

Mindful Policies in Bhutan: Reclaiming Meaning in the 21st Century

Tshering Gyeltshen¹

Introduction

Recently, a traditional yet contemporary concept known as “Mindfulness” has gained popularity in the Western world. Within psychological studies, “Mindfulness” remains the most discussed topic as a clinical practice on mental health (Ji, 2023). However, the practice of mindfulness has long been there, core to practices in Buddhist cultures.

Apparently, “Mindfulness” is an English translation of the Sanskrit word *smṛti*, or Pāli word *sati*, which refers to the idea of remembering the goals of a practice based on the previous memory or learning (Gethin, 2011). The Westernisation of the concept has led to the refashioning of mindfulness that was designed to appeal to secular-minded people in search of ways to improve their lives (Kirmayer, 2015).

In Bhutan, the practice — once rooted in spiritual and monastic traditions — has now been translated into a number of secular public domains. A prominent example is the 2010 education reform under the theme “Educating for Gross National Happiness”, where mindfulness practices, such as guided meditation, were institutionalised in schools to foster emotional regulation, empathy and holistic student well-being (Tshering, 2021).

This trajectory of its usage culminated in the announcement of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) on December 17, 2023, by His Majesty The King during the 116th National Day celebrations. Since then, the development of the GMC initiative has spurred a widespread and enthusiastic adoption of the term “mindfulness” across various institutional and policy narratives, often extending beyond its original philosophical context.

¹ Tshering Gyeltshen is a Communications Officer at the Prime Minister’s Office.

As the term gains traction across policy domains, questions emerge: Is mindfulness still grounded in its ethical and cultural origins, or has it become a diluted policy catchphrase?

Similarly, such widespread adoption of the term raises important questions. What do policy-makers mean by “mindful”? How consistently is it applied? Has it retained its cultural and spiritual depth, or has it become a mantra for aspirational policymakers?

Therefore, its integration into modern governance frameworks demands a deliberate effort to define its principles, purpose and application in public policy. This paper seeks to develop a grounded understanding of mindful policies that is culturally resonant, ethically robust, and practically relevant.

Philosophical and Cultural Foundations

In the Bhutanese context, the concept of mindfulness is guided by the Buddhist philosophical ideal of *lhag pa'i bsam pa* (ལྷག་པའི་བསམ་པ་), meaning noble intention or, simply, altruism (Jackson, 2024).

In modern times, it is grounded in the more refined idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH) that is relevant today. In it, the focus on holistic well-being and good governance is particularly apt, where emotional balance, compassion and ethical decision-making are emphasised as core values of leadership and policymaking (Monaco, 2016).

Therefore, the framework of GNH enables the operation of mindfulness in a cross-cutting principle across policy planning and public service, instead of viewing it as an isolated concept.

Bhutan's historical governance has been derived from Buddhist principles, especially from the concept of Dharma as a guiding moral order. This can be illustrated by the legend of *Mangpoi Kurwai Gyalpo* (The King Chosen by the People), found in Bhutanese legal philosophy and rooted in the *Agganna Sutta*.

This pre-Buddhist concept illustrates the emergence of leadership through public consent, to restore justice and order, and underlines that legitimate

governance must be anchored in ethical conduct and the collective welfare of society, not divine right or authoritarian rule (Dubgyur, 2022).

Although the idea of Bhutan's mindfulness is fundamentally anchored in Buddhist principles, global re-interpretations, especially in the West, has largely secularised the concept. In other words, its meaning is stripped of its spiritual foundations and is now popularly promoted as a means for stress reduction, productivity and emotional regulation, especially in corporate and clinical settings.

It is often promulgated as "McMindfulness", first coined by Purser (2019), which simply meant the hijacking of the teaching of Buddhist principles on mindfulness by capitalism. This contrast raises a serious question on how Bhutan can adopt mindfulness without actually diluting the ethical foundations embedded in its culture.

Defining "Mindful Policy"

If it is drawn from the Bhutanese policy traditions and review exercises, a mindful policy may be understood as one that is not only ethically and culturally grounded, but one that is systematically designed to further holistic well-being.

The Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (2025) defines a public policy in Bhutan as "a set of principles that outline the government's approach toward a particular issue or set of issues that are of national concern, and having cross-sectoral externalities... providing a framework within which specific actions can be taken".

In this sense, mindful policies can be further contextualised by anchoring in GNH principles. Mindful policies are drafted and systematically evaluated to ensure that policies are aligned with the holistic philosophy of GNH; in other words, balancing economic growth with social well-being, cultural integrity, and environmental sustainability that distinguishes Bhutan's policy framework from conventional models.

The GNH Policy Screening Tool provides a structured mechanism for assessing policy proposals against the four pillars and their associated

domains, making sure that no policy advances at the expense of broader societal goals (Ura et al., 2012).

Additionally, embedding ethical and cultural values can reiterate mindfulness in a policy domain. It should be noted that ethical mindfulness in policy should not be left to rhetoric or good intentions, but must actively operationalise communal values, such as compassion, equity, community vitality and respect for human dignity. These values are embedded through explicit criteria in the GNH Screening Tool.

This perspective aims to institutionalise ethical decision-making, thus incorporating it as an integral part of the entire policy cycle, which involves agenda-setting to implementation and review (RIGSS, 2025; Ura et al., 2012).

Moreover, a mindful policy process is participatory by design. That is to say, Bhutan's experience narrates inclusive governance and early stakeholder consultations that are essential for shaping well-being-focused policies (Balogun & Weru, 2023).

