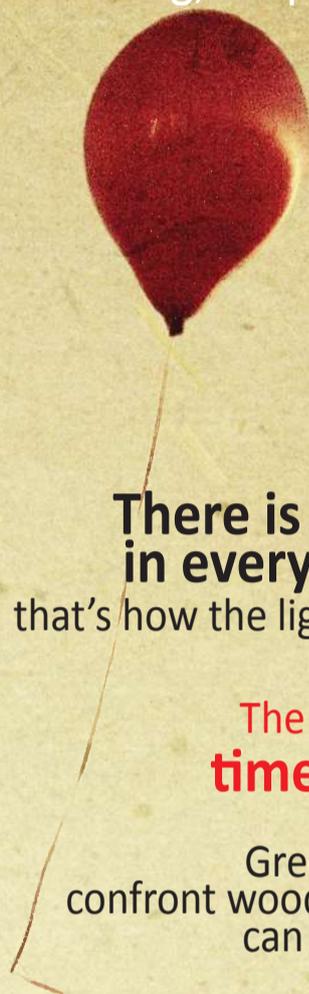


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that's how the light gets in

The man who  
**time forgot**

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confront wood industry  
can of worms

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**Greece –**  
the euro or Uranus?

**Wellness**  
in a toxic world

Do you often feel flat?  
**Coconut water**  
could be the answer

Bhutan's GNH –  
gross national happiness

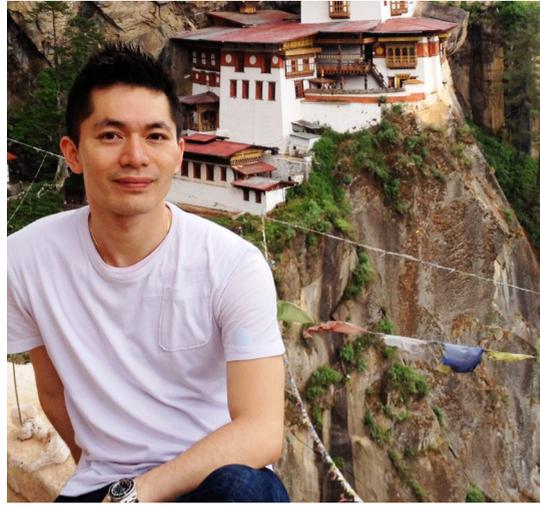
**ORANGUTANS**  
under threat

We all have the  
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the world

# free

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## BHUTAN – THE LAST SHANGRI LA ON EARTH

by Joseph Law

### Introduction

Early in the year, I saw a photo of a beautiful monastery built high on the edge of a rocky cliff overlooking a valley. I thought to myself, ‘Soon I will visit this place’. I had no way of knowing that within a few months, through a series of seemingly coincidental events, I would be hiking along the tracks to Tiger’s Nest monastery, a national treasure of Bhutan. My recent trip to Bhutan was nothing short of a spectacular experience, from visiting sacred sites and meeting holy men to meeting with the Prime Minister.

### Gross National Happiness

Where is Bhutan, anyway? It is located at the eastern end of the Himalayas and is bordered to the south, east and west by India and to the north by China. It is known as “one of the world’s happiest nations” and “the last Shangri La on earth”, but most notably for its concept of Gross National Happiness. Bhutan’s guiding principles are derived from Buddhist beliefs and their understanding of karma. The population of around 700,000 is predominantly Buddhist, but everyone has the free will to pursue religion in their own way.

According to the fourth king, the governing principle of Bhutan should be the people’s collective happiness; not blind pursuit of economic growth based on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is an idea that continues to fascinate me, as it is similar to the values embraced in my book, *Living Greatness: a Practical Guide to Living an Enlightened Life*.

The term Gross National Happiness (GNH) was coined in 1972 by Bhutan’s fourth Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. On December 17, 2005, he announced to a stunned nation that he would abdicate the throne in favour of his eldest son, the crown prince. Over the last few years, Bhutan has made the transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. A graduate from Oxford University, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck the 5th, is now the current reigning Dragon. He was at one time the world’s youngest head of state, and his royal marriage last year was celebrated worldwide through the international media.

### Visiting the Tiger’s Nest and the Prime Minister

In my brief stay in Bhutan of just over six days, I travelled to Paro, Thimphu and

Bumthang. It is not uncommon to meet tourists from Australia, Asia and other parts of the world. To stay in Bhutan, you need a guide. I was blessed to meet Pema, who was my guide and is now a good friend.

The first highlight of my journey started with my visit to the Tiger’s Nest (also known as Paro Taktsang), a prominent Himalayan Buddhist sacred site and temple complex located on the face of the cliff that surrounds the upper Paro Valley in Bhutan. A temple complex was first built on this site in 1692, and it defies architectural principles. Buddhist Saint Guru Padmasambhava is said to have meditated for three months in this same location in the eighth century.

