Mindfulness in Bhutanese Society and Governance – People's Perceptions

Siok Sian Pek-Dorji[1]

More than a trend

Mindfulness has become a global catchphrase perpetuated by a feel-good industry skilfully crafted by branding experts, the advertising industry, and media. This contrasts sharply with the understanding of mindfulness in Bhutan, which has been deeply influenced by the values of spiritual practices for centuries.

Mindfulness can be interpreted as an understanding or awareness of life through meditation and other practices. It is also about making a more conscious effort to understand our role in a community, where governance and human relations still matter to people living in harmony with nature.

Mindfulness is part of daily discourse in Bhutan. It is practised in schools and educational institutions, in the civil service through a well-being programme, and through new-age yoga and healing practices (health) that is becoming popular.

And now, the development of the Gelephu Mindfulness City is integrating mindfulness into developing infrastructure, into design, into the governance and economy of a new city. This is Bhutan's attempt at crafting a future – while the world is tackling the pressures of living in what the UN terms as a "polycrisis" - battling climate change, post-COVID economic challenges, democratic decline, regional conflicts, and war.

In such disruptive times, there is a need to explore more deeply and to ask what people can do, at individual and collective levels. It is time to investigate the meaning of a more mindful governance, and a mindful society that can inspire people to strive and work for a better world.

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1 Siok Sian Pek-Dorji is advisor to the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy and member of The Druk Journal editorial board.

Mindfulness and the Dharma

While mindfulness is marketed as a self-help tool in global contexts, Bhutan's initial integration of mindfulness into governance and society—rooted in Buddhist dharma principles of compassion and social engagement—offers a transformative model to address contemporary challenges.

Dharma teachers remind us that mindfulness is more than merely finding peace and calmness within oneself. One can use a more mindful approach to explore, reflect and investigate, and to find more effective and suitable solutions to the many gaps and needs in the governance of society.

Buddhist practice emphasises the development of wisdom and compassion to enable people to take civic action, and to serve and benefit others. Other foundational practices, such as Bhutan's development vision of Gross National Happiness, prioritise collective well-being over individual benefit. Good governance is integral to the vision of GNH which fosters an environment suited to the adoption of greater mindfulness and spiritual practices.

Governance and Society

Academic discourse on governance rarely mentions mindfulness, but Buddhist teachers have long connected mindfulness to society. Its holistic approach makes us think more deeply about matters of society and current global challenges, and even try to address them.

Most mindfulness programmes focus on personal peace and stress reduction, helping people become more effective, productive and capable at work and in daily life. But Buddhist teachings emphasise serving humanity, nature and the environment. This has led to what is termed as "engaged" Buddhism.

This article explores how people perceive and understand mindfulness and its role in governance and society. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 14 persons from multiple sectors (civil service, educators, civil society representatives, legal professionals, entrepreneurs, economists, an MP and an artist), providing perspectives on how mindfulness applies across different domains of society. They share how mindful practices can reduce

gaps, strengthen government services, and improve the governance system in Bhutan.

Mindful Social Engagement

Dharma and mindfulness directly impact society and politics. "Engaged Buddhism" emerged in the late 1980s with Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh who developed the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings (1966). He believed that Buddhist communities should "take a clear stand against oppression and injustice... without taking sides in a conflict." Politicians can approach work as spiritual practice, as he pointed out: "A mindful politician can act according to conscience and independent insight. He's capable of voting mindfully, even against his own party." (Thich Nhat Hanh, Good Citizens, 2012)

Thai activist and professor, Sulak Sivaraksa, advocates socially engaged Buddhism: "If Buddhism is only meditation without understanding social and environmental suffering, it's escapism." He notes that leaders of most societies are "confused and engrossed in greed, hatred, and delusion. They are like the blind leading the blind. If they do not have peace of mind, how can they lead others?" (Sulak Sivaraksa, What is Engaged Buddhism?, 2020)

American professor Jon Kabat-Zinn, who popularised Western mindfulness for stress reduction, describes meditation not just as a practice to get rid of stress but "a radical act of sanity" for responding in action to global needs with wisdom and compassion. (https://www.upaya.org/video/ poly-crisis/).

