patterns of connection in the very structures of life: the coherence, structures and archetypes hidden within the mysteries of inner and outer life. These can be described as the Dharma, the Dao, the Li, the Logos, the Great Spirit.

Spirituality fosters an awareness of the goodness and richness of life, of an interconnected whole encompassing the fragments we live and perceive

Religious traditions offer distinct spiritual insights. The monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam sense a moral imperative to transform the world, to initiate change, to progress and develop the world. In general, Eastern traditions of Daoism, Hinduism and especially Buddhism are more apt to receive the world, to cultivate awareness, awakening to life and its mysteries, to step back and listen.

Both needed at different times.

Those who are spiritually engaged with life are inevitably captivated by the beauty and astonished by the exquisite and extraordinary life around and within us. They awaken to the earth and its wonders. And are then repulsed by the destruction of life. It can be difficult hold the tension between an awareness of the potential, fullness and ultimate goodness of life and the systems of oppression, intense poverty, relentless suffering, and limitations to change.

This is why authentic spiritual growth does not avoid suffering, of oneself and of others. Spiritual consciousness is deeply ethical.

Spirituality is popular these days, often linked to something else, such as business, leisure, health, travel, personal renewal, swimming with dolphins, treks to the astral plane, ...you name it. What spirituality actually means in these contexts is slippery and often unclear. Yet spiritualities are not quick fixes. They are complex systems about what communities consider to be profound and sacred. They are ways of life; living traditions are not easily transposed, rearranged or re-

created. An uncritical embracing of “spirituality,” without knowing what a particular spirituality means and its political impact, can allow it to sprawl into meaningless and political inadequacy - accountable only to individual tastes and temperament.

In speaking of spirituality and development, we cannot avoid the undeniable ambivalent legacies of religion and spirituality. They rarely embody their best, and are fraught with bias, contradictions and ambiguities.

How do we bring spirituality into development? We are in uncertain times for religion and spirituality:

- with the rise of fundamentalism as well as bold inter-religious collaboration
- where religions and science are interacting with mutual understanding or denunciation..
- where religions are both a weapon and a tool of peace and non-violence
- where women are claiming religious autonomy, shaking the foundations of patriarchy
- where religious truth claims compete for supremacy, or search for deeper notions of truth

Religions and spiritualities in their current form are unequipped to deal with the issues of our day, and yet we cannot respond without them. They can offer wisdom and insights, practices and teachings, but in a world very different from their origins.

What I want to emphasize tonight is that spiritualities in their depth can assist in tuning our awareness to perceive new levels of reality, in transforming consciousness, in awakening.

This is the invitation of our time, and these are challenging times. It is a new religious and spiritual moment. The invitation is to awaken to this moment, of failing social and economic systems, and innovation beyond the imagination, awakening to this stunning and elegant earth, in a living universe at the same moment of an ecological crisis of unprecedented proportions. We are awakening to the need for genuine cooperation across disciplines, cultures and value systems without erasing distinctions.

Gross national happiness is one way to develop tools to respond, and represents this transformation of consciousness.

Its four pillars - sustainable and equitable economic development, environmental preservation, cultural and social promotion, and good governance - represent extraordinary work in rethinking development.

How can we infuse each of these with spiritual insights? How can we discern when to engage in transformation, and when to step back and listen?

There are several options of these new indices of measuring 'development'. Some of these are:

- Gross national happiness
- Gross International Happiness Project
- Genuine progress indicators
- Natural capital
- Canadian index of wellbeing.

It is a way to enlarge the horizon, expand appreciation, give a truer account of human reality. They are crucial, but not complete.

For example, let us pause a moment on the reality of water. It is basic structure of the planet and of all living systems, and yet it can be conceptualized many ways.

Water.. It has become an economic commodity to be bought and sold, privatized and controlled.. This has increased the GNP, but not created gross national happiness.

We could use the genuine progress index to understand water as a basic human right.

We could consider water as a natural capital, and then it becomes a common good for all life.

From science, we learn the genius of the earth's elaborate water systems. From spirituality water is a great teacher. It refreshes and cleanses. It is the great transformer, as teaches Daoism, flowing to the deepest places. It gives way to others, is elusive, yet is the most powerful force.

Water is the blood of life as teach many North American Indigenous traditions.

The monotheistic insights claim that water is like the spirit of life: springs of living water will well up from within.

Water is an image of the suppleness of Buddhist consciousness.

Yet all the measuring and indices in the world will never contain these, or the beauty of water, its power to nurture and sustain life, to console the human spirit, to teach the mind, and refresh the body.

The same is true that all the measuring tools can never contain the realities of compassion, generosity, justice, beauty, wonder, awe and reverence.

In conclusion, happiness, rethinking development, local pathways, global wellbeing. These are such urgent needs, and are all aspects of transforming consciousness.

In the next few days of intense thinking and action plans, we also need to foster awareness, attend to the mysteries hidden in every leaf and tree, to listen, step back, and awaken.

We can open ourselves to feel awe, and listen to Rabbi Heschel's statement, "what we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe."

This time of work is also an invitation to open to a new consciousness, to cultivate reverence and gratitude for the immense privilege of being alive. It is a formidable and stunning earth to which we belong, and an awesome world of which we are only a part.

Thank you.