After hiking for nearly six hours to the Tiger’s Nest, we drove more than an hour from Paro to Thimphu to meet with the Prime Minister. When I got there, the Prime Minister’s people and film crew were ready to commence filming. The Prime Minister was gracious and welcoming, and we had a delightful conversation for 30 minutes, which will be included in the documentary I am filming on the concept of happiness. We talked about the benefits of focusing on Gross National Happiness versus Gross Domestic Product as an indicator of a nation’s wealth. We also discussed Bhutan’s culture and values, and how the world’s leaders and thinkers can work together to create a more sustainable planet for the future.

Recently, on behalf of Bhutan, the Prime Minister hosted a conference in New York with the United Nations about integrating the concept of happiness in the global agenda. The Prime Minister gave me the impression of someone with vision, dedication, and with the noble intent to do good for his people, for the nation of Bhutan and for the rest of the world.

The economy of Bhutan is based on tourism, agriculture, forestry and hydropower. Since the opening of the country to tourism in 1974, Bhutan has made a significant expansion in that industry. The development in tourism has led to growth in arts and crafts indigenous to Bhutan. Tourism has increased exponentially and today it is one of the main contributors to the revenue of Bhutan.

### Guru Rinpoche and the reincarnation of Buddhist masters

Bhutan is a land blessed by their

foremost teacher, Guru Rinpoche or Guru Padmasambhava, who is said to have transmitted Vajrayana Buddhism to Bhutan and Tibet and neighbouring countries in the eighth century. He is known as the second Buddha and is a revered Buddhist saint from India. There are many miracles surrounding the life of the great guru.

Perhaps one of the most mystical aspects of Bhutan’s cultural heritage is the concept of tulku. Traditionally a tulku is considered to be a reincarnation of a Buddhist master who, out of his or her compassion for the suffering of sentient beings, has vowed to take rebirth to help all beings attain enlightenment. This is a proven and accepted reality in the lives of everyday Bhutanese, and the tulku are revered teachers who guide the moral values of the civilisation of Bhutan. The concept of tulku is not a fairytale, as these incarnated beings are recognised through a set of proven methodologies. Some young tulku have vivid memories of their past lives, including their place of birth and family.

One of the most incredible experiences of the trip was visiting the incarnation of Gyaltsé Tenzin Rabgay, a young man in his early 20s. He is credited with being the one who built the Tiger’s Nest in his previous life, and he is acknowledged as the incarnation of Guru Rinpoche. Despite the brief duration of my encounter with him, it was a fascinating experience. I presented him with a white scarf, and he in turn put it around my neck as a gesture of blessing. He has a strong presence beyond his years, and his eyes convey deep wisdom.

### Visiting a Bhutanese home

On the same day, I was warmly invited to the home of the Minister of Information and Communications. It was my first experience visiting a Bhutanese home, and, as a gesture of respect, I put on the Bhutanese traditional dress, which is a robe known as the ‘gho’. What strikes me about the Bhutanese people is their warmth and sincerity. The Minister is a wise and compassionate leader who emphasises the importance of starting at the fundamental level of being a good human being inwardly as a foundation for living a successful life outwardly.

### The pursuit of happiness

Perhaps what intrigues me the most is that we are all born, grow up and live in different places and times, yet, through a chain of

seemingly coincidental events, we meet certain key people at the right place and at the right time in our lives. Is this karma, destiny or synchronicity? I’m not sure, but what I do know is that no matter where we come from or what our background is, we all have the same need for love, warmth and for connecting with others.

When we share encounters through the common thread of love, our life experience is enriched. The contemplation of interdependency, the vastness of this world and the power of nature makes us truly humble and grateful for the miraculous nature of life. It does not take a complicated philosophy to understand love, as it is simply a feeling in the heart.

Sometimes, moments of joy come into our lives spontaneously when we engage in random acts of kindness. When I visited one of the monasteries, I noticed a group of young monks playing soccer. They did not have the money to buy a real soccer ball – they had created one out of socks and some plastic materials.

When we got back to the town, I asked my driver to stop by the local store, where I purchased a soccer ball for the monks. I was eager to see the smile on their face and bring joy to their lives. With great joy and infectious smiles, they came running out ready to play soccer. We all had a great time, and it was one of the most memorable experiences of my trip.

Bhutan is one of those places you have to experience to discover the warmth and uniqueness of its culture. It is guided by many good principles inherited from its Buddhist beliefs. Tuesday is a ‘dry day’ when hotels and restaurants do not serve alcohol. It is also a day when no cars are allowed to be on the road (taxis and tourist cars excepted). Smoking is prohibited in public, and there are laws in place for forest preservation and free hospital care.

Bhutan will not give you more than what you already have, but it will take away what you don’t need in the form of stress and anxiety derived from the complexity of modern life. This reminds us of the Taoist philosophy and a great line from the Tao Te Ching: “One who seeks knowledge learns something every day. One who seeks the Tao unlearns something every day.”