

The hard way to happiness in Bhutan

Severe pain and joy don't usually mix, unless you're mountain biking in Bhutan



SCOTT YORKE

The Kingdom of Bhutan is perhaps best known for its credo of gross national happiness, or GNH, an official index of prosperity and quality of life in place of gross domestic product. GNH is based on four guiding pillars: good governance, sustainable socioeconomic development, environmental conservation, and the promotion and preservation of culture.

Part of this philosophy champions a healthy, active lifestyle as a vehicle to help citizens maximise their pursuit of happiness. Towards that end, in 2010, His Royal Highness Prince Jigyel Ugyen Wangchuck, president of the Bhutan Olympic Committee, started the Tour of the Dragon competition, billed as “the toughest one-day mountain bike race in the world.”

Last fall, after a summer of hard, solitary, sometimes less-than-happy training, I went to Bhutan — nestled above the far northeast corner of India — to compete in the Dragon race. The 167-mile course follows a chewed-up, menacing road under major construction while snaking its way over four mountain passes, three of which stand above 10,000 feet, all in one long, masochistic day with over 15,000 vertical feet of climbing. At 132 miles in, my system was fried and my GNH had plummeted, and I still had another 22 miles of steep, uphill pedalling in front of me, followed by a 13-mile descent.

By comparison, one of the hardest stages of the 2019 Tour de France will cover just over 13,000



Bhutan tops Gross National Happiness index.

feet of climbing, and that's on ultralight race bikes on fully paved roads. The Dragon race's course profile looks like an alarming EKG reading.

I expected my body to protest. It began with a three-part barrage of cramps that surged across my lower limbs in paralysis of all forward progress: As I staggered up the steepest section of the whole course, a painful stab seized my right IT band while another twisted knots into my groin, followed by an aftershock rumbling across the left thigh for good measure.

A fervent bicycle culture has seen rapid development in Bhutan. Its northern border with Tibet runs along a treacherous seam of the Eastern Himalayan mountain range, which has historically protected the Switzerland-size country from outside influence

and fortified it as one of the only nations in the world to never be colonised. This geographic and political isolation has long delayed Bhutan's modernisation. The cycling culture has grown thanks to the bike-crazy former Druk Gyalpo, or Dragon King, who spends his days cruising trail networks throughout the mountains. Bhutanese citizens idolise the royal family, often wearing lapel pins with the current king's handsome side-burned portrait.

“My goal has always been to create a world-class cycling event in Bhutan,” the prince said. “For someone who is a believer of healthy living, cycling is a very important sport to promote national happiness.”

The roadside scenery alone was enough to warm the heart, with hydro-powered prayer wheels spin-

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ning beneath canopies of colourful prayer flags and wrinkled old women smiling toothless smiles as they shyly waved to passing cyclists. The landscape is so lush and green (over 70 per cent of Bhutan is

still covered in forest) that the hillsides explode with dense treetops resembling ripe heads of broccoli. It's a constant collage of enchanted scenery.

At 10 hours into the race — after a bleary-eyed 2 am start, a headlight dying prematurely in the dark, gravelly mud caked inside my eyelids and the onslaught of cramps as I pedalled through the upper end of a 50-degree temperature swing — I found it hard to smile. My achy legs felt like bags of concrete. My seizing lower back muscles were on the verge of snapping. My neck and shoulders were so fatigued that I couldn't even hold my head up to see where I was going. I had already doubled the distance of my longest training ride, and I was starting to look for a place to pull over and rest, or maybe just quit.

The road banked into a left turn, and I slowly coasted through, gazing down at the pavement. Just then, I was hit with an eruption of cheers coming from 100 schoolchildren posted on the side of the road. Spectators across the entire country had lined the course to cheer for the riders while handing us bananas and chocolate. It was the largest crowd of “cheering team” volunteers I'd yet to encounter, and their energy was colossal. In a sea of white khata scarves, the fanatic children chanted “Do your best! Do your best!” while running alongside me, clapping and screaming as if I were locked in a dead sprint.

