

Mindfulness and Modern Nationhood: The Bhutanese Approach to Governance and Social Harmony

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Abstract

Bhutan has long distinguished itself by aligning national development with spiritual and ethical values, notably through its unique governance framework guided by Gross National Happiness (GNH). Central to this approach is the integration of mindfulness, derived from Bhutan's rich Buddhist heritage, into both statecraft and everyday civic life. This paper explores how mindfulness, as a cultural and philosophical practice, shapes governance strategies, policy-making, and social behavior in Bhutan. Drawing from official policy documents, published interviews, and academic analyses, the study examines how mindfulness contributes to ethical leadership, public trust, and community cohesion. It also assesses recent developments such as the Gelephu Mindfulness City initiative and its role in redefining urban planning through spiritual principles. The paper argues that Bhutan offers a model of "mindful modernity," where contemplative traditions reinforce rather than hinder democratic progress and state functioning. This model challenges dominant paradigms of development by emphasising inner transformation alongside structural change. Ultimately, the research highlights the potential of mindfulness-informed governance to foster a harmonious, participatory, and resilient society in the face of globalisation and modernisation pressures. The findings contribute to a growing field of contemplative social science, offering Bhutan's experience as both context-specific and globally relevant.

Keywords: Bhutan, mindfulness, governance, Gross National Happiness, Buddhist philosophy, social harmony

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Introduction

Nestled in the Eastern Himalayas, Bhutan is often portrayed as a peaceful kingdom guided by spiritual traditions and ecological wisdom. Yet beneath this surface lies a profound political philosophy that integrates ancient Buddhist values with modern governance — a synthesis exemplified in the country's pursuit of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

Central to this national vision is mindfulness, a deeply rooted contemplative practice originating from the Buddhist principle of *sati*, or moment-to-moment awareness. In Bhutan, mindfulness transcends its spiritual origins to inform public institutions, leadership ethics, civic life, and national development strategies.

As global societies increasingly turn to mindfulness as a tool for mental health and productivity, Bhutan offers a distinct model, wherein mindfulness is not commodified or detached from ethics, but structurally embedded within public policy and social life.

This raises a critical question: How does mindfulness, as practiced and institutionalised in Bhutan, shape both governance and societal harmony?

This paper investigates how mindfulness is not merely a private spiritual discipline in Bhutan, but a public ethic that influences statecraft and civic behaviour. By tracing the philosophical foundations of Bhutanese mindfulness, its manifestations in governance frameworks, and its expression in urban planning and community initiatives, this study argues that Bhutan exemplifies a form of mindful nationhood where internal awareness supports external development.

Through analysis of policy documents, academic literature, interviews and case studies, such as the Gelephu Mindfulness City project, the paper illustrates how Bhutan operationalises spiritual wisdom in policy-making and public service. In doing so, it contributes to emerging scholarship in contemplative social science and ethical governance.

Ultimately, the Bhutanese example challenges dominant global development paradigms by proposing an alternative, rooted not in economic materialism

but in mental clarity, ethical leadership and communal compassion (Ura, 2012, p. 29; Thinley, 2015, p. 45).

Philosophical Foundations of Mindfulness in Bhutan

The philosophical roots of mindfulness in Bhutan are grounded in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, which have shaped the country's cultural and political identity for centuries. The Buddhist principle of *sati*, or mindful awareness, is central to spiritual practice and daily conduct.

In Bhutanese thought, mindfulness (*dran pa*) is not merely about inward reflection but involves ethical presence, relational awareness, and social responsibility (Dorji, L., 2020, p. 11).

The integration of mindfulness into Bhutanese governance began with the recognition of inter-connectedness between personal discipline and collective well-being. The fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, introduced Gross National Happiness in the 1970s as a guiding principle for national development.

Rather than measuring success through GDP (Gross Domestic Product), GNH emphasised balance between material progress and spiritual fulfillment (Ura, 2012, p. 35). Mindfulness became an implicit value underlying the GNH framework, encouraging leaders and citizens to act with awareness, compassion and moral clarity.

The spiritual lineage of Bhutan, including monastic institutions and lay teachers, has historically reinforced this mindful worldview. Public rituals, community festivals and meditation retreats have kept the ethic of mindful living alive, even as Bhutan has modernised. Thus, mindfulness in Bhutan is not a new concept imported for wellness or performance enhancement; it is a cultural constant that influences how citizens relate to one another and to the State (Phuntsho, 2013, p. 204).

By foregrounding ethical consciousness and mental clarity, Bhutanese Buddhism provides a philosophical foundation for what may be termed “contemplative governance”. Mindfulness becomes both a personal discipline and a civic virtue, a mechanism through which leaders and citizens engage with the world responsibly and reflectively.

Mindfulness in Governance and Public Policy

Bhutan's governance system integrates mindfulness into its core functions, reflecting the influence of Buddhist ethics on institutional behaviour and leadership training. Public servants and political leaders are expected to model self-discipline, compassion and awareness in decision-making — qualities deeply tied to mindfulness practices.

The Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS), for instance, incorporates meditation sessions and ethical reflections into its leadership development programmes (RIGSS, 2019, p. 17).

Mindfulness also informs the structure of the GNH policy framework, which lists nine domains, including psychological well-being, time use and good governance. Policy makers are required to consider the holistic impact of legislation, prompting reflection on how policies affect both inner and outer dimensions of well-being (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2017, p. 88).