In the United Kingdom, members of an All-Party Parliamentary group (a technical group in the UK Parliament) underwent a mindfulness training programme during the period 2015-2017. Politicians report finding "a new way to approach political discourse, and a corresponding enthusiasm for policy that tackles society's problems at the level of the human heart and mind."

Spiritual teacher Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche said at Bhutan's Innovation Forum in October 2024: "I don't know whether there is any phenomenon about mind that is mutually agreed between West and East, or between scientists and Buddhists, but mindfulness is not really a need. It is not

really an end, it's not really the goal for Buddhism. It is a means." (BBS channel 2, Bhutan Innovation Forum)

The means is being used today to focus on alleviating stress or to become more productive, but its wider possibility of inspiring people to become more consciously and socially engaged is limited. There is a conflict between adopting spiritual means, often associated with being religious, and maintaining secularism in governance systems that is equated with being neutral and open to diversity. It is this secular consciousness that has made mindfulness programmes so popular today.

Buddhist-inspired practitioners worldwide link mindfulness to societal demands - clarity gained through meditation practice enables them to generate wisdom and compassion to act for social well-being. Spiritual teachings, therefore, ground socially conscious citizens and leaders, contributing to mindful governance.

In Bhutan, dharma-inspired organisations include Lhomon Education, whose activities include teacher meditation training, Jangsa Animal Saving Trust promoting animal welfare, and Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative that supports participatory development and GNH-based education. These are just a few organisations that represent socially engaged Buddhism in action.

Qualitative Interviews - People's Perceptions

The following section shares perspectives of a broad section of Bhutanese society on mindfulness, including those engaged in governance. Each respondent used the lens of mindfulness to examine Bhutan and areas they believe need more attention to improve governance and society. Their comments showcase how mindfulness principles can be operationalised within policy domains.

Respondents in 14 qualitative interviews agree that mindfulness is a concept relevant to modern day society. They note that the framing and consequences of policies should be more mindfully conducted in Bhutan.

Most interviewees were familiar with the underpinnings of Buddhist principles in mindfulness, and nearly a quarter of them were involved in the Search-Inside-Yourself mindfulness programme activity for civil

servants and teachers. Several respondents requested anonymity, mindful of potential repercussions in a small society if they are misconceived as being "negative" comments. All public officials were speaking in their own personal capacity.

A college president, Lopon Lungtaen Gyatso, describes mindful governance as figuring out what is the most appropriate or effective way to bring about well-being in society. Hence mindfulness has a societal goal beyond individual stress reduction. (Personal communication, May 20th, 2025)

An economist defines mindfulness as applying "our minds thoroughly to something, going beyond superficial analysis for thoughtful appraisal policy decisions made and their consequences". He notes that people in Bhutan tend to be "very instinctual-like, without adequate reflection" especially in areas of governance. (Personal communication, May 28th, 2025)

Leadership and Governance

Mindful governance emphasises intention, awareness, and a more systemic understanding. It is regarded as policy-making and implementation that consciously incorporate long-term consequences, stakeholder impacts, and well-being metrics. Respondents say this is contrary to the practice of what they observe as "reactive governance" that focuses on immediate problems.

A public official regards mindful governance as including environmental impact, and "long-term sustainability… It is about looking far into the future". He notes that many agencies "focus on short-term gains because leaders want to show quick results". New leaders (in the governance arena) focus on their agenda, without reflecting on previous work or sustaining good initiatives. "Politicians have just five years and want to show short-term results." (Personal communication, May 19th, 2025)

Another public official highlights the need for discourse with experts to better understand the mindfulness Bhutan is seeking, especially for new cities. He says: "… mindful governance goes beyond nice policies. We have to be mindful of how we're implementing. We're failing at both policies and implementation… policies are not there to hinder people, but to facilitate." He identifies some failed policies and implementation in the

management of waste and urban water supply. (Personal communication, May 10th,, 2025)

Nedup Tshering, Director of Clean Bhutan, a civil society organisation, notes a need to review the purpose of policies: " the whole government system has to be overhauled to focus on understanding the needs of the people, not the needs of people in power. They should be very mindful about working for the people, as they're the ones who elected their representatives." (Personal communication, May 10th, 2025)

