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Buddhist Modernism Underway in Bhutan: Gross National Happiness and Buddhist Political Theory

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Abstract: This article synthesizes and clarifies the significance of the last half-century's developments in Bhutan's politics within the frame of Buddhist political thought. During this time, Bhutan has held a curious position in the international community, both celebrated as a Buddhist Shangri-La defending its culture in the face of globalized modernity, and at times, criticized for defending its heritage too conservatively at the expense of ethnic minorities' human rights. In other words, Bhutan is praised for being anti-modern and illiberal and denounced for being anti-modern and illiberal. As an alternative to understanding Bhutan vis-à-vis this unhelpful schema, and in order to better grasp what exactly is underway in Bhutan's political developments, I read Bhutan's politics from within the tradition of Buddhist political literature. I argue that the theory of governance driving Bhutan's politics is an example of Buddhist modernism—both ancient and modern, deeply Buddhist and yet manifestly inflected by western liberalism. To elucidate Bhutan's contiguity with (and occasional departures from) the tradition of Buddhist political thought, I read two politically-themed Buddhist texts, Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland* and Mipham's *Treatise on Ethics for Kings*, drawing out their most relevant points on Buddhist governance. I then use these themes as a lens for analyzing three significant political developments in Bhutan: its recent transition to constitutional monarchy, its signature policy of Gross National Happiness, and its fraught ethnic politics. Reading Bhutan's politics in this manner reveals the extent to which Buddhist political thought is underway in this moment. Bhutan's Buddhist-modernist theory of governance is a hybrid political tradition that evinces a lasting commitment to the core values of Buddhist political thought while at the same time being responsive to modern geopolitical and intellectual influences.

Keywords: Bhutan; gross national happiness; Buddhist modernism; Buddhist political theory; Nāgārjuna; Jamgön Mipham

1. Introduction

The year 2007 signaled a seminal moment in the history of Buddhist political thought. The tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, a country celebrated for its preservation of its Vajrayāna Buddhist heritage, held democratic elections for the first time in its history. The next year, Bhutan ratified its first constitution, which codified the new structure of its governance as an officially Buddhist, constitutional monarchy guided by the national development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Although Bhutan had been slowly moving toward modern forms of governance for decades, together these two events crystallize a singular moment in the development of Buddhist political thought.

This article synthesizes and clarifies the significance of the last half-century's developments in Bhutanese politics within the frame of Buddhist political thought. I argue that the political thought developing in the kingdom of Bhutan is an example of Buddhist modernism. David McMahan defines Buddhist modernism as 'forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an engagement with the

dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity’ (McMahan 2008, p. 6). As such, Buddhist modernism does not in itself indicate a corruption of a ‘pure’ or ‘original’ form of the Buddhist tradition. The iterations of Buddhism that have spread all over the world in the two and a half millennia since the lifetime of the Buddha Śākyamuni are themselves hybrid traditions, in which Buddhism adapts and responds to the culture and historical moment in which it finds itself.¹ The hybridity of Buddhist modernism can be taken, therefore, as yet another moment in the ongoing development and re-development of living Buddhist traditions in their encounters with the changing social and cultural spheres that contextualize them. Buddhist modernism demonstrates the plasticity of the Buddhist tradition as it responds to rapidly changing geopolitical, intellectual and cultural climates. Although McMahan’s analysis of Buddhist modernism does not deal in depth with political modernism or the encounter between Buddhism and political liberalism per se, Bhutan’s example demonstrates that political theory is indeed another venue in which the dynamism of Buddhist modernism is at work.²

Simultaneously drawing upon an ancient tradition of Buddhist political theory while selectively adopting modern, western political values and governance practices, Bhutan is actively moving the tradition of Buddhist political theory forward in a new direction. In reformulating the governance structure of the kingdom for the 21st century and articulating the development philosophy of GNH, Bhutanese leaders, political theorists and public servants are generating a Buddhist theory of governance that is both ancient and modern, deeply Buddhist and yet clearly inflected by and reflective of Bhutan’s relationship with the rhetoric and practice of modern political liberalism.³

In what follows, I develop and then weave together the two threads of this argument: the Buddhist political literature that provides a conceptual undercarriage for traditional Buddhist governance, and the modern elements of Bhutan’s contemporary reinterpretation of Buddhist political thought. My argument will proceed in three parts: I will begin with a primer on Bhutan’s recent history, particularly its transition to democracy and its implementation of GNH. Then, turning to my argument in earnest, I analyze two politically-themed Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, Nāgārjuna’s *Precious Garland* and Jamgön Mipham’s *Treatise on Ethics for Kings*, distilling the key features of Buddhist theories of governance that they expound. Finally, I offer a synthetic analysis of these traditional governance principles that have been hybridized with modern political institutions and values in Bhutan, including its recent shift to democracy.

¹ ‘In all of the geographic areas where Buddhist traditions have emerged, the dharma has been understood in terms of the categories, practices, conventions, and historical circumstances of particular peoples at specific times. They have, in fact, shown a remarkable adaptability, taking on widely different forms in various geographical areas and transforming, absorbing, superseding, and accommodating local ideas and practices. Through incorporating elements of a new culture and leaving behind irreconcilable ones, traditions inevitably become hybrids of what were already hybrid traditions’ (McMahan 2008, pp. 18–19).

² McMahan analyzes Buddhist modernism vis-à-vis three broad domains of modernist discourse: western monotheism and the rhetoric of the Protestant reformation; rationalism and scientific naturalism; and Romantic expressivism (McMahan 2008, pp. 10–11). Although McMahan does not take up a sustained analysis of political modernism per se, he does spend a chapter discussing the contemporary ethical analyses that have followed from a contemporary treatment of the Buddhist concept of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), including the emerging field of ‘engaged Buddhism.’

³ In this respect, Bhutanese politicians and political theorists embody McMahan’s archetype of the ‘Asian modernizer’—a cosmopolitan thinker who is well educated and well read in western literature and culture, and therefore, infuses their understanding of Buddhism with western concepts and values, without fully embracing western modernity or abandoning what they view as the core principles of the Buddhist tradition (McMahan 2008, pp. 35–36). This kind of modernizer ‘[combines] Buddhist and western ideas and practices into complex hybrids that strategically adopt, reject, and transform elements of both modernity and tradition’ (McMahan 2008, p. 42).

2. The Last Buddhist Kingdom on the Roof of the World: Contemporary Bhutan

In 1972, the king of Bhutan, the IV Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, made an informal declaration that eventually became his trademark as a monarch: ‘Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.’⁴ He was then but a teenager, but this precocious and provocative statement gradually became the foundation of the national development policy of his tiny Himalayan Buddhist kingdom. Dasho Karma Ura, the preminent Bhutanese scholar and civil servant behind GNH, describes it in the following terms:

GNH stands for a holistic concept guiding governance and development. It also stands for the holistic needs of the people . . . GNH stands for the preservation and renewal of a holistic range of wealth or capital . . . It is not only economic wealth or capital—which is measured, though not so well, by GDP—but there are also other capitals, which we should value and measure. These capitals are ecological, human resource, and cultural. (Ura 2010, p. 145)

