

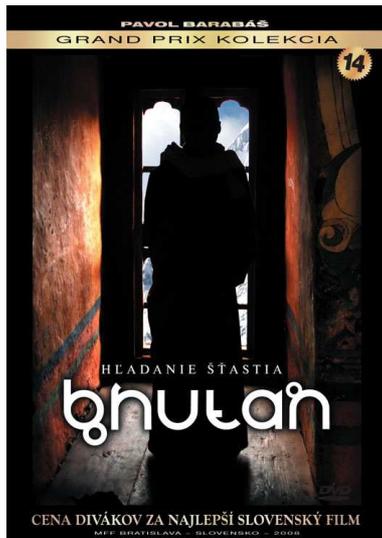


presents the documentary film

BHUTAN

A search for happiness

Premiere: 23 October 2008



Director and camera: **Pavol Barabáš**
Script: **Pavol Barabáš**
Editor: **Matej Beneš**
Music: **Maok**
Production: **K2 Studio**
Length: **33 minutes**
Format: **16:9**
Suitability: **all ages**
Info: **www.k2studio.sk**

It's said that Bhutan was forgotten by people, but never by the Gods. The natives call this ancient mountain kingdom, crowded between Indian Assam and Chinese Tibet, the land of the Thunder Dragon. Wandering through a forgotten country, in which people worship all living things, is a story of happiness. Internal peace is valued here more than a craving for worldly pleasures, and harmony with nature is the supreme principle. A good king cares for the wealth of his people. Instead of Gross Domestic Product, he promotes Gross National Happiness. It's like a fairy-tale world. In its fragile perception of happiness, this small Himalayan kingdom has chosen to follow a strange path. Perhaps, it's the correct one...

IN THE DRAGON EMPIRE

“Gross domestic happiness is more important than gross domestic product”,
declares the worshipped King of Bhutan

There are only two ways. Foreigners can only get here by land, across a designated border, or by air. The second option is much more mystical, as it offers a sight for the Gods. It almost touches Nepal and the world’s highest mountains, which have long lost their peace and inviolability. There are no scheduled flights here. None, except the king’s national carrier Druk Air, may land in Bhutan, the forgotten country, crouched between Indian Assam and Chinese Tibet. Majestic mountains are not the only ones protecting this world’s most untouchable cultural and natural oasis against intruders. “I have seen and experienced many rare cultures, but crossing Bhutan was like a fairy-tale for me,” says the respected documentarist, Pavol Barabáš, who with a group of friends set out for another expedition against the flow of time.

A sight for the Gods

“During a one hour flight from crowded Kathmandu in Nepal into the Kingdom of Bhutan, our eyes caught the sight of snowy eight-thousand-metre peaks emerging beneath us like islands from the sea. It revived our memories of the milestones of Slovak mountaineering in the Himalayas,” recalls Pavol Barabáš. The first one to be seen was Cho Oyu. “My friend, Jarýk Stejskal, tried to conquer it during his first winter ascent in 1985, using the Alpine style.” The highest one that stands out is the peak of Mount Everest, reminding one of the black year of 1988. “Bonington’s route is the most difficult route to the top. It was first climbed in the Alpine style by four Slovaks. Unfortunately, they lost their lives during the descent.” It looks as if the south wall of Lhotse Shar supports Everest. For insiders, it symbolizes the declared Himalayan problem, which in 1984 was also solved by Slovaks. Across the valley, our airplane has to give way to the Big Black Giant, as the natives call another eight-thousand-metre peak – Makalu. “In 1976, its south-western pillar received the attribute – Czechoslovak. At that time, it was an impressive achievement,” remarks Palo. The easternmost, but also the most monumental eight-thousand-metre peak on the way to Bhutan is Kangchenjunga. “Ten years ago, I trekked across the valleys below its northern wall. The mountain stopped Jaro Vonderčík and Juraja Karhordó only 80 metres below the summit,” Barabáš says, recalling the expedition which inspired his first successful film. After green Sikkim, the earth’s crust rises up again to dizzying heights. The Great Himalayas of Bhutan are as steep and inaccessible as the entire Buddhist kingdom.

Entry permits

In this rugged mountain terrain, the Bhutanese were only able to build one international airport. Close to the city of Paro, they found an ideal plain where, in 1983, they opened one runway. It’s not easy to take off here, let alone land. The first journalists were allowed into the country in 1974 on the occasion of the coronation of the present king, the fourth in line. The worshipped Jigme Singye Wangchuck has for years ensured that Bhutan keeps its precious traditions and resists the “Western influence.” He is the only one to grant permits to enter the country, and the reason why only a handful of tourists are able to visit this region. They number only a few thousand per year. Such restrictions are in place to protect

nature and culture. Because of its isolation, this ancient mountain kingdom at the foot of the Himalayas has preserved its exceptionality. A traditional rural way of life and harmony with nature are the principles that are superior to everything. After all, it's the only ecologically intact country in the world.

