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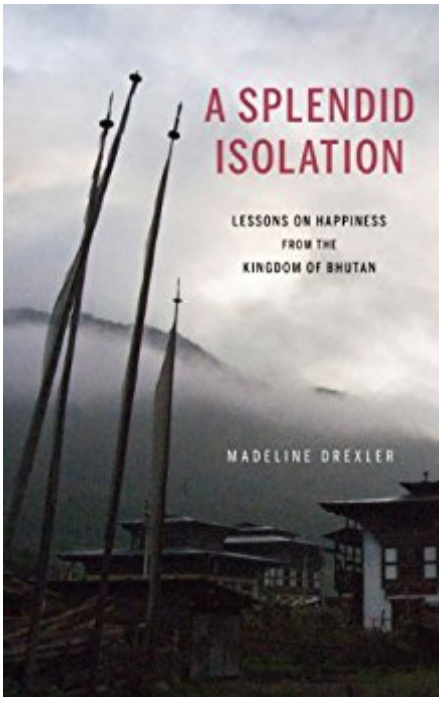
A Splendid Isolation: Lessons On Happiness From The Kingdom Of Bhutan



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Synopsis

What does Bhutan understand about happiness that the rest of the world does not? Award-winning journalist and author Madeline Drexler recently traveled to this Himalayan nation to discover how the audacious policy known as Gross National Happiness plays out in a fast-changing society where Buddhism is deeply rootedÃ¢â ¬â •but where the temptations and collateral damage of materialism are rising. Her reported essay blends lyrical travelogue, cultural history, personal insights, and provocative conversations with top policymakers, activists, bloggers, writers, artists, scholars, religious leaders, students, and ordinary citizens in many walks of life. This book is sure to fascinate readers interested in travel, Buddhism, progressive politics, and especially the study and practice of happiness.

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Customer Reviews

While on a trip to Bhutan, I was made aware of this book. After spending ten days in the country, I appreciated the contents of the variety of essays written by Drexler. Her essays provide an examination of a variety of aspects of Bhutan, specifically the concept of Gross National Happiness

(GNH) as viewed from different perspectives within the country. This book is written for a specific audience--people interested in Bhutan, people who will or who have traveled to Bhutan.

Drexler tells the story of Bhutan's unique experiment in elucidating and prioritizing Gross National Happiness (GNH). She tells it through dozens of interviews with citizens, Buddhists, and government officials. Even better, the tale is transmitted through beautiful narrative passages describing Bhutan's culture and traditions. It is almost inconceivable that a monarchy would voluntarily and on its own initiative cede power to democracy, and that that government would be accountable to quantify and measure GNH. As Bhutan now modernizes and confronts the globalization challenges of the 21st century, I can only hope that GNH remains front and center in its priorities.

In anticipation of a trip to Bhutan, I read a lot of books about the country, and this was the best of the lot. (In fact, after coming back from my 3+ weeks there, I might actually read this again.) It takes a good hard look at the Gross National Happiness concept as it applies to this essentially third-world country, and paints a very realistic picture of conditions in Bhutan, which are not as "Shangri-La" as they're popularly cracked up to be.

This beautifully written book opens up a remote and unfamiliar country in which Buddhism is ingrained in the fabric of social and political life. Drexler provides an introduction to Buddhism along with Bhutan, and also to the country's role on the world stage of progressive politics. However, the story of contemporary Bhutan should appeal to readers of any political or religious persuasion, since the author's love of the country does not preclude a deeply probing analysis of it. She is undaunted in reporting the conflicts and inconsistencies within Bhutan's concept of "happiness" and of itself. This account also serves as a case study of the effect of modernization on the social structures that originally sustained tradition in any number of countries now undergoing development. As Bhutan provides a particularly moving example of precious traditional values in action and peril, I look forward to a sequel, some 5 or 10 years hence, to tell us how the soul of the nation has fared in opening to the rest of the world.

Madeline Drexler has achieved a very rare quality with her essay, "A Splendid Isolation..." through the use of her years of experience as an investigative reporter on rather complex and delicate subjects; through her amazing compassion, never-ending curiosity, and clear, objectective thinking;

and through her surprising willingness to allow her readers a glimpse into her personal spiritual journeys and how those affected or were affected by what she learned from Bhutan. The author's factual research is extensive and impeccable, yet it is how she wove the essential facts together with her observations, conversations and impressions upon every sensation she experienced that allowed me to feel as if I were there.As described by Drexler and the leaders of Bhutan that she spoke to, GNH (Gross National Happiness) is an ideal that Bhutan's visionary leaders over the last 40 years have strove to achieve, and while it has yet to be accomplished, its' guiding principles have produced a kinder and gentler population. Drexler had extraordinary access to the driving forces behind GNH, to those who's job it is to implement the various facets necessary to achieve that mission, as well as to the people, young and old, who are the beneficiaries and/or objectors to a government that stresses spiritual happiness over consumerism, self-reliance, and just about every step comprising Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Her people skills in getting her subjects to open up was topped only by her skills as a listener, to what was and was not being said.Clearly, the author went to Bhutan expecting it to be more than a working vacation, but any answers she originally sought appear to have been more elusive than expected and instead gave way to perhaps the deepest, most profound question that faces humankind, which in my own words is: "Can we (and will we) save our species from ourselves?" There are no quick answers and perhaps there can never be a "right" answer, atleast not as long as we remain "human". But Madeline Drexler has brought that question to the forefront at an extremely timely point in modern history. Let's keep the discussion going.

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