This holistic view of national capital and the human needs that should drive governance has attracted considerable attention from the international community. Scores of articles for both popular and academic audiences have praised Bhutan’s refreshingly unconventional, humanitarian approach to governance.⁵ Academic and professional societies have dedicated several conferences to its elaboration, and in 2011, the UN unanimously adopted a resolution introduced by Bhutan calling for a ‘holistic approach to development’ that would promote sustainable happiness and well-being.⁶ Public intellectuals such as the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz have also drawn inspiration from Bhutan, holding it up as a model of humane governance. Stiglitz has advocated for the adoption of more human-centered, holistic approaches to measuring the success of nations, citing visits to Bhutan as an influence.⁷

Part of the appeal of GNH is how it directly challenges the dogmatism of conventional capitalist thinking. Rather than treating the inherent value of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as straightforwardly doxographic, GNH offers a refreshing alternative to the popular assumption that increasing national wealth is, independent of any other metrics, a social good. In setting forth GNH in contradistinction to GDP, the Druk Gyalpos have disambiguated genuine human flourishing from economic growth. As Ura puts it: ‘The world-wide development experience of the last 40 years shows [King Jigme’s] observation to be pertinent, because economic development has failed to provide as much contentment and happiness in the [global] North as was expected’ (Ura 2010, p. 143). To those who share King Jigme’s circumspection about the singular value of economic growth, Bhutan is Shangri-La, a brave holdout against the cynical reach of Capital.

⁴ He is said to have coined the term Gross National Happiness as early as 1972. The first occasion on which this declaration was recorded and reported publicly was in the Bombay airport in 1979, when an Indian journalist had posed a slightly confrontational question about Bhutan being an underdeveloped nation (and therefore, presumably obliged to do the bidding of larger powers like India). Wangchuk’s statement that ‘Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product’ was meant to be a clear rejoinder to such presumptions of Bhutan’s inferiority (Elliott 2015).

⁵ For example, see Tideman (2016); Allison (2012); Burns (2011); Kelly (2012), or Schultz (2017). A common theme in media coverage and academic analysis of GNH has been the novelty of Bhutan’s prioritization of happiness as a national goal and the ways in which the adoption of GNH principles by the international community could radically reorient fields like international development studies and sustainability management.

⁶ ‘This was followed in April 2012 by a UN High-Level Meeting on “Happiness and Wellbeing: Defining a New Economic Paradigm” designed to bring world leaders, experts and civil society and spiritual leaders together to develop a new economic paradigm based on sustainability and wellbeing. This builds on the Government of Bhutan’s pioneering work to develop the GNH Index’ (Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative 2019).

⁷ As recently as November 2019, he wrote, ‘It is clear that something is fundamentally wrong with the way we assess economic performance and social progress . . . it should be clear that, in spite of the increases in GDP, in spite of the 2008 crisis being well behind us, everything is *not* fine’ (Stiglitz 2019). In addition, in 2008, Stiglitz collaborated with Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and economist Jean Paul Fitoussi to form a commission for the French government, evaluating the limitations of conventional economic measures such as GDP. The report produced by their commission was eventually published as a book, *Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn’t Add Up* (Stiglitz et al. 2010).

Notably, the implementation of GNH has included the shift to constitutional monarchy, marked by the ratification of the Constitution of 2008.⁸ Both the fourth Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, and his son, the fifth and current Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Khesar Wangchuk, were responsible for this shift and toured the country for years to promulgate support for democracy. They have argued that electoral democracy is a crucial support for realizing the vision of GNH and that absolute monarchy was not a form of government well suited to the 21st century (Ura 2010).⁹ Rather than wait for political unrest or demands from the international community to move toward democracy, the fourth and fifth Druk Gyalpos implemented a slow, peaceful democratization of the kingdom. Bhutanese citizens were reportedly rather circumspect about democracy and did not see a need to unseat the widely beloved lineage of Druk Gyalpos (Sinpeng 2010). Nonetheless, by all indications, this transition—which was in the making for at least 27 years and had been under discussion for even longer—has gone smoothly (Bajoria 2008).

On the whole, for a country of its size and comparative wealth, Bhutan has a remarkably prominent and well-respected place in the international community. Its thoughtfully holistic approach to national development and its largely drama-free transition to constitutional monarchy have helped cement Bhutan's reputation as a remarkably well-governed, stable developing country.

There are some sharp edges to this Shangri-La, however. In the background of the international fascination with Bhutan's unconventional approach to national development, there is a chorus of vociferous critics. They decry what they view as retrograde policies that undermine civil liberties and embrace Buddhist conservatism, such as a requirement that all citizens wear traditional Bhutanese dress; the formal recognition of but one national language, Dzongkhar, to the exclusion of other language groups common in the region; and the unabashed religiosity of its governance, evidenced by the continued enshrinement of a Buddhist patriarchy as a central pillar of the state apparatus.¹⁰ With the kingdom's Constitution stipulating that 'political parties and candidates shall not resort to regionalism, ethnicity and religion to incite voters for electoral gain' (2008, p. 30) and the Election Act prohibiting 'any activity, which may create ill-will, differences or cause tension between communities, religious or linguistic groups' (quoted in Miyamoto 2017, p. 100), this raises the question of what recourse there could be for contrarian or minoritarian voices falling outside of the government-sanctioned party system.

Most sobering of all is the human rights crisis of ethnic Nepalis, who have been expelled from Bhutan. Once estimated to be between one-third to nearly one-half of the total population of Bhutan, the Lhotshampas ('southerners') began organizing politically in the late 1980s, during a time when the Nepali diaspora throughout the region was becoming increasingly politicized. They staged protests against the language and traditional dress requirements in Bhutan's southern region and allegedly became militarized with the support of Nepali paramilitary groups. The Bhutanese government, euphemistically referring to these ethnic tensions as 'the southern problem', viewed this as 'a critical threat to the country's stability' and forcefully expelled many southerners who could not meet

⁸ Among its political contemporaries, Bhutan's specifically Buddhist democracy is unique. As the comparative political scientist William Long notes, 'Other countries in the world have a predominantly Buddhist population to be sure, but very few are functioning democracies. For example, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia are Buddhist, but not democratic. Other nations with a predominantly Buddhist population might be said to be democracies or transitioning to democracy, such as Sri Lanka, but because they have been colonized and integrated into the global marketplace, little is left of their political and economic systems that is distinctively Buddhist' (Long 2019, p. 2).

⁹ According to the government, the objective of this transition of political systems was to '[build] Bhutan as a prosperous democracy that would represent a blend of global democratic system and Bhutan's traditional structure of governance' (Ura 2010, pp. 155–56).

¹⁰ Long explains the impetus behind these policies as part of the fourth Druk Gyalpo's approach to modernization: 'Bhutan, a latecomer to development, had seen numerous other nations shed their traditional culture and values on the road to modernization. The government's concern for cultural preservation led to the passage of revised citizenship laws and laws promoting Drukpa language and culture, thus creating frictions with Bhutan's ethnic minority Nepali population' (Long 2019, p. 76).

Bhutan's stringent citizenship requirements (Ura 2010, p. 131).¹¹ The political scientist Dhurba Rizal characterizes Bhutan's contemporary political situation quite bluntly: 'Today, the champion of GNH has violated the fundamental human rights of its own citizens' (Rizal 2015, p. 217).

