

## Bringing GNH to schools



5 December, 2009 - A class XI student in Thimphu, Dorji Tshomo Tshering, has been through this week reading up on gross national happiness (GNH) and the Bhutanese education system.

The 16-year-old science student is among the 28 Bhutanese participants and 25 international educators, who will take part in the six-day "Educating for GNH workshop" in Thimphu starting December 7.

Bhutanese and international participants will sit together to discuss very practically how GNH values can be brought into science, math, history, language and extra-curricular activities from pre-primary through post secondary education,

according to education officials.

"It's a very important workshop and I'm preparing myself on GNH values and principles," said Dorji Tshomo. "For me, GNH means inner peace and not just academic excellence. I hope that the participants are able to come up with a different method of assessing a student, not just through a stressful and competitive exam system.

I think a student shouldn't be pressurised to study and excel," she said.

The 25 international participants are educators, scholars, directors of schools and teachers, all of whom have methods, which are in consonance with GNH principles and values, according to the executive director of GPI Atlantic, Ronald Colman, who is assisting the education ministry to host the workshop. GPI Atlantic is a non-profit research group based in Canada.

"Some of them are educators, who have experience in bringing spiritual and contemplative education into regular curriculum, people who have brought environmental consciousness, critical thinking and cultural values into school curriculum," said Ronald Colman. He also said that some of these people have already created schools in the UK, US, India, Nepal and Thailand, based on ecological, culturally responsive, holistic education and critical thinking.

Prime minister Lyonchhoen Jigmi Y Thinley, in his eight-page letter to the 25 international participants in November this year, said that the holistic, contemplative, eco-literate, culturally responsive educational approaches that they teach and practise are precisely what needs to be implemented in Bhutan. "Unless our young people grow up with a deeply felt concern, care, and respect for each other and for the profound wisdom of our ancient culture and traditions, our development goals will quickly falter," said Lyonchhoen in his letter.

He said that, during the workshop, the participants would not spend too long talking about these approaches but, rather, see specific strategies emerge from the workshop. "I want us to move quickly to consider specific content of the strategies we need to adopt GNH into the educational system without delay," he said. "I want our educators to know how to teach math from a GNH perspective, and I want to begin to do so as soon as humanly possible."

Ronald Colman said that the long-term process on GNH and education began almost six years ago but the immediate process, which led to this workshop, began last year, when the prime minister asked GPI Atlantic to identify the international participants. "Identifying these participants and ensuring that they could attend the workshop took 6 to 8 months," he said. "We looked at the four pillars and the nine domains, and after much research, we identified these 25 participants."

There will also be 50 observers from overseas and 70 Bhutanese observers attending the six day workshop. Among them will be 12 student observers and 2 student participants.

"It won't be a conference where participants will make presentations. There will conversation and dialogue among the Bhutanese and international educators and participants to come up with strategies and answers to how GNH principles and values could be brought to the entire education system," said Ronald Colman.

Education minister, Thakur Singh Powdyel, said that it is essential that GNH values and principles be deeply embedded in the consciousness of the youth. "They, after all, are the citizens and leaders of the future and country's future rests in their hands," he said.

Seventeen-year-old Rohit Ahdikari, a class 11 student in Thimphu, is one of the student observers. He is excited. "I think GNH and education is having peace and tranquility in schools, where teachers and students understand and practise GNH values and principles," he said. "I'm a little skeptical that the implementation of strategies, which emerge from the workshop, might take few more years."

UNICEF and educational programme development fund, an international multi-donor agency, are funding the actual cost of the workshop.

Lyonchhoen Jigmi Y Thinley, who initiated the workshop, said: "We need to spend the first workshop day agreeing on what we mean by GNH values and principles. Right after that, I'm hoping we can address together how GNH values and principles can begin to be built in all our existing curricula without delay."

**By Phuntsho Choden**