

# Who Talks About “Self- Actualisation” Anymore?

*Ngawang Rigzar Wangchuk*

Ask young Bhutanese today about their dreams and aspirations for their lives and a common answer involves leaving the country -- Australia being the new promised land. This is among those who dream and aspire. There is another lot perfectly happy doing absolutely nothing as long as they have a roof over their heads and three meals that their parents still cook for them, as they risk their “lives” protecting their “country” from hordes of enemies on their smartphones. Even their parents seem to have lowered their expectations, mostly because of a fear of suicide placed over their heads by their own sons and daughters. It is not uncommon to hear a parent say that, at least, “their child is not engaged in drugs, gangs, or in prison”. How have we come to expect so little of ourselves?

## Contextualising Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

In 1943 a psychologist, Abraham Maslow, offered a categorisation of needs in his paper *A theory of human motivation*. Within this, Maslow offered five broad categories of needs and placed “self-actualisation” right at the top of his pyramid.



Describing self-actualisation simply as “what a man can be, he must be”, it is the realisation of an individual’s fullest potential. This can be thought of as that stage where a person is doing the very thing, at the best of his/her potential, which they were placed on this earth to do.

Our basic needs have comparatively been fulfilled over the years, as evidenced by the ever-rising Gross National Income (GNI), from \$550 in 1989 to \$3,140 in 2019.<sup>1</sup> However, Maslow’s highest purpose of life, self-actualisation, stands in sharp contrast when we consider the lifestyle, passion, and direction of youth.

Swept up by the mighty wave of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, most of our youth are voluntary victims of the endless foreign fascinations readily available through their smartphones. Resigning to the much effort-less and incomparably stimulating challenges that offer instant gratification and a convincing illusion of achievement, our youths consume and put out information like an addict who needs ever-higher doses of gaming victories and Tik-Tok trends to feel satisfied. Against Maslow’s categorisation, our youth seem mostly stuck in an effort to fulfil their psychological needs of belonging, relationships, and esteem. We hardly talk about self-actualisation and the higher purpose of life.

The mindless consumption of information and content has had deep implications on the kind of role models whom the youth of Bhutan look up to. Most of these role models serve as easy answers for our youth, who feel severely deprived in terms of esteem, belonging, and meaningful relationships.

However, this approach in adopting role models seems to have two major flaws. Firstly, they are situated within a context of the industrial media-consumer complex, guided by laws of aggressive marketing, algorithmic echo chambers<sup>2</sup>, filters, touch-ups, and all the tricks of post-production that give the illusion of perfection. Youth, unaware of these behind-the-scenes forces at play, unconsciously compare their lives to those “lived” by their role models, and set themselves up for inevitable disappointment and disengagement in their own lives.

<sup>1</sup> “GNI per capita, Atlas method (current US\$) - Bhutan,” The World Bank, accessed on September 10, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD?locations=BT>

<sup>2</sup> “The Reason Your Feed Became An Echo Chamber — And What To Do About It,” NPR, accessed on September 29, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/07/24/486941582/the-reason-your-feed-became-an-echo-chamber-and-what-to-do-about-it>

Secondly, the increasingly higher amount of time spent online has a direct impact on the amount of available time offline. A recent study has shown that an average Bhutanese spends around 2.7 hours a day on social media, compared with the global average of 2.4 hours.<sup>3</sup>

Another implication of this subtle but heavy importing of role models and, with them, the approach towards self-actualisation, is that it takes on a particularly individualistic flavour, where the self-actualised individual rises above the “dull” crowd to fulfill their own goals and ambitions, often at the expense of those around them. Self-actualisation ends up becoming a comparative exercise, not a genuine search within oneself.

Consequences of such a view of self-actualisation have been made most clear in the glorification of “anti-heroes” in the West. Although anti-heroes represent the perversion of society’s deeply-held values and beliefs, they are nonetheless celebrated since they, in their own ways, are seen as individuals who have realised their full potential to become the perfect self-actualised villains. The danger for Bhutan’s case is that, while the Western consumers and audience have access to the contexts within which such content is manufactured, Bhutanese youth often take these ideas as being real, since they have no contexts to ground their ideas.

## **Towards a Bhutanese Version of Self- Actualisation**

However, while self-actualisation often takes a self-centred flavour elsewhere we, as Bhutanese, can venture out to ideate and model self-actualisation that draws from being deeply rooted in our communities, and from our innermost values of *tha damtshig ley judre*, compassion, and the innate sensibilities as Bhutanese.