In the penumbra of all of these policies is the keenly felt diminution of the Buddhist identity of Bhutan's Himalayan neighbors. Of all the Buddhist kingdoms on the roof of the world, Bhutan alone remains as an independent nation. Sikkim, Spiti, Lahul and Ladakh have been absorbed by India; Dolpo, Mustang, Solu-Khumbu and Walung are now Nepalese districts, and of course, Tibet has been colonized and systematically Sinicized by China. In those places, now that they have been integrated into secular, non-Buddhist-majority nations, the strength of the Buddhist institutions in these kingdoms has waned due to a decline in political patronage.¹²

As a reference point for considering Bhutan's response to its ethnic politics, let us consider the example of Sikkim. Just next door to Bhutan, the kingdom of Sikkim has a storied Vajrayāna Buddhist heritage. In the mid-17th century, Chogyals (Buddhist 'dharma kings') became the ruling monarchical lineage in Sikkim—a lineage which persisted for over three centuries. In the 17th and 18th centuries, however, the Gorkha armies of Nepal conquered considerable parts of Sikkim, and Nepalis settled there in large numbers, such that when these lands eventually returned to Sikkimese rule, the population of the kingdom as a whole was two-thirds Nepalese. The Chogyals nonetheless remained in place until the mid-20th century, when the Indian independence movement incited a radical rebalancing of the political powers of South and East Asia. By the 1970s, the Chogyals had introduced democratic reforms to remain in step with these modernizations. In 1975, not long after King Jigme Dorje Wangchuk made his first declarations of GNH, in the wake of anti-royalist riots in front of the Chogyal's palace, Sikkimese voters, driven largely by discontent among the non-Buddhist majority, chose by popular plebiscite to become a state of India. Within months, the Chogyal monarchy was abolished, and for decades now Sikkimese state politics has been dominated by a secular, democratic socialist party.

There are worse political fates than democratic socialism, of course. Nonetheless, a Bhutanese onlooker to this series of events could be forgiven for wondering whether the Bhutanese Buddhist state was, too, going the way of its Himalayan neighbors—and whether, by extension, the tradition of Himalayan Buddhist kingdoms was coming to a definitive end.¹³

The totality of Bhutan's political circumstances is, therefore, much more complicated than a cursory celebration of 'the Shangri-La behind GNH' would indicate. While it is beloved for advancing an 'exotic', Buddhist-inflected political ethos, it is denounced for defending too jealously its Buddhist identity and traditional culture. Bhutan is, in short, praised for being anti-modern and illiberal (refusing to uncritically accept capitalist dogma as a political good) and criticized for being anti-modern and illiberal (taking a starkly conservative stance relative to multiculturalism and its national identity).

So, which is it? Is Bhutan progressive or regressive? Humane or hateful? Compassionate or ruthless? What exactly *is* the ideology that underwrites Bhutan's politics? I maintain that the surprising

¹¹ Ura recalls that era in the following light: 'Agitators and rebels claiming to be Bhutanese had built camps in bordering Indian tea estates and in Bhutanese forests. They were moving fluidly in and out of Bhutan creating disorder. The country faced, simultaneously, three kinds of subversive campaigns for the first time in our history. It was unprecedented' (Ura 2010, p. 136). Ura waves away two of the main complaints of the refugees—that the governmental requirement to wear traditional Bhutanese dress and speak the official language, Dzongkar—by pointing out that these policies had been in place since 1973 and 1982, so, in his view, raising these complaints in the late 1980s or early 1990s was a 'somewhat convenient pretext' (Ura 2010, p. 136).

¹² Beginning with the first diffusion of Buddhism from India to Tibet with the sponsorship of the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo (*Srong brtsan sgam po*, 7th cen. CE), Himalayan Buddhist institutions have long relied on royal patronage to sustain themselves. Snellgrove and Richardson note that, as annexations to other non-Buddhist nations, these former Buddhist kingdoms now 'lack ... the directing force of a local authority, whether lay or religious, which has an interest and stake in the survival and development of what have now become little more than odd remnants of Tibetan culture and religion' (Snellgrove and Richardson 1986, p. 271).

¹³ These worries are reflected in much of the popular media coverage of Bhutan. For example, even the title of Barbara Crossette's travelogue about Bhutan, *So Close to Heaven* (Crossette 1996), evokes an image of Bhutan as otherworldly, a near paradise, and also approaching oblivion.

ambivalence with which a critical observer of Bhutan is confronted is best answered by reading its politics outside of these binaries and instead through the lens of Buddhist modernism. As we will see in the following sections, Bhutan's contemporary politics are consistent with a long tradition of Buddhist political theory, while also crafted in response to and influenced by contemporary geopolitical and intellectual forces that have produced a Buddhist politics that is both old and new.

3. Governance and Kingship in Mahāyāna Buddhist Political Theory

Themes of rulership and governance are evident throughout the history of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature. They appear as early as the Pāli canon (3rd–1st cen. BCE), in which a prominent political archetype is the 'wheel-turning monarch' (Pāli: *Cakkavatti*), a king whose rule is an instrument for the propagation of the Buddhist dharma.¹⁴ According to Matthew Moore, the Pāli canon contains a well-developed Buddhist political theory portraying an 'enlightened monarchy based on a primal social contract' (Moore 2015, p. 42).¹⁵ In addition, one of India's most revered imperial monarchs also happens to be one of Buddhism's most famous converts, the Mauryan emperor Aśoka (3rd cen. BCE), who is said to have converted to Buddhism after his victory in a bloody war. Repenting his use of extreme violence to expand his kingdom, he went on to become known for his humanitarian works; his defense of religious minorities, animal welfare, and marginalized classes such as prisoners; and his lavish funding of Buddhist activities. Mahāyāna literature is also rife with references to royalty and government. As Halkias points out, 'there is a plethora of royal symbolism in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts, rituals, and art,' for example, in iconography of bodhisattvas or the Buddha in royal garb, seated on a throne in a palace, or abiding at the center of a *maṇḍala*-as-kingdom (Halkias 2013, pp. 502–3). Even the narrative recounting the transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet is protagonized by several monarchs, without whom the story of Himalayan Buddhism could not be told.¹⁶

In the following section, I select, from the rather vast genre of Buddhist politically-themed literature, two texts that strike upon several of the issues most central to contemporary Bhutanese politics. One of these is an Indic text, Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland* (*Ratnāvalī*, 2nd cen. CE), and the other is a Tibetan text, Mipham's *Treatise on Ethics for Kings* (*rgyal po lugs kyi bstan bcos*, 19th cen. CE). Together, they are particularly philosophically significant relative to Bhutan's cultural and philosophical milieu. The Indian sage Nāgārjuna is considered by many to be the second-most significant of all Buddhist philosophers after the historical Buddha and is a towering exponent of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, while Jamgön Mipham is a widely known, prolific Tibetan scholar and key figure in the

¹⁴ For example, the Pāli canon's *Mahasudassana Sutta* recounts the story of King Sudassana who ruled the city of Kusāvati. King Sudassana happens to have been the Bodhisattva himself—the Buddha in a previous lifetime—making this sutta a Jātaka tale. By virtue of his perfect moral conduct and unsurpassable generosity, King Sudassana brought about unrivaled joy and prosperity in Kusāvati. Florid descriptions of the royal city are a conspicuous trope in this sutta, casting it in terms reminiscent of a pure realm, an enlightened mandala. For a detailed exegesis of this sutta, see Gethin (2006).

¹⁵ Moore argues that the political theory of the Pāli canon gives a 'deflationary account' of the role of politics in human life, and particularly in the Buddhist soteriological project (Moore 2015, p. 42). That is, whether or not a king is 'spiritually fit' for rulership contributes to the nexus of causes and conditions under which his subjects will or will not attain enlightenment, but it is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for those subjects' attainment of enlightenment. After all, it is manifestly possible in Buddhist literature to attain enlightenment even while not under the rule of an enlightened monarch, and even under an enlightened monarchy, not all subjects are necessarily bound to attain enlightenment.