The Great Himalayas to the northwest of the country hide about twenty unclimbed peaks which are over 7,000 metres high. They are actually the highest untouched mountains in the world. They have never felt the touch of a human foot. The natives consider these gigantic, steep peaks, some of which do not even bear a name, to be the seats of the Gods. Cold and magical. "Based on a petition made by "liege" people, a good king made an order banning access to heights above 6,000 metres. For religious reasons. For good. The holiness of the mountains must be preserved. No wonder that 7,554 metre high Gangkhar Puensum remains the highest unconquered peak in the world," says Pa'o. Experts consider the transit through these mountains to be the most difficult trek on the planet. They call it the Snowman. Only a few individuals have ever managed to finish it.

Strong feeling of purity

"You get to know the country best if you travel by foot. Long hikes provide space for meditation. Nights under the sky, in the company of herders holding their prayer wheels, take you back to the distant past," says Pavol Barabáš. Crossing the five-thousand-metre-high ridges of the Great Himalayas is an unforgettable and mystical adventure. On each ridge, you see a number of prayer flags fluttering in the wind, taking away the sacred mantra "Om Mani Padme Húm" to honour all the sentient beings of the world. "We planned a three-hundred-kilometre-long journey across the hills of north-western Bhutan. During the sixteen-day-long trek, we didn't meet any tourists at all, but many natives unspoilt by civilization. High in the mountains, we not only experienced amazing peace, but also a strong feeling of purity," describes the well-known documentarist. They were on the route every day, and slept in tents. Their baggage was carried by horses, and at higher altitudes by yaks, which are essential when it comes to metres of snow or harsh weather.

Pardoned television

At first glance, the mountainous and undulating landscape was saying something about the people who inhabit it. Scattered in mountain villages, they need each other. They are close to each other, even though distances in the remote mountains are measured in kilometres. They live in harmony with nature and what the land can give them. Their homes correspond to their traditions and purpose. "Like in the village of Laya at a height of 3,900 metres. Ever smiling men and women separate the ears of mountain barley from the stems. One after another. The same as centuries ago," Barabáš says about what he captured with the third eye of his camera. He saw people farming their fields, breeding yaks and adoring their king. They don't even take ill of him over his ban on fishing. It's only logical, because Buddhism, which they profess, is peaceful to animals.

Every valley is dominated by a monastery, known as a "dzong". Great white forts once used to guard the roads to Tibet. Today, they serve as the half-spiritual and half-administrative centres of the country. They're inhabited by monks and state officials, who can be recognized by the colour of their traditional dress, known as "gho". It reminds one of a

bathrobe, tied at the waist by a shawl. White is worn by regular civil servants, orange is for ministers and yellow is the royal colour for those at the top of the pyramid. The monasteries located in the quiet corners of the Great Himalayas are considered to be jewels of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Thirty two of them are the most important. They are of similar architecture and colourful décor, while preserving ancient traditions.

Bhutan is unique with its own way of thinking, eating and dressing. It's a country with no signs of visual pollution. "You can hardly find an advert in there. The king even banned plastic bags, which are ever-present in our country. Mobile telephones have arrived, but they are only allowed to be used by the highest civil servants. Even television was only pardoned a few years ago. It has brought new information, but also new culture. A sudden flurry of action films has caused shock. Children began to fight in schools. For the Bhutanese Buddhists it was an unknown phenomenon, until then unthinkable and unacceptable for their philosophy," describes Pavol Barabáš. Only time will tell what other changes will be brought by new technologies.

Hitting the bull's-eye

To hit the target, the size of a plate, is a small miracle. When a native archer, holding his breath, tightens the bow-string, it's a hundred and forty metres away. He shoots, and dead silence is interrupted by an explosion of emotion from the bystanders. "Nothing can encourage the spirit more than archery," say the residents of the capital Thimphu about their national sport. Even while shooting from bows the Bhutanese have to wear the unchanging, traditional clothing. They have also adopted other principles, such as foreigners not being able to marry into their community and that sixty percent of the territory must remain forested. For all of that the Bhutanese have a royal decree. They are immensely proud of their country. Their good king offers "compassion" instead of competition, and "gross domestic happiness" instead of gross domestic product. That's the aim of the country's development; the enlightened way to progress. Traditional agriculture and crafts provide people with everything they need. In modesty, their monarch leads by example. The Dragon King, as he's nicknamed, has also modernized his own office. In 1998, he limited his powers in favour of the council of ministers and, in 2008, he will abandon them completely. He will be replaced by the crown prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, who will rule with a two-house parliament in a system with two political parties. In the same year, the century-old monarchy will for the first time experience elections. When the king decided on accession to the UN, it was a sign of the end of being closed-off from the world. "However, when Bhutan starts to open itself to investments, its vision of development based on Buddhist happiness will disappear as soon as cheap agricultural products from abroad flood the country. Technical progress will one day also arrive in these regions." Will Bhutan withstand the onset of the new era that is knocking on the door of the forgotten kingdom?