This unexpected surge of motivation from the children's impassioned cheers and encouragement instantly revived my near lifeless body and spirit and jolted me into high gear. Although it had been hours since I had seen another cyclist, I was no longer alone. The support cascaded down upon me until I burst into happy tears, something I've never experienced in team sports or recreational cycling.

My pedal cadence quickened as my body lurched with a replenished energy. Several more cheering congregations propped me up along the rest of the ride. Infected with the stoke, I began passing other riders one by one, offering my own upbeat cheers and words of encouragement, which ultimately propelled me across the finish line in a decent 13 hours 45 minutes 24 seconds.

I'd cycled thousands of miles all summer in dreadful preparation of this ride, and while I had never felt so much pain in my training, I had never felt so much happiness, either.

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Future jobs and disruptive technologies



PROF ODEH AL JAYYOUSI

Which jobs are likely to disappear in the future decade and what is the best job in the future? These questions pose critical concerns about the sustainability and viability of future jobs in a globalised digital world.

In essence, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Internet of Things are likely to disrupt the fabric of socio-economic system worldwide and GCC as well.

We are witnessing trends due to the emergence on robotics, smart city, driverless cars, and artificial intelligence. These disruptive technologies are likely to make some jobs obsolete.

However, are we prepared to

cope with such deep transformation in economy and society?

Reflecting on the US experience in the last 200 years in technology and agriculture, it was illuminating to note that agriculture used to constitute about 70 per cent of GNP in 1800 and it was reduced in 1990 to about 3pc of GNP.

However, this drastic change in US economy did not cause unemployment. In contrast, new jobs were created in the service economy, industry and technology.

For countries in GCC and Bahrain in particular to be prepared for the future job market, a number of measures and reforms need to be adopted that cover education reform, new business model, and culture and mindset.

Education reform is imperative to cope with new platforms and models of learning and education in light of open source education, e-learning and distance learning.

Quality education for the future is pivotal for future jobs. Future

jobs need an education that pays attention to reflection, understanding, imagination, and synthesis.

This genuine reform entails redefining what constitutes happiness, success, and good life. Also, life-long education is key for future educators since there will be multiple sources for learning like U-tube channels and social media and on-line open sources like Khan Academy and Coursera.

Hence, the conventional role of teachers is likely to change to be more of a facilitator and convener. Despite the fact that many jobs may vanish or change its nature in the future, education and health care providers will be in demand.

Emotional intelligence (not IQ), imagination and empathy will be highly needed in the era of robotics and internet of sensors and Big Data. New paradigm of learning and education should be developed to enhance multiple intelligences, especially nat-

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uralistic intelligence to address the nature-deficit-disorder due to addiction to social media and e-games.

New business model is to be developed to cope with disruptive technologies and future jobs' demands. It is envisioned that future jobs will highly depend on new skills and talents. For example,

models of free lance and outsourcing will be on the rise, like the concept of flash organisations that have a mandate to solve specific tasks.

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Team work and work from home for mothers and old people and working less hours are all viable options for policy makers and business owners.

Better balance between work and leisure can be attained if we can harness technology in a balanced manner. Teachers, nurses and doctors will always be in demand in the future since quality service depends on human communication and empathy. However, on-line education and virtual universities offer new possibilities for millions of people in remote areas.

New business culture and mindset are crucial in shaping the future employee. For example, con-

sumerism and fast pace of life are forcing people live beyond their limits.

This is vividly illustrated in the statement “we work at a jobs that we do not like to buy things that we do not need”. New metrics other than GDP for measuring the health and wealth of nations are needed. Happiness index and sustainability index are attempts to re-define new meaning for work and progress.

In sum, the journey from slavery to democracy was unimaginable and unthinkable but was transformative and enlightening. Nevertheless, human civilisation is founded on new ideas and human talent. Future jobs are limitless and can be cultivated by quality education that celebrates diversity, critical thinking and long-life learning.

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