¹⁶ These noble kings gave crucial support to Buddhist projects and institutions—from the construction of monasteries to the translation of the Sanskrit Buddhist canon into Tibetan—which was essential to establishing Buddhism in Tibet and other Himalayan kingdoms over the course of several centuries. In fact, the drama of the first and second diffusions of Buddhism in Tibet in the 7th and 11th centuries exemplifies the central role that these Tibetan monarchs are said to have played in the institutionalization of Tibetan Buddhism. Among other contributions, the revered dharmic kings Songsten Gampo (Wylie: *srong brtsan sgam po*, 617–649 CE) and Trisong Detsen (Wylie: *khri srong lde btsan*, 742–797 CE) sponsored the first translations of Sanskrit Buddhist texts and established Buddhism as the official state religion of the Tibetan Empire, respectively. However, in a policy reversal that has won him lasting infamy as a thoroughly "evil" monarch, Langdarma (Wylie: *glang dar ma*, 799–841 CE) persecuted Buddhists and revoked all royal patronage of Buddhist institutions, which is believed to have brought about the fragmentation of not only the budding Buddhist tradition, but also of the Tibetan Empire more generally. The Empire's good fortune was only restored by the revival of Buddhist institutions in the 10th and 11th centuries under a new series of dharmic kings, the most notable of whom was Yeshe Ö (Wylie: *ye shes od*, 959–1040 CE).

Nyingma (*rnying ma*) school and nonsectarian Rimé (*ris med*) movement of Tibetan Buddhism, which have a close doctrinal relationship with the Drukpa Kagyu school that predominates in Bhutan.

Reading these texts together elucidates the ideological underpinnings of Buddhist governance. The key claim that emerges in both Nāgārjuna's and Mipham's expressions of Buddhist political theory is that good governance by a virtuous monarch manifests in the collective spiritual advancement of his kingdom as a whole. The highest function of a political leader is to incite the enlightenment of his kingdom, and the measure of monarchical legitimacy is the overall flourishing of the realm, the fullest expression of which is the collective spiritual realization and liberation of the kingdom. To the extent that a monarch can use public resources and policies to facilitate that liberation for their subjects, they are a successful ruler. While Buddhist politics is meant to be deeply humane in this way, it is also rather partisan, adhering to a specifically Buddhist program of individual and collective liberation.

3.1. Society as Doorway to Enlightenment: The Precious Garland

Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland* is among the most widely read exemplars of the Buddhist *rajaniti* genre—texts offering advice on ethics to kings from renowned Buddhist teachers. In this text, we read Nāgārjuna's advice to King Udayi of the Sātavāhana dynasty in south central India.¹⁷ Written specifically as ethical advice for a worldly leader, the *Precious Garland* toggles between Nāgārjuna's trademark contemplative philosophical rigor on topics such as emptiness and sections with a remarkably pragmatic, earthy feel, in which he expounds on the view and practice of Mahāyāna Buddhist governance and royal conduct.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pith of Nāgārjuna's advice on rulership is that the best kind of governance is rooted in Buddhist practice. Nāgārjuna's fundamental instruction is to do his best to fully realize the Buddhist dharma, and then, to actualize his realization in brick and mortar—to practice compassion at a large scale by establishing a society that comprehensively reflects Buddhist values. Nāgārjuna's ideal kingdom is one that is humane to the poor and to prisoners; that is staffed with ethical, genuinely wise ministers; that funds public works such as parks and services for travelers; and—conspicuously—that invests heavily in Buddhist institutions such as monasteries.

On Nāgārjuna's view, there is no higher function of political leadership than inculcating Buddhist practice and study among the subjects of a kingdom, because the Buddhist dharma stands out as *the* best and only path toward true, ultimate flourishing. He is clear that successful governance must be religiously-minded, and indeed, its religiosity is what will serve as the guarantor of its success: 'If your realm exists for the doctrine [the Dharma]/And not for fame or desire,/Then it will be extremely fruitful./If not, its fruit will be misfortune' (Nāgārjuna 1998, stanza 327). Nāgārjuna does recommend other, non-religious policies and institutions as useful and worthwhile, but in the end, his advice to the king revolves around the central claim that no greater benefit could be conferred upon an individual or a society than giving them access to ultimate liberation by way of the Buddhadharma. To that end, Robert Thurman argues that Nāgārjuna's encouragement to create a society dedicated to dharmic education is the crux of the *Precious Garland's* royal advice: 'That of greatest value to beings is freedom and transcendence and enlightenment. These are obtained only through the door of Dharma' (Thurman 1986, p. 25). The king's primary mandate is therefore to foster 'a social space filled with doorways to Nirvana, shrines of liberating Truth, facilities for Teaching and Practice' (Thurman 1986,

¹⁷ There is some scholarly disagreement on the identity of Nāgārjuna's interlocutor. Heramba Chatterjee Sastri has alternatively identified him as another Sātavāhana ruler, King Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi (80–104 CE) (see Hopkins 1998, p. 22). In general, it is difficult to establish with any certainty the chronology and exact history the Sātavāhanas, and it is difficult to infer with any certainty the specifics of the political conditions that might have contextualized Nāgārjuna's advice to whomever his interlocutor was. In general, though, we do know that the Sātavāhana dynasty—and Gautamīputra particularly—is known for several successful military campaigns that vastly expanded the dynasty's territory for a time and for consolidating political power effectively within its reign.

p. 26).¹⁸ The creation of a dharmic kingdom is not a contemplative wish or a symbolic literary trope; for Nāgārjuna, it is the marquee policy of a truly altruistic monarch.

While Nāgārjuna's text evinces the highly ambitious goal of using royal power to spiritually elevate a whole society, there is also a recognition here that the real business of governing will require the king to be fierce and uncompromising in the face of certain political realities. For example, a series of stanzas describes in poetic language how 'the birds of the populace will alight upon/the royal tree providing the shade of [tolerance]', but the king must also be tough, like a sweet candy with a rough exterior (Nāgārjuna 1998, stanza 340–341).¹⁹ Acknowledging that sometimes the sweetness of the king's tolerance must have a limit, Khensur Jampa Tegchok explains, 'While [the king] needs to be tolerant and generous in general, out of compassion he must sometimes look fierce. When he sees something that is extremely harmful, wrong or destructive, for the benefit of the people he must forcefully show that it is not acceptable' (Tegchok 2017, p. 287). Nāgārjuna concludes this thought by saying, 'If you analyze with reason thus,/Your governance will not degenerate./It will not be without principle/Nor become unreligious but be religious' (Nāgārjuna 1998, stanza 342). What is at stake in this claim is the view—counterintuitive to some—that true compassion is not always sweet and gentle. Sometimes a righteous Buddhist monarch must care for others by defending clearly and decisively against actors and views who stand to cause harm. Keeping the 'long view' of what is ultimately most beneficial for the most people, the king may have to draw and maintain firm boundaries against behavior that undermines the collective interest of the realm.²⁰

Furthermore, while Nāgārjuna instructs the king to pay due respect to his spiritual teachers, he is blunt about the relationship he should have toward non-Buddhist teachers: 'You should not respect, revere,/Or do homage to others, the Forders [the non-Buddhists],/Because through that the ignorant/Would become enamored of the faulty' (Nāgārjuna, stanza 237). Tegchok understands this to mean: 'If the king were to show great respect and make offerings to [those who teach or practice a wrong path], the citizens would think that they should follow suit . . . [and] would be led on a wrong path, which harms them in this life and for many lives to come' (Tegchok 2017, p. 228). While religious partisanship is no excuse for unkind behavior—and Tegchok even specifies that 'the king should still be polite to these [non-Buddhist] people' (Tegchok 2017, p. 228)—nonetheless, there is a clear wariness here toward non-Buddhist religious traditions. Gestures toward religious pluralism would undermine what Nāgārjuna thinks should be the king's clear advocacy of Buddhism alone.