A civil servant says: "Culturally, Bhutanese leaders are associated with power, authority. But mindfulness makes one more humble and aware of others' needs, weaknesses and strengths. You become less draconian and more flexible." (Personal communication, May 11th, 2025)

On leadership, entrepreneur Sangay says: "There's a big gap in top leadership living up to mindful governance." However, he notes: " I do not necessarily judge leadership for doing all the things they do, because ground reality is that many citizens aren't ready for consultation—they don't know what they want. So leaders must make decisions for them." (Personal communication, May 27th, 2025)

Respondents believe that Bhutan could work towards a "spiritually insightful governance; that should be the backbone of our government".

Legal Perspective

Mindful governance also applies to the rule of law. Lawyer Kunzang, says: "It's not just Western concepts of due process and fairness, it's also compassion, empathy." She notes that "the law is purposefully ambiguous in some cases, because it cannot address every situation. So, you're supposed to use your judgement and discretion, even for judges, to apply to the facts of the situation. Sometimes, people are not mindful of the purpose of the law, and whether it is being fulfilled in how they interpret and apply it." (Personal communication, May 27th, 2025)

Law academy faculty member, Dema, links mindfulness to the exercise of compassionate responsibility: "It's not just about what decisions are

made, but how they are made, grounded in attentiveness to consequences, inclusiveness and well-being of people, and future generations."

Dema points out that marginalised groups - children, women and people with disability - need more mindful attention. "In the legal landscape, when they (the marginalised groups) go to court or seek legal aid, they're not normally taken seriously… Both offenders, or the so-called victims, are in a disadvantaged situation; this is when mindfulness (is needed)." (Personal communication, May 28th, 2025)

A mindful framework could strengthen restorative justice by enabling judges and police officers, for example, to engage in contemplative decision-making processes that prioritise rehabilitation and community health over punitive measures and sentencing. Some work has already begun in Bhutan.

Business and Enterprise

The Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) represents "deep level, mindful thinking",according to an economist who calls it "a positive example of being mindful about the impact of decisions on people's lives, the nation, and the future economy." However, he warns that the original intent could be compromised in the "busyness of implementation", so mindfulness applies during implementation of policies and decisions as well. (Personal Communication, May 27th, 2025)

On material wealth versus spiritual values, the economist notes: " Ethics is important in business. … Honesty is always, in the long run, the best policy. If you do things ethically, there's nothing wrong in acquiring some measure of material well-being."

He distinguishes between macro and micro economics: "The larger economy — the corporate sector — is doing reasonably well. GDP shows that Bhutan is not in a recession. But the people's economy — tourism, shops, trade, construction — suffers from lack of funds, and other issues. We need to be mindful about these areas."

An investor calls attention to mindful planning. He observes that some young entrepreneurs go into business without studying market dynamics. Some failures have resulted from a lack of research.

Another civil society member highlights alcohol consumption and mindful business: "The whole country will be in rehabilitation if we continue to consume alcohol the way we do. Bhutan could be more mindful in regulating the sale of alcohol." (Personal communication, May 28th,)

Creating mindful business requires mindset shifts, starting from school. Entrepreneur Sangay, explains: " Students are not taught to take risks, and failure is not accepted in Bhutan. Schools can promote a sense of continuous learning and how to confront failure to nurture entrepreneurship". (Personal communication, May 26th,)

Society

Educator Carolyn Tshering observes a lack of mindfulness in society: "It's difficult to be mindful because there are problems. People littering, dropping matches that start forest fires, polluting rivers. There's that don't-care – 'It's not my problem'- attitude." She suggests encouraging students to develop community feeling through volunteer activities and community service, such as visiting hospitals, talking to and helping patients, reading to children and even helping in the home. (Personal communication, May 11th)

Schools can be more mindful about discipline and gender sensitivities. Examples cited include students going to counsellors who are themselves strict disciplinarians, and female students who face discomfort sharing with male mentors.

Educators recognise that mindfulness practices "foster emotional intelligence, attention and compassion" and "reframe success to include inner well-being and life skills, and not just the test scores."