Such an understanding of self-actualisation also lends itself well to our own spiritual tradition of Buddhism, which takes the focus away from an individual towards a much deeper focus of benefitting the other. The implication that this has for motivation is that the attitude gets shifted from one of passion (where the parameters extend only to include oneself) to one of purpose (where the parameters expand to include others); the reason for self-actualisation moves beyond the individual to the societal level.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bhutan Media Foundation, “Social Media Landscape in Bhutan,” (2021): 24

We can look at our own history and find many examples of self-actualised individuals -- from Zhabdrung and Tertön Pema Lingpa and contemporarily, our Monarchs. His Majesty The King has always emphasised ‘self-actualisation’ (in our own context and with our own language) in his many Royal addresses: “It is not just enough to love our country but to love our country intelligently”<sup>4</sup>... “For what we lack in numbers, we must make up in talent...”<sup>5</sup> and “What we need is not a leader to lead the masses -- we need leadership of the Self”.<sup>6</sup>

So how do we go about initiating efforts toward our homegrown version of self-actualisation? On an individual level, we need youth who understand and accept that the journey to self-actualisation must begin with the self. On the societal level, we need a culture of mentorship so that the journey towards self-realisation can be achieved skillfully, organically and expediently.

## Taking Individual Responsibility

As introduced earlier, the current bar for responsibility rests, not on maximising potentials and raised expectations, but rather on how our youths are “not engaged in drugs, gangs and in prison”. Even if we ask the youth themselves, their answers constitute all the reasons how the support and opportunities elsewhere are so much more enabling than here. Such a discussion would be acceptable if it becomes the starting point for action by appropriating what works elsewhere, but most times it remains a convenient justification to take a defeatist stand coated with self-victimisation and pity.

On the contrary, youth today have access to information and resources unimaginable just a decade ago to the older generation. While nothing is without its challenges, the options available now for self-education, and avenues to fulfill one’s curiosity on almost any subject, are enormous. Youth who have taken notice of this unprecedented advantage are moving

<sup>4</sup> Wangchuck, H.M. the Fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel, Transcript of speech delivered at National Graduates Orientation Programme, 2012. <https://thebhutanese.bt/his-majestys-address-at-the-national-graduates-orientation-program/>

<sup>5</sup> Wangchuck, H.M. the Fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel, Transcript of speech delivered at 14th RUB Convocation, May 24, 2019.

<https://www.rub.edu.bt/index.php/en/the-university/chancellor1/588-his-majesty-the-king-s-address-at-the-14th-rub-convocation-24-may-2019>

<sup>6</sup> Wangchuck, H.M. the Fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel, Transcript of speech delivered at Calcutta University Convocation, October 5, 2010. <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=1436>

away from complaints of “the system not providing”, to self-education and skilling. In short, they are taking their lives into their own hands.

Likewise, culturally we remain surrounded by great stories of individuals like Milarepa who underwent unthinkable hardships and a great many obstacles to become self-actualised. Even his master, Marpa, spent great fortunes and underwent formidable trials and tribulations on his journey of self-actualisation.

Why is it that such inspiring stories which we remain surrounded by, are somehow not taking root in our attitudes and worldview? Globally, the need for self-initiative in achieving self-actualisation has also been discussed and researched extensively with Malcolm Gladwell’s popular “10,000-hour rule” to master a skill in his book *Outliers* (2008).

Not only as youth but even as a culture, we need to move away from the defeatist attitude we adopt towards life, prostituting karma (fate) for our own justification and instead, emphasise freedom and the change that becomes possible with action and effort.

### **Cultivating Mentorship Collectively**

While youth need to begin from themselves and constantly ask themselves, “What can I be, that I must strive to become?” they are bound to come across challenges, obstacles, and even run out of “fuel”. This is where a culture of mentorship would be that trampoline from which they bounce back up.

We often hear adults remark about how the youth of today are not resilient. These very adults can play a role in changing that. Most often, youths do not know what they do not know, and this continues to trap them in their habitual way of thinking and viewing the world. However, such a seemingly fated state of their lives can be pried open with exposure to mentors from whom they can see the world differently, as well as be provided with options to make incremental efforts towards self-actualisation. After all, education is the great equaliser and the means to escape one’s hereditary social condition.

Contrary to popular belief that mentorship is only of benefit to the mentee, a culture of mentorship is a two-way street. In our spiritual tradition, it is the master-disciple relationship that has ensured that the legacy of past self-actualised beings has been preserved through time and changing contexts. This ensures that the wheel of self-actualisation does not have to be re-invented every single time through trial-and-error, but that each mentor passes his/her wisdom to the next generation so that progressive jumps can be made.

Such a benefit has also been researched extensively elsewhere with remarkable outcomes for mentees: 46 percent reduction in drug use, 50 percent increase in school attendance and 33 percent reduction in violent behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, a popular longitudinal study from Harvard that tracked 700+ men, starting from 1938, revealed that those adults who were engaged in investing in, caring for, and developing the next generation, were “three times as likely to be happy” than those who did not.<sup>8</sup> In a country that prioritises GNH, such a study ought to be taken seriously and translated into action.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jean Baldwin Grossman, Joseph P. Tierney, and Nancy Resch, “Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters (Re-issue of 1995 Study),” (September 2000), <https://www.issuelab.org/resource/making-a-difference-an-impact-study-of-big-brothers-big-sisters-re-issue-of-1995-study.html>

<sup>8</sup> George E. Vaillant and Kenneth Mukamal, “Successful Aging,” *Am J Psychiatry* 2001, (June 2001): 158-6, <https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org/publications>