This position is possibly influenced by the religious milieu of the Sātāvahana dynasty. The Sātāvahanas were formally Hindu but still known for generously patronizing Buddhist monasteries, and laypeople under Sātāvahana rule were generally not especially devoted to one particular religious tradition over another (Fynes 1995, p. 43). In this milieu, we can hear Nāgārjuna's unabashedly partisan play for the king to commit himself to Buddhism as a plea to elevate the tradition that, in his view, is the single best resource at the king's disposal for helping his kingdom to flourish. If the king wishes to fully enact the mandate of a truly noble ruler, he should do everything he can to make available the

¹⁸ In his commentary on the *Precious Garland*, Jeffrey Hopkins summarizes Nāgārjuna's royal advice in similar terms: 'The implicit message is that for the values of Buddhist doctrine to be inculcated on a popular level, impressive, well-endowed institutions are required' (Hopkins 1998, p. 78). Likewise, Khensur Jampa Tegchok comments on this point in Nāgārjuna's advice by remarking: 'Building Buddhist learning centers will bring your country great joy and happiness, and freedom from famine, drought, war, strife, and disease' (Tegchok 2017, p. 272).

¹⁹ These two stanzas read in full: 'The birds of the populace will alight upon/The royal tree providing the shade of patience/Flourishing flowers of respect,/And large fruits of resplendent giving./Monarchs whose nature is generosity/Are liked if they are strong, / Like a sweet hardened outside/With cardamom and pepper' (Nāgārjuna 1998, stanzas 340–341). From the Tibetan of this text, Jeffrey Hopkins translates the term *bzod* with 'patience', while the translation by Thubten Chodron in Tegchok's commentary uses 'tolerance' (Tegchok 2017, p. 287). I favor Chodron's translation in this instance.

²⁰ Instances like this when the compassionate 'skillful means' (*upāya*) of Buddhist heroes involve actions that, on their own, might appear unconventional, unkind or even violent are well-known in Buddhist ethical literature. While I do not think that Buddhist ethics taken as a whole amounts to a form of consequentialism, moments such as these certainly do resonate with a consequentialist ethical calculus. For a robust analysis of the consequentialist bent of Buddhist ethics, see Goodman (2009).

soteriological potency of the Buddhadharma, which stands above that of all other traditions in the spiritual marketplace of the Sātāvahanas.

With its thorough explanations of emptiness and instructions on how to act compassionately in everyday life, the *Precious Garland* serves as a compelling primer on Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine. As Buddhist political theory, however, it also offers a model of how to create a thoroughly Buddhist society as an expression of the king's benevolent wish to be of benefit to his subjects. There is no greater public service or resource to which he could commit his royal powers than wholeheartedly—and exclusively—propagating the Buddhist dharma.

3.2. Royal Ethics and Realpolitik in the Treatise on Ethics for Kings

The *Treatise on Ethics for Kings: An Ornament for Rulers* (*Rgyal po lugs kyi bstan bcos sa gzhi skyong ba'i rgyan*, 1895) by the revered 19th century Tibetan luminary, Jamgön Mipham, strikes many of the same notes as the *Precious Garland*.²¹ In it, Mipham gives advice on kingship and statecraft to Ngawang Jampel Rinchen, the prince of the eastern Tibetan kingdom of Dege.²² Mipham begins with the clear expression of the responsibility of a ruler: 'Even at the cost of his life, the king/will never abandon/the jewel of Dharma,/the source of happiness in the world./He will rule the kingdom righteously,/relying on his righteous qualities;/he always abandons unrighteousness, and he teaches the Dharma' (Mipham 2017, p. 86). Luran Hartley characterizes this prime mandate of the king as '[moving] beyond the mundane level of its worldly trappings into a force for the furthering of positive karmic forces for all beings in his realm' (Hartley 1997, p. 71).²³ In this respect, a key aspect of what is expected of the king is that he work to fully grasp and embody Buddhist doctrine, so that the benefits of his accumulated merit and wisdom can be transferred to his subjects through his skillful governance.²⁴

Even more than in the *Precious Garland*, we see here the extent to which the work of a noble monarch is like the bodhisattva ideal—pursuing enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings—writ large. As in our previous text, the primary qualifications for political leadership are virtue and wisdom, which will be reflected in the well-being of the king's subjects. Once again, built into this view of the Buddhist monarch is the understanding that ultimate well-being is rendered by the Buddhist dharma, hence Mipham's claim that, 'People primarily need Dharma./Dharma helps us both in this life and the next' (Mipham 2017, p. 49). Inasmuch as the king's mandate is to facilitate the flourishing of his kingdom, the middling steps in achieving that goal require the propagation of the Buddhist tradition itself.

On the other hand, in a seeming departure from Nāgārjuna, the king is advised not to let his religious partisanship go too far. Mipham stipulates that: 'The king properly protects/any ancient religious systems, each with its own traditions,/that may exist within his kingdom,/from the non-Buddhist heterodox religions on up ... He cares for them individually so that they do not degenerate./This is the way of caring for living beings' (Mipham 2017, p. 117). José Cabezón captures this ethos in noting that, 'although the sovereign of Mipham's *Treatise* is presumed to be Buddhist, he is the king of all his subjects, no matter what religion they practice' (Cabezón 2017, p. xviii). This ecumenical position is perhaps not so surprising coming from a figure like Mipham, a celebrated

²¹ As an indigenous Tibetan text, Mipham's *Treatise* is not quite a *rajaniti* text, which is technically an Indic genre. Rather, it is classified as 'jig rten lugs kyi bstan bcos' ('treatise on worldly advice'). However, Mipham clearly has the *rajaniti* genre in mind, and in fact, cites Indian *niti* texts abundantly in the text, including the *Precious Garland*. Recently Mipham's *Treatise* was translated by José Ignacio Cabezón and published as *The Just King* (Mipham 2017).

²² As Luran Hartley puts it, this text 'represents a perspective on the king's responsibilities by one of the most influential religious figures of the time' (Hartley 1997, p. 68).

²³ Hartley cites an interview with a Tibetan lama, Thubten Nyima, who, in Hartley's paraphrasing, affirmed that 'Mi-pham's main intent was that the king stay on-track, as it were, and rule in keeping with the dharma (*chos*). [Thubten Nyima] concluded that Mi-pham essentially saw behaving the way of the "ya-rabs" (noble) as a way to stay in power and to keep the kingdom calm, by maintaining the local tradition and acting as appropriate to expectations' (Hartley 1997, p. 82).