This reflective policy design promotes empathetic governance, and encourages decisions aligned with long-term societal harmony.

Education policy is another domain where mindfulness has a structural role. Bhutan's education system includes value-based education, encouraging students to cultivate emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning and mindful awareness. Mindfulness sessions and contemplative classroom practices are being piloted in schools to foster emotional regulation and social connection (Wangmo & Tobgay, 2021, p. 63).

Even parliamentary deliberations and civil service procedures reflect mindfulness principles. Decision-making is often preceded by moments of silence or prayer, emphasising pause, clarity and humility.

The influence of mindfulness thus extends beyond rhetoric into the rhythms and rituals of governance, where reflection precedes action and collective good is prioritised over expediency.

Mindfulness in Urban and Social Design: The Case of Gelephu Mindfulness City

The Gelephu Mindfulness City initiative, launched under the vision of His Majesty The King, represents a bold experiment in urban planning, grounded in contemplative values. Envisioned as a spiritual and economic hub in southern Bhutan, Gelephu seeks to integrate mindfulness into the very design of the city — from architectural aesthetics to the lived social environment (Dorji, T. 2024, p. 12).

Planned as a space that nurtures inner peace and communal well-being, the city includes meditation parks, spiritual centres, and contemplative walkways that encourage slow, reflective movement. The layout emphasises harmony with nature, clean energy, and human-centric design that aligns with Buddhist values of non-harm and inter-connectedness.

What distinguishes Gelephu is its ambition to infuse mindfulness not only into private spiritual spaces but also into public infrastructure, education and economic activity. Social planning incorporates mindfulness training in schools, community centres, and even business ethics curricula. This ensures that mindfulness is not an elite practice but a civic culture.

The Gelephu project challenges conventional notions of modernity by proposing an alternative form of development — one where architecture, governance and everyday life are orchestrated to foster contemplative awareness. As a national pilot, Gelephu serves as a blueprint for future Bhutanese cities, and potentially for global mindfulness-based urban innovation.

Mindfulness in Civic Life and Social Harmony

In Bhutan, mindfulness extends beyond governance into the fabric of civic life, shaping how citizens interact, resolve conflict, and contribute to national harmony. Mindfulness is embedded in community rituals, local governance practices, and educational systems that encourage reflection and ethical responsibility.

Public discourse in Bhutan is notably civil and introspective. Platforms such as *The Druk Journal* offer citizens a space to engage in mindful debate

on national issues. These discussions are guided not by confrontation but by mutual respect, listening, and shared concern for the national good (Penjore, 2018, p. 77). This orientation toward respectful dialogue is partly attributed to cultural values reinforced through mindful practices.

Mindfulness is also visible in the way Bhutanese media operate. Journalists are trained to prioritise truthfulness, compassion and societal well-being in their reporting, a stark contrast to adversarial media models elsewhere. Mindful journalism encourages narrative-building over sensationalism, and emphasises understanding rather than judgement (Rinzin, 2021, p. 103).

In schools and public health programmes, mindfulness is cultivated as a preventative and developmental tool. Students practice guided meditation; community health workers use mindfulness-based stress reduction to promote emotional resilience. These grassroots practices help cultivate social trust, reduce aggression, and promote cooperative behaviours.

As a result, Bhutanese society enjoys relatively low levels of violent crime and high levels of civic participation — indicators of a culture where mindfulness is not peripheral but central to public life.

Comparative Insights and Global Relevance

Globally, mindfulness has gained popularity as a tool for individual well-being, especially in education, mental health and corporate settings. However, in many contexts, mindfulness has been secularised and commercialised, often stripped of its ethical and communal dimensions.

Bhutan's approach offers a critical counterpoint, demonstrating how mindfulness can be culturally integrated into governance without losing its ethical grounding (Kabat-Zinn, 2016, p. 9).

While Western models emphasise mindfulness for productivity or stress reduction, Bhutan prioritises mindfulness as a civic ethic and governance principle. This difference is crucial. In Bhutan, mindfulness is not an intervention but a worldview that shapes institutions, urban planning and policy discourse (Goleman & Davidson, 2017, p. 72).

Other countries experimenting with mindfulness-based governance, such as New Zealand, or select municipalities in the United States, could learn from Bhutan's holistic model. However, Bhutan's success stems from its deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions — a context that may be difficult to replicate.

Nonetheless, Bhutan provides a powerful case study in what might be termed “contemplative democracy” — an approach that harmonises inner transformation with public service, and individual mindfulness with collective well-being. As global crises intensify, Bhutan's mindful nationhood offers both inspiration and insight into alternative futures for democratic governance.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how mindfulness, deeply rooted in Bhutanese Buddhist traditions, informs and transforms governance and civic life in Bhutan. Far from being a private spiritual pursuit, mindfulness in Bhutan functions as a public ethic that shapes leadership behaviour, policy development, urban planning, education, and community engagement.

From the structural application of Gross National Happiness principles to the visionary Gelephu Mindfulness City initiative, Bhutan demonstrates that spiritual values can meaningfully inform modern governance. By embedding mindfulness in the very rhythms of civic life, Bhutan fosters a society that is not only efficient but compassionate, reflective and resilient.

In contrast to global trends where mindfulness is commodified, Bhutan's experience shows that when mindfulness remains tethered to ethics, culture and collective good, it can be a transformative force in nation-building. As the world grapples with ecological, psychological and political turbulence, Bhutan offers a unique and timely model for integrating inner wisdom into public action.

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