The Participation Paradox

Respondents consistently highlighted the importance of feedback and public participation for mindful policy development and decision-making. However, significant barriers prevent meaningful engagement between governance and society.

Entrepreneur Sangay notes cultural tendencies that inhibit open participation in governance matters: "There is no feedback loop or mechanism. We often haven't done a consultative process to implement something or to frame something. To some extent, as a young Bhutanese, I would still accept that, because stakeholder engagement in Bhutan doesn't work. For example, people will not answer surveys. And if they do, they don't think before answering." (Personal communication, May 26th, 2025)

This creates a problematic cycle where " sometimes…leaders come and start imposing things. But without feedback you cannot be mindful because you cannot introspect." Public officials and economists acknowledge this challenge and consider opinions from the private sector and people outside the civil service as being vital.

An official notes: "More openness is necessary here on governance matters. One issue that people bring up is the many restrictions. Once we see a small problem, we try to come up with rules that restrict a lot of things."

A senior bureaucrat and former MP, Tashi Wangmo, observes: "In this day and age, we cannot be top-down, authoritarian or autocratic. Now is an era of co-creation, as society is much flatter (level playing field). People want to be included. I try to be mindful that they (colleagues) feel their views are being considered, that they're being respected, but at the same time, sending out a message that they need to carry out their duties." (Personal communication, June 24th, 2025)

There are cultural and social challenges as people accustomed to quick fixes may view mindful decision-making as governmental delay or indecision. People and leaders often want immediate action while extended, more mindful, deliberations could take time.

Another concern is that the world is much more secular today, including Bhutan. In societies with strong separation of religion and state, mindfulness practices with spiritual values might be perceived as introducing religious elements into governance, creating discomfort or even political obstacles.

The Dharma Disconnect

The research interviews reveal a gap between Bhutan's Buddhist foundations and contemporary practice of mindfulness. High school headmistress, Jigme Choden, notes that mindfulness and the dharma complement one another: " When the modern education system came in, there was no connection with dharma. Except for prayers and then some of the Dzongkha texts, they couldn't understand the value of Buddhism and spirituality. Once people understand mindfulness, they would better understand their environment." (Personal communication, May 9th, 2025)

While secular mindfulness training gains traction, traditional dharma teachings struggle to connect with modern governance needs. Lopon Lungtaen observes that external mindfulness approaches "seem to be packaged better for Bhutanese", despite mind-training being central to Buddhist practice.

Civil servant Namgay articulates this disconnect: "We're in the land of Dharma, we do all these chokos, rimdros, blessings, offerings. I sometimes think that we don't understand our practices. We miss the essence and are more into the rituals. The essence of dharma, Chö, itself is to tame and correct the mind, improve the mind. But we hardly focus on that."

Entrepreneur Sonam advocates for a return to Buddhist principles in governance and economics: "Being practicing Buddhists, we should be non-materialistic. Think from that perspective, and say that there is enough for everyone. We should not be thinking about the American concept of business—money, liberal capitalism. Since capitalism began decades ago we've been running around in a rat race. We should stop that rat race and be more conscious about why we do what we are doing." (Personal communication, May 28th, 2025)

The Path Forward

Old solutions are inadequate today – mindfulness techniques can help government and citizens to move beyond utilitarian market goals and encompass broader societal needs. Harnessing mindfulness with Buddhist values can be a systematic approach to governance that prioritises awareness, motivation or intention, and conscious decision-making processes

for society's well-being. Bhutan could create leadership development programmes that combine dharma teachings with modern governance skills.

This approach enables society to carry out an honest, conscious examination of what works in governance and society, and what requires improvement. It creates spaces for genuine dialogue and feedback in a non-judgemental manner and helps to develop flexible and healthy awareness to deal with a rapidly changing world.

Bhutan has a unique opportunity to model a development approach that prioritises inner transformation alongside external, material progress — just as GNH promises societal well-being beyond economic progress.

Realising this potential requires continued deliberation, reflection and investigation. It also requires the willingness to practice what Bhutan already knows intuitively - that true progress comes from training and improving the mind not just for oneself, but in the service of society and all living beings.

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