²⁴ 'A lot is required of the righteous ruler, but that is precisely why he must first engage in a long program of intellectual and moral self-fashioning. Only then will the king be able to rule justly and effectively ... Only when the uppermost position in the political hierarchy is occupied by a just and moral sovereign will righteousness be spread to the masses' (Cabezón 2017, p. xviii).

exponent of the non-sectarian Rimé (*ris-med*) movement of Tibetan Buddhism. However, Hartley additionally argues that, unlike Mipham's otherwise more 'lofty', abstract advice, these verses are unusually specific instructions that apply to Jampal Rinchen's particular political situation. His kingdom, Dege, was fairly unstable at the time of this text's writing, and Jampal Rinchen's position as the rising monarch was threatened by struggles over succession with his brother (Hartley 1997, p. 83). It is also relevant to note here that the primary doctrinal struggles in Dege were not between Buddhists and non-Buddhists but rather between sects of Buddhism. There were good political reasons, then, to adopt what Hartley calls 'religio-political alliances that cut across sectarian lines' in order to '[respond] flexibly to the several internal and external forces bidding for rule in the kingdom of Sde-dge [Dege] during the nineteenth century' (Hartley 1997, pp. 84–85).²⁵ In a text otherwise exclusively dedicated to expounding the spiritual qualities and ethical outlook that Buddhist governance entails, Mipham here betrays a unique moment of realpolitik. After all, Jampal Rinchen's potential to serve his realm as a noble Buddhist monarch will be for naught if he cannot first secure political stability.

Taken within the broader set of concerns that direct Buddhist political thinking, therefore, Mipham's gesture toward religious open-mindedness is not as dramatic a departure from Nāgārjuna's advice as it initially appears. What is at stake in both cases is working with local conditions to maximize the potential of each monarch's political circumstances to promote Buddhist practice and values among their subjects. In the case of King Udayi, who was already established as the ruler of his kingdom, that meant affirming the centrality of the Buddhist tradition alone as the ultimate source of well-being for his subjects. In Jampal Rinchen's case, whose transition from prince to monarch was still somewhat uncertain, that meant focusing on the first-order concern of stabilizing the kingdom. Only from a stable seat as monarch could Jampal Rinchen fully manifest as a 'bodhisattva-king'. Once again, this is still a partisan view of Buddhist leadership; while a Buddhist king is meant to be benevolent to all, it is clear that their primary mandate is to protect and promote the Buddhist dharma—and therefore, the ultimate well-being of their subjects—in their kingdoms.

In this section, what we have seen emphasized by both Nāgārjuna and Mipham is the incredibly high hopes that Buddhist thinkers have for the fruition of wise, Buddhist-inspired governance. In the *Precious Garland*, the king is strongly urged to fully and exclusively embrace Buddhist values in his governance, with the promise of a profoundly successful reign (measured by the well-being and realization of his subjects) as his reward. In the *Treatise on Ethics for Kings*, we likewise see the singular value of a strong Buddhist monarch whose compassionate rulership is an expression of his Buddhist practice. The key theme of the Buddhist political theory linking these texts is the view that high minded, dharmic governance stands to benefit and elevate the kingdom as a whole, and to the extent that a king can rule according to Buddhist values, his kingdom will reflect the benefits of his wisdom and compassion.

4. Revisiting Contemporary Bhutan: What Is Old Is New Again

With this context in mind, let us now turn back to Bhutan and re-examine its contemporary politics. I will focus on three points: the question of monarchy, the Buddhist underpinnings of GNH, and the fraught question of religious pluralism. Bhutan's approach to these three areas is invoking the tradition of Buddhist political thought outlined in the previous section. At the same time, Bhutan's politics are clearly responding to contemporary geopolitical and intellectual factors in such a way that Bhutan is now manifesting as a political iteration of Buddhist modernism.

²⁵ Hartley specifies: 'In light of the local power of many chiefs, the events which followed the Ngag-rong campaign, and the succession struggle in which 'Jam-dpal-rin-chen was involved, impartiality in the political realm was exceptionally pertinent' (Hartley 1997, p. 83).

4.1. The Question of Monarchy

To a contemporary reader, a conspicuous feature of the political ‘scenes’ portrayed in traditional Buddhist political literature is that absolute monarchy is taken for granted as the self-evidently ideal governance structure. Although democratic governance was not absolutely foreign to Buddhist thinkers,²⁶ so entrenched is the presumption of monarchy as the ideal structure through which to effect Buddhist governance that these political writings do not concern themselves with even defending it.²⁷ In the Buddhist narratives about ideal kingship that we have examined, the power of an absolute monarch is conceptualized as a valuable tool through which a virtuous ruler can affect good works. They begin from the fact of monarchy as a premise and, from that starting point, theorize about how to attain the best possible outcomes of monarchical rule.

In light of this, the enthusiasm with which the Druk Gyalpos campaigned to transition their kingdom to a democratic, constitutional monarchy signals a remarkable pivot away from this storied tradition of Buddhist absolute monarchy.²⁸ Indeed, when the former king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, initiated the first steps in the transition toward democracy in 1998, one of the members of the National Assembly reportedly asked, ‘If it is not broken, why fix it?’ The king replied, ‘The future of the country must not be compromised for one individual’s convenience; we must always give more importance to building the institution’ (quoted in Wangchuk 2004, p. 837). In the long run, an absolute monarchy was a liability to the country, in his view. Rather than placing the future of Bhutan in the hands of one hereditary ruler, he believed that stability and the continued rise of national prosperity would be best afforded by democracy.

Bhutan’s transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy is therefore a genuinely remarkable moment in the history of Buddhist governance. As the political scientist William Long puts it, ‘Bhutan has, in a very short period of time, transitioned from an essentially authoritarian system of government to a recognizable democracy with uniquely Buddhist features’ (Long 2019, p. 70). This transition constitutes a significant pivot from a governance structure celebrated and reaffirmed by centuries of traditional Buddhist political theory to a governance structure that is a hybrid of Buddhist governance with modern, western political theory.

Formally codifying the transition to a Buddhist, constitutional monarchy, Bhutan’s Constitution of 2008 is a fascinating exposition of Buddhist modernism. The product of a cross-cultural constitutional study, it is a document that is a hybrid of old and new, ‘Buddhist’ and ‘modern’. While the literary form of the document itself is boilerplate western political science, a significant portion of the content distinctly invokes the kingdom’s Bhutanese and Buddhist heritage.²⁹ It specifically names Buddhism as the ‘spiritual heritage’ of Bhutan and upholds the traditional splitting of government between a head of the state and a ‘head of the church’-type figure, the Je Khenpo. It goes on to map out the leadership structure and government funding of the monastic bureaucracy that oversees the Buddhist state religion. Further, it establishes the Sino-Tibetan dialect Dzongkha as the sole national language,

²⁶ For example, it is often noted that the structure of early Buddhist monastic communities was largely democratic and premised upon social equality among the monastics (Gyatso 1993).

²⁷ Moore cleverly points to a moment in the Pāli canon that demonstrates the implicit assumption that monarchy is the ideal form of government. In the *Cakkavatti-Sīhānaāda Sutta*, the Buddha prophetically envisions a utopia in the distant future when humanity has reached the apex of its social decency and spiritual progress (and has even attained an average lifespan of eighty thousand years!). Moore notes that if the Buddha favored a republican system of governance, this is where we would have found it, and yet, this best of all possible worlds is still ruled by a monarchy (Moore 2015, p. 45).

²⁸ The French diplomat Thierry Mathou registered the exceptional nature of this political transition when he wrote, ‘It was the first time in world history that a monarch who was initially vested with absolute power, voluntarily reduced the scope of these powers and eventually abdicated with no other reason than his own dedication to political reforms’ (Mathou 2008, p. 1).