In this regard, inclusive engagement of citizens, experts, local communities and marginalised groups must be guaranteed in order to be meaningfully involved in shaping policies that directly or indirectly affect them.

On the other hand, mindful policymaking should be adaptive, reflective and coherent. In effect, policies are subject to continuous learning and improvement, which requires reviewing what has worked in the past ("look back"), anticipating and adapting to new challenges ("look ahead"), and ensuring coherence with existing laws and strategies to avoid duplication, fragmentation or proliferation, so as to remain responsive to evolving needs, while staying anchored in national values and long-term vision.

Therefore, a working definition could be proposed:

"A mindful policy is a set of principles and actions, systematically developed and screened for holistic impact, that embodies (Bhutanese) ethical values, and is intentionally aligned with the collective well-being as envisioned in Gross National Happiness."

Core Attributes of Mindful Policies

Mindful policies are not a static prescription but a dynamic approach for governance, which is shaped by the interaction between tradition and modernity. Apart from relying solely on technical checklists or assessments, this policy approach seeks to incorporate values of purpose, presence and non-judgement in every stage of policy-making (Naik et al., 2013).

Therefore, the following components are proposed as the core attributes of mindful policies. These features do not function in isolation; rather, they interact dynamically to ensure that public policies are not only culturally rooted and ethically robust, but also practically responsive to evolving national needs.

a) *Ethical Awareness*

Mindfulness is linked to ethical attitudinal attributes such that the policies are grounded in compassion, integrity and moral responsibility toward the collective good (Özdemir & Turgut, 2017). Shapiro, Jazaieri, and Goldin (2012) point out that mindfulness can promote individuals to embrace a more objective point of view than a subjective one.

b) *Holistic Vision*

Unlike narrow policy approaches that prioritise economic growth in isolation, holistic policy design ensures that development is sustainable, culturally coherent, socially inclusive and environmentally conscious. Costanza et al. (2016) argue that “well-being economies” must go beyond GDP to include health, social cohesion, environmental integrity and cultural vitality in their evaluative metrics. Similarly, mindfulness practices, as applied in governance, encourage systems thinking which is aware of how policies impact and are impacted by multiple spheres simultaneously (Naik et al., 2013).

c) *Cultural Resonance*

In the Bhutanese policy context, cultural resonance is not merely symbolic but foundational to the legitimacy and sustainability of public governance. Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009) contend that culturally resonant policies enhance policy acceptance and effectiveness, particularly in deeply rooted traditional societies. It must be noted that cultural resonance serves as both

a source of normative guidance and a practical strategy to deepen policy impact and societal engagement.

d) Inclusive Participation

What defines a mindful policy is the nature of its inclusivity in an era of a democratic governance. International policy literature supports this view, noting that inclusive engagement fosters greater legitimacy, trust and responsiveness in governance (Fung, 2006; Cornwall, 2008). Moreover, inclusive processes are linked to more context-sensitive and adaptive policies, as stakeholders bring lived experiences and local knowledge into policy formulation (Chambers, 1997).

e) Policy Coherence

Most importantly, coherence, in Bhutan's current policy landscape, is a foundational attribute of mindful policy-making. To put it differently, it carries a paramount substance in ensuring that various policies are harmonised across sectors and levels of governance, which, if left unmonitored, risks undermining service delivery and wasting limited resources (Lee, 2025; United Nations, 2018). In Bhutan's case, ensuring vertical coherence (between central and local governments), horizontal coherence (among ministries), and internal coherence (within specific sectors) is essential to mitigate redundancy and reinforce unified national priorities (Mortelmans et al., 2022).

Toward a Mindful Policy Framework

All in all, the operation of mindful policy in Bhutan requires more than rhetorical commitment; it requires practical tools and systemic approaches that embed ethical and cultural values into the full policy cycle. Considering Bhutan's governance ethos is rooted in the GNH and Buddhist philosophy, a mindful policy framework must further integrate instruments that promote ethical awareness, cultural coherence, participatory engagement and reflexivity.

For instance, instruments such as the GNH Policy Screening Tool may be expanded and refined to assess not only impacts across GNH domains, but also the ethical implications of policy choices to institutionalise

mindfulness in policymaking. This includes evaluating compassion, equity, interdependence, and harm reduction in design process and implementation.

Further, structured spaces are needed for citizen deliberation, which allow diverse stakeholders, especially those often excluded or marginalised, to voice concerns and shape policies from the ground up. This enables a democratic legitimacy, and enhances collective intelligence in governance (Dryzek, 2000).

Additionally, embedding cultural scholars, monastics, ethicists and local leaders in review committees can ensure that policies reflect Bhutanese values, indigenous knowledge systems, and spiritual perspectives that can counterbalance technocratic decision-making.

Lastly, instruments that map and align sectoral policies with national priorities and values can prevent policy fragmentation and reinforce inter-ministerial and -sectoral collaboration.

Conclusion

As Bhutan navigates the complexities of modern governance, the concept of mindfulness must be more than a rhetorical flaunt. This paper has argued that “mindful policy” in Bhutan must draw from its deep cultural roots, particularly the ethos of GNH, while responding meaningfully to the challenges of a contemporary society.

Reclaiming mindfulness as a serious policy principle that is harboured in ethical awareness, cultural integrity, inclusive engagement and systemic coherence, makes sure that it remains a transformative force rather than a diluted buzzword. In doing so, Bhutan can set a global example of governance that is not only efficient and innovative but also deeply humane and spiritually grounded.

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