Land of the Thunder Dragon

It is said that Bhutan was forgotten by people, but never by the Gods. The Buddhist religion has always had a very strong position here. The name Bhutan is derived from the Sanskrit "Bhota-anta", which translates as "At the end of Bhota", where Bhota means Tibet. Therefore, this region is sometimes also called "Lower Tibet" or "Sikkim". The Bhutanese,

who speak a Tibetan dialect, known as “Dzongha” call their country “Druk-jul”, which translates as “Land of the Thunder Dragon”. Bhutan has remained a monarchy until the present day. A system of specific secular government was established in the country in the sixteenth century. However, there were always great rivalries between ecclesiastical and secular powers. Until the current king, who has ruled the country since 1972, managed to resolve this long-standing conflict in the style of Solomon. He married four sisters from the family line of the main Buddhist lama. One of them was indeed married, but local morals don't mind. He has two children with each of these women. Therefore succession to the throne, which since 1907 has been hereditary to the Wangchuk dynasty, is well provided for. In practice, it has resulted in relations of ecclesiastical and secular power. It is also appreciated by the almost one million inhabitants of the kingdom, which is barely 300 kilometres long and 150 kilometres wide. None them is even bothered by the fact that, for the wellbeing of the people and to protect the environment, Bhutan was the first country in the world to place a ban on smoking. But next year, they won't need to pay taxes. “Royal astrologers have predicted that 2007 is not going to be a good year for the country. Taxes will therefore not be collected. The country is also expecting to celebrate the centenary of the monarchy, but the celebrations will be postponed to 2008. This was decided by the beloved king,” says Pavol Barabáš.

Happiness is in one's mind

In Bhutan, poverty is not seen as a lack of money, but of happiness. Buddhist teaching says that happiness comes straight from the man. “It's born in our minds. If we understand this, we will find happiness as an individual, as a nation or as the entire population,” Tshennyi Gopon, a Buddhist monk from the Gaza monastery, reveals his belief. The king creates the environment where every citizen can achieve happiness. It sounds almost unbelievable. “Bhutan has learned from the mistakes which the world has made over the past half-century of development. But it was only the development of material wealth; real happiness was in the meantime somehow forgotten. Because of the economic boom, many nations sacrificed their culture and environment.” Even for Pavol Barabáš, it's a big unknown as to what is going to change when Bhutan is ruled by democracy and the country will be flooded by the conquests of Western civilization. Will the traditions and fragile cohesion of the local population withstand? It's difficult to predict. “It's not enough to demand from our children that they value customs because of traditions. We need to create adequate heritage. The more I travel, the more I appreciate those nations which have managed to retain their traditional way of life. Not because of tourists, but because that's how they were taught by their parents. Every trip convinces me more and more that happiness cannot be found anywhere else in the world, but at home,” says Pavol Barabáš. In this respect, Bhutan is practically like a fairy-tale. In a fragile understanding of happiness, the last Himalayan kingdom has chosen the right path. So far.

Prepared by: Juraj Sedlák
Photo: Pavol Barabáš, K2 studio

“Crossing Bhutan was like a fairy-tale. Seeking the charm of the last kingdom on earth which is still preserved thanks to its remoteness and the inaccessibility of the steep Himalayas.”

Pavol Barabáš

ABOUT THE FILM

The nation of Bhutan, which lives high in the massive Himalayas, worship the unexplored mountains and virgin-snowy peaks as sacred, because of the residing Gods who need to be protected.

The breathtaking mountain range of the kingdom, with 20 unconquered peaks over 7,000 metres high, is home to various flora and fauna, from snow leopards to blue sheep, and goats to yaks, and their herders wandering across the mountain slopes.

Mountain-climbing in this area was allowed from 1983 until 1994, when the government forbade it under the impulse of a petition from the locals to preserve the holiness of the mountains, the underworld depths of which generate the power of mysterious awareness and spirituality. The peak of Gangkhar Puensum is the highest unclimbed summit in the world.

For the Bhutanese, this harsh terrain is their home. It's the place where man and nature coexist in perfect harmony.

“Gross domestic happiness is more important than gross national product.”

With these words, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck presented the strategic path of Bhutan, leading to change and development of the country. It seems that by defining happiness as the official goal of future development, Bhutan has reminded the world of forgotten priorities.

For the Bhutanese, gross domestic happiness is an enlightened path to progress. They have learned from the mistakes made by the surrounding world during five decades of the so-called development process. Many countries have mistaken, or rather misinterpreted such development as the pursuit of material enrichment. Because of the economic boom, many nations have sacrificed their culture and environment. However, countries that have achieved amazing economic development have not been that happy.

Gross domestic happiness does not deny economic development. It's just that happiness comes first. Gross domestic happiness is based on the Buddhist teaching which says that happiness is not an outside source, but that it comes from within the man. “Happiness is born in our minds,” says Tshennyi Gopon (principal monk) from the Central Bhutanese Monastery. “If we understand this, we will find happiness as individuals, as a community or nation, or as the entire population.”

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