²⁹ In his comparative analysis of Bhutan’s constitution and typical Western democratic constitutions, Long notes that ‘rather than simply adopting a Western model of liberal democracy, Bhutan sought to build a democracy consistent with its fundamental Buddhist values and Bhutanese culture. Although Bhutan’s constitution draws heavily from many Western models, Bhutan was also aware of the problems besetting liberal democracy and neo-liberal development models, such as high income inequality, elite capture of power through the influence of money on politics, and environmental degradation, and saw these characteristics as inconsistent with its Buddhist ideals’ (Long 2019, p. 85).

and it enshrines GNH (the Buddhist roots of which I address below) as the central development mandate of the State (2008, p. 9). At the heart of this hybrid, Buddhist-modernist system of governance is the king, the Druk Gyalpo, in whose person the dual secular and religious pillars of the Bhutanese state are unified and ‘who, as a Buddhist, shall be the upholder of [this dual, secular and religious state]’ (2008, p. 2).

At the same time, the very document itself is a modernist artifact. The chairman of the constitutional drafting committee, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, recounts that, in drafting the constitution, the committee took up a careful study of a number of political and philosophical texts. Some of these were Bhutanese and Buddhist texts, such as Royal decrees and speeches of the former king; religious, cultural, philosophical and political bases of Bhutan’s heritage; and the history of Bhutan’s own democratic process. In addition, however, they also studied western philosophy and democratic theory and read around one hundred constitutions of other nations, of which twenty they studied in detail (Tobgye 2016, p. 7). They also took care to collectively study several features of western political theory, such as the nature of sovereignty; human rights conventions, treaties, protocols, covenants and other international and regional instruments; as well as the verbiage and literary style of various constitutions (Tobgye 2016, p. 7). The constitutional committee’s use of these western sources is evident in not only the form but also the content of the product of their work together. The Bhutanese constitution’s articles proceed from a preamble through an enumeration of fundamental rights and duties of citizens; an explication of the role and responsibilities of the king; a division of powers and responsibilities between the Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary branches of government, as well as local governments; and provisions for amending the constitution.

The very existence of a Buddhist constitution such as Bhutan’s, that blends an ancient political tradition with a modern one, is historically noteworthy in itself. Beyond this, the change in form of government that the Constitution of 2008 inaugurates denotes an evolving view of what tools and social structures are most useful for advancing the goal of using Buddhist governance to spur societal well-being up to and including collective awakening. It is another instance of a sort of Buddhist political pragmatism—a recognition that an altruistic Buddhist monarch must respond to the geopolitical and social mores of the moment, and not cling too conservatively to one specific ideology or even form of government as the only possible vehicle for his political altruism. In eschewing the traditional Buddhist governance structure of absolute monarchy, Bhutan’s leaders have made clear that although Buddhist political theory has previously upheld absolute monarchy as an unquestioned norm for millennia, there is no intrinsic relationship between monarchy and Buddhist governance. They discerned that monarchy is manifestly not an indispensable tool for realizing societal liberation. In fact, one might even say that, for the fourth and fifth Druk Gyalpos, embracing democracy was not a step away from Buddhist tradition but rather a measure taken in favor of preserving it. Even in radically revising Bhutan’s traditional form of government, Bhutanese leadership has managed to re-emphasize and reinscribe the core aspects of its culture and values that are distinctly Himalayan Buddhist. Although absolute monarchy features prominently in the history of Buddhist political literature, democratic governance is not ‘un-Buddhist’, therefore, at least in the estimation of the two most recent Druk Gyalpos and their government ministers.

4.2. GNH as a ‘Buddhist Social Contract’

Bhutan’s signature policy of Gross National Happiness is a modernist iteration of the traditional mandate of Buddhist governance. From what we have seen in the *Precious Garland* and the *Treatise on Ethics for Kings*, there is already a fairly clear line to draw between traditional Buddhist political literature and Bhutan’s project of advancing ‘national happiness’. Facilitating spiritual liberation is the core ethos of the Buddhist monarch, and on the Buddhist view, spiritual liberation is, in fact, ultimate

happiness.³⁰ Therefore, although the locution of ‘gross national happiness’ is clearly a rejoinder to modern capitalism, the underlying philosophical principle of GNH has been a consistent component of Buddhist political literature for centuries. Ura writes: ‘H.M. King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck [the current King of Bhutan] defined GNH as the creation of an enlightened society in which the happiness and well-being of all people is the ultimate purpose of governance’ (Ura 2007). In that respect, although to outsiders it sounds radical and iconoclastic, GNH is not quite an innovation or even a reaction to western capitalism per se; it is an expression of an ancient, fundamental principle of Buddhist governance, presented in a modernist vernacular.³¹

However, the way in which GNH has been codified, broken up into empirically measurable components, and carried out by a highly organized national bureaucracy is certainly an innovation upon the Buddhist ideals of kings who use their power for collective benefit.³² Even the vocabulary that Bhutanese scholars and bureaucrats use to describe the nature of this national project is steeped in the rhetoric of modernism. For example, Ura, writes: ‘GNH should be considered as a Buddhist society’s equivalent of the social contract, where citizens pursue collective happiness’ (Ura 2007). The Bhutanese scholar Karma Phuntsock similarly affirms the modernist interweaving of traditional and modernist elements in GNH: ‘it was visionary for [King Jigme Singye Wangchuk] to crystallize the [ancient Buddhist] ideas and practices which remained diffused in the society in a formal national policy in order to guide development programmes’ (Phuntsho 2018, p. 596). In other words, GNH is a method for bringing the ancient ethos of Buddhist governance into the 21st century by way of a highly modern, technocratic state apparatus.³³

Karma Ura’s writings constitute a remarkable archive of this modernist, technocratic articulation of Buddhist governance. As the principal architect behind GNH policy, Ura often deploys traditional Buddhist philosophical principles in his explanations of the ‘view’ of GNH. For example, Ura distinguishes the collective happiness that is pursued under GNH from ‘private’ or individual happiness, which ‘does not take into account the needs of others and is therefore irresponsible and egocentric’ (Ura 2007). By comparison, he argues that collective happiness must be pursued vis-a-vis ‘the Buddhist understanding of reality’—that is, its metaphysics of interdependence and karma. From the vantage point of that metaphysical paradigm, Ura argues that ‘to be a member of a GNH society requires one fundamental property: to see all things and interdependent with other things. By being convinced and informed about interdependence, compassion should naturally arise as a person recognizes that his happiness is dependent on all other creatures’ welfare’ (Ura 2007). Here, Ura is using classical Buddhist metaphysical and ethical reasoning to advance a Buddhist social contract theory. On this view, the objective of becoming what Ura calls a ‘GNH society’ is to recognize and fully take hold of the powerful fact of a society’s interdependence. Yoking one another’s interests together according to the Buddhist principle of interdependence, this GNH society stands to mutually reinforce the causes and conditions for collective happiness, the apotheosis of which is collective enlightenment

³⁰ For a fuller exegesis of a Buddhist conception of happiness, see Ricard (2014).

³¹ The Buddhist philosophical basis of GNH has received a good deal of attention. See, for example Givel (2015); Ura (2007) and Tashi (2004). Notably, Tashi contends that while GNH is compatible with and supportive of the Buddhist goal of spiritual liberation, in and of itself it only buttresses the helpful causes and conditions under which a person may achieve enlightenment, but it does not obviate the dedicated formal practice of the Buddhist path that would make such collective liberation a reality.

