



ENDPAPER BY KAREN GREENSPAN

One hundred monks rehearsing a cham (sacred dance)

PHOTOGRAPHS/MICHAEL DOTTARAR

# State-sponsored Happiness

Last November, citizens of the tiny Himalayan nation of Bhutan were in a frenzy preparing for the sixtieth birth anniversary of their previous king, His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo (Dragon King) Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who had reigned from 1972–2006. This wise, benevolent, and innovative leader brought Bhutan into the modern age by implementing such public policies as free public education, free healthcare services, well-planned business development, internet connectivity, and vigorous environmental protections. In an unparalleled move, he launched the drafting of a constitution and shifted the country to democracy. He then abdicated the throne to his eldest son, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. According to some, the king made this move because he did not want his son to be unexpectedly thrust into the role of leadership as he had been at age sixteen when his father died suddenly.

The Fourth Druk Gyalpo is probably most renowned, however, for introducing the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH)—the government policy that measures the growth and development of the country by the happiness and contentment of its people. At the core of the policy are four

priorities—equitable and sustainable development, protection of the environment, preservation and promotion of Bhutan's unique cultural heritage, and provision of good and responsive governance.

In honor of the king's birthday, the entire country observed three days of celebration from November 9–11. Because Bhutan is a Buddhist country, prayers and rituals were woven into the festivities. The Je Khenpo, High Abbot and spiritual leader of the country, wrote a special *zhabten*—a prayer for the long life of an individual composed by a senior spiritual figure whose power of speech is considered capable of turning word into reality. Other prayers and texts were to be recited

across the country in *dzongs* (fortresses), monasteries, temples, and seminaries. At Changlimithang Stadium in the capital city of Thimphu, one hundred monks rehearsed a special *cham* (sacred dance) called Zheng Zhi Pem that is a component of the Longevity Ritual. An elaborate ceremonial procession with military, monastic, and government officials, as well as an honor guard of one thousand army personnel, was presented three times to His Majesty.

Because the people of Bhutan are so happy—more than ninety-one percent of the population were scored as happy in a 2015 GNH sur-

vey, [www.grossnationalhappiness.com](http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com)—many of them wanted to participate in showing gratitude for His Majesty's leadership. The currency of gratitude in this land of happiness is dance. At The Royal Academy of Performing Arts, the artists rehearsed their own folk dance presentations inside the studio while, on the court outdoors, they directed a group of 138 bespectacled civil servants who showed up to learn and perform a dance for the king. Schools from all over the country prepared traditional folk dances, as did a group of senior citizens. When one of the queens—the king married four sisters during one ceremony—called for 108 (the number that makes up the complete prayer cycle for Buddhists) women to volunteer to perform a dance, 200 turned out. The Bhutanese had readied multiple venues throughout the capital for all the events and entertainers, including a group of hip-hop dancers. The release of thousands of colorful, biodegradable balloons and three cake-cutting ceremonies capped the celebrations.

My takeaway, after witnessing these events in November, is that a government's focus on the happiness of its people can be a powerful transformative force, an instrument for positive social change.

KAREN GREENSPAN, a New York City-based dance writer, researches and observes contemporary and traditional dance forms in the United States and abroad. A former professional dancer, she is a frequent contributor to *Natural History*. Most recently, she wrote about traditional and unscripted forms of dance in Myanmar in "A Romantic in Search of the Authentic" [10/2015].



Senior citizens performing a traditional folk dance