³² The implementation of GNH is measured across four societal ‘pillars’: sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development; environmental conservation; preservation and promotion of culture; and good governance. Progress in developing these pillars is evaluated using objective criteria known as the GNH Index that examines the four pillars within nine domains of daily life. The measurement tools that are used to evaluate these facets of national flourishing are complex and quite detailed; for a fuller description, see Ura et al. (2012a).

³³ The technocratic aspect of Bhutan’s approach to advancing happiness can be observed in the GNH Index itself. This measurement tool for studying the four pillars and nine domains of happiness throughout the kingdom is based upon the Alkire–Foster methodology developed by Sabine Alkire and James Foster at the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative as well as the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index (Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative 2009; Ura et al. 2012b).

itself. A modern bureaucrat par excellence, Ura is, thus, also a contemporary theorist of Buddhist political modernism.

4.3. The Place for Pluralism in the Buddhist-Modernist State

Finally, to consider the role of religious and ethnic pluralism in modern Bhutan, let us recall the moment in Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland* when he warns the King against venerating non-Buddhist religious traditions.³⁴ Hopkins considers this addition by Nāgārjuna 'chilling', noting that 'although he never calls for persecution of non-Buddhists, it is clear that he seeks for the King to support only Buddhism within the context that its values promote social well-being. How such advice could be adapted to multi-cultural societies in the present day is an enigma yet to be worked out' (Hopkins 1998, p. 82). Although Hopkins makes no reference to Bhutan here, he is indeed correct that this advice is out of step with contemporary, liberal mores of multiculturalism and religious tolerance, and Bhutan's exceedingly complicated and challenging ethnic politics underscores Hopkins' misgivings about Nāgārjuna's views.

Indeed, many of Bhutan's detractors point to the refugee crisis of the Lhotsampa as evidence that Bhutan is not the 'Shangri-La' that it is purported to be. They claim that, in fact, its Buddhist identity is nothing more than window dressing for authoritarianism—that Bhutan has branded itself as the 'happy Buddhist kingdom' but in fact evinces no real commitment to the ethical principles that true adherents to Buddhism would avow.³⁵

Although Bhutan's relationship with religious and ethnic minorities strikes some critics as somehow 'un-Buddhist', in fact, the sobering reality of Bhutan's Lhotsampas is yet another facet of its contemporary politics that is remarkably consonant with the views espoused by the likes of Nāgārjuna and Mipham. Each of these philosophers were attuned to the political realities that stood to compromise the integrity and longevity of the Buddhist kingdoms they intended to foment. In Nāgārjuna's case, the thrust of his argument to his royal interlocutor was to embrace an unequivocally Buddhist approach to governance in order to have a successful reign. Mipham's realpolitik consisted of muting internecine polemics among Buddhist sects in order to stabilize a hitherto unstable political landscape. In Bhutan's case, we see a combination of each of these concerns. The Druk Gyalpos have for decades been singly focused upon fully realizing the promise of an enlightened society founded on Buddhist principles. Geopolitical threats to the sovereignty of the kingdom do pose a genuine danger to that goal. Keenly aware of its status as the last independent, Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas, Bhutan's leaders have, therefore, long made the preservation of Bhutan's sovereignty a paramount concern, sometimes at the expense of non-Bhutanese people or non-Buddhists within the kingdom.³⁶

The story of the emergence of the contemporary Bhutanese state as an exemplar of unconventional modern governance has, to a great extent, been a story of tying the very existence of this kingdom to its Buddhist identity. In narrating a national identity that is so thoroughly imbued with its Buddhist-ness, Bhutan has made it nearly impossible to imagine a Bhutan that is anything other than utterly, completely Buddhist. That is a fairly canny strategy for staking its claim on the world stage, but for minorities who either are not ethnically Bhutanese or not Buddhist, this means that the modern Bhutanese state has been crafted precisely in a way that excludes them.

³⁴ Once more, the citation reads: 'You should not respect, revere,/Or do homage to others, the Forders [the non-Buddhists],/Because through that the ignorant/Would become enamored of the faulty' (Nāgārjuna, stanza 237).

³⁵ Critical op-eds to this effect appear with some regularity in major media outlets (cf. Mishra 2013) and in the blogosphere (cf. Gindin 2018).

³⁶ The rhetoric coming from Bhutanese scholars and leaders—particularly during the peak of the Lhotsampa crisis in the early 1990s—spared no sense of urgency in its declarations of the precarity of Bhutan's situation. For example, Jigme Thinley, a government bureaucrat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who would go on to become the first democratically elected prime minister of Bhutan, authored an extensive article on the crisis of Nepali migrants, which bore the ominous title, 'Bhutan: A Kingdom Besieged' (Thinley 1994).

This deeply fraught situation must be included in our understanding of Bhutan's contemporary politics. Bhutan's inability to fully accommodate an ethnically pluralistic identity may, on the face of it seem, seem uncharacteristically 'un-compassionate' and, therefore, contradictory to its Buddhist identity. Seen from another perspective, however, this stance is in keeping with Buddhist political thinkers' singular concern for preserving the stability of a Buddhist monarchy, the sine qua non of attaining a truly happy kingdom. Perhaps it is a 'sign of the times' that in order to assert and defend its existence, Bhutan has had to trade on a national narrative that mutes those human beings whose existence complicates that narrative. This aspect of Bhutan's politics is different in kind from the modernism on display in its transition to democracy and its exposition of GNH principles, wherein elements of the Buddhist tradition become hybridized with modernist values or institutions. When it comes to the preservation of its political sovereignty and stability, in a context of globalization and the explicit and implicit colonial pretensions of two massive superpowers on either side, Bhutan has hewed to a long tradition of conservative Buddhist nationalism. It remains to be seen whether—and if so, how—the ongoing recalibration of the balance of powers around the world and in the region will alter this inheritance.

5. Conclusions

Bhutan exemplifies how Buddhist political thought is a living tradition that is getting worked out in real time in this tiny mountain kingdom. However, beyond that, Bhutan's politics also highlight the potential for mutuality in Buddhist modernism. This particular instance of Buddhist modernism is not a 'new' form of Buddhism resulting from the introduction of Buddhism to a culture that previously did not have it. Rather, Bhutan's politics enact a re-articulation of Buddhist political thought *in light of* the introduction of western political liberalism to a traditionally Buddhist society. This is not the dynamic—more familiar to westerners—of Buddhist traditions departing from Asia and getting reshaped in other cultural contexts. Rather, here, we have a dynamic in which a Buddhist society in Asia simultaneously affirms its Buddhist identity while adopting and adapting modernist political forms and practices, indeed using these modernist political forms and practices as a tool for affirming and rearticulating its Buddhist identity.

Understanding Bhutan's contemporary politics in this light reveals the dynamic tension that is inherent to its national project. Bhutan is threading a fine needle—reaffirming and fiercely defending its identity as a thoroughly Buddhist kingdom while also allowing itself to be changed by its contact with the international community, western political forms and mores, and the shifting demands of its regional geopolitics. The Buddhist modernism on display in Bhutan's contemporary politics is yet another example of the dynamism and plasticity of the Buddhist tradition as it becomes hybridized and re-hybridized in its encounters with novel social, cultural and geopolitical landscapes.

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