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Institute of Happiness



TREK REPORT

International Forum on Mindfulness, Sustainability & Peace

16th Harvard/MIT – Bhutan Trek

16th – 22nd December, 2025

*Celebrating Bhutan's 118th National Day
& the 70th Birth Anniversary of His Majesty the Fourth King*



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Executive Summary

The 16th Harvard/MIT Bhutan Trek (December 16–22, 2025) brought together over 45 students and professionals from Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, Harvard Graduate School of Design, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for an immersive exploration of Bhutan's approach to mindfulness, sustainability, and peace.

This trek held special significance as Bhutan simultaneously celebrated its 118th National Day, the 70th birth anniversary of His Majesty the Fourth King (the father of Gross National Happiness), and the afterglow of the historic Global Peace Prayer held in November 2025.

The International Forum on Mindfulness, Sustainability, and Peace served as the intellectual centerpiece, featuring presentations by Bhutanese government officials, policy discussions with Harvard/MIT participants, and cross-cultural dialogue on development beyond GDP. Participants represented 17 countries and brought expertise from organizations ranging from global consultancies to government agencies.

Trek Highlights

National Day Celebration: Participants attended the 118th National Day ceremonies at Changlimithang Stadium, experiencing the Royal Address and cultural performances firsthand.

Forum Sessions: Keynote addresses from Thimphu's Mayor Dasho Ugyen Dorji, presentations on GNH methodology by the Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, and panels on entrepreneurship and governance.

Cultural Immersion: Village feast in Punakha with traditional cooking, archery, and rice-dehusking; pilgrimage to Tiger's Nest monastery; and the challenging Phajoding monastery hike for select participants.

About the Trek

Since 2017, the Institute of Happiness has organized Harvard/MIT Bhutan Treks one to two times per year, bringing over 450 professionals and students to experience Bhutan's unique development philosophy. The December 2025 trek marked the 16th edition of this flagship program.

Itinerary Overview

Day	Activity	Location
Dec 16	Arrival, Orientation, Driglam Namzha	Thimphu
Dec 17	National Day, International Day, Forum	Changlimithang
Dec 18	Full Day Forum Symposium	Zhichenkhar
Dec 19	Punakha Valley, Village Feast, Peace Prayer	Punakha
Dec 20	Phajoding Hike or Yoga and Meditation, Travel to Paro	Thimphu / Paro
Dec 21	Tiger's Nest Hike, Hot Stone Bath	Paro
Dec 22	Departure	Paro Airport

Participant List and Profile

The December 2025 trek assembled an exceptionally diverse cohort of 45+ students and professionals, representing 17 countries across five continents and bringing expertise from leading global institutions.

Name	Occupation	Organisation
Mingyang Zhang	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Nicole Paige Vereczkey	MBA Student	MIT
Arhan Bagati	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Dharshan Baskar	CFO, Real Estate Family Business	Padayappa Real Estate
Mitali Garg	Founder and Creative Head	MG Design Collective
Prescott Beatty Overbey	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Da Na Yoo	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Julian Rico Gluck	Major	U.S. Airforce Reserve
Kristy Marie Morse	Senior Manager, Tech Consulting	EY
Lydia Celestia Fisher Brosnahan	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Koichi Tsukioka	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Andrea Perez Vega	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Xilin Liu	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Nicole Etsuko Anzai	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Boya Gong	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Feiyang Dai	Project Finance Manager	GoldenMax Energy
Tomas Ariel Guiloff Krauss	MBA Student	MIT
Yael Senerman Link	Co-Founder	Fundación MiColab
Szilágyi Szabolcs	Founder & CEO	BLOCK - Guards Your Ride
Bernard C Y Ho	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Daniela Jaye Schulman	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Margarita Maria Isaacs Prieto	MPP Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Jessica Yan	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Felipe Andrés Vergara Iduya	EPA Student	Harvard Graduate School of Education
Kwan Yee Queenie Wong	Director	Sonnabend Collection Foundation
CARLEY ANNE MAMBUCA	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Tamra Olin	MBA Student	MIT
Nicholas Noerdlinger	MPS Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Yingjing Deng	Senior Program Manager	MIT
Maren Pritchard Wilder	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Megan Christina Nilles	MBA Student	MIT
Daniella Spector	Product Manager	Capital One
Pranathi Gummadi	MBA Student	MIT
Johanna Kathryn Bankart	MBA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Topaz Aharon	MBA Student	MIT

Justin Arthur Hilliard	MBA Student	MIT
Andrea Salazar Díaz	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
CAMILO JOSE RIOS IBARRA	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
You Ting Lee	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Allison Sheu	MBA Student	Stanford
margherita bruti liberati	LL.M Student	Harvard Law School
Stephanie An Ni Wu	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
CHOTIPOOM LUANGPRASERT	MPA Student	Harvard Kennedy School
Juliet Paree Porter	MBA Student	MIT
Raeesa Pradeep Rane	MBA Student	MIT
Linyue Chen	MBA Student	Stanford
Gabriela Nakano Athayde Franca	MBA Student	MIT
Arshiya Lal	MBA Student	MIT
Vineet Ahluwalia	MBA Student	Stanford
Diana Yurchak	MBA Student	Harvard Business School

Academic Representation

Harvard Kennedy School (HKS): 22 participants

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT): 12 participants

Harvard Business School, Graduate School of Design & Education: 3 participants

Stanford University: 3 participants

Other institutions: 5 participants

Countries Represented

USA, China, India, Hungary, Chile, South Korea, Canada, Japan, Mexico, Spain, UK, Israel, Taiwan, Italy, Australia, Thailand, and Brazil.

Professional Backgrounds

Participants brought experience from McKinsey, BCG, EY, Amazon, Google, Goldman Sachs, IBM, NYU Langone Health, U.S. Air Force Reserve, GoldenMax Energy, Capital One, and numerous government agencies and NGOs worldwide.

PART I: The Forum

The International Forum on Mindfulness, Sustainability, and Peace explored the intersection of these themes through Bhutan's unique lens, examining how the philosophy of Gross National Happiness offers a framework for development that prioritizes human and ecological well-being alongside economic growth.

Day 1: National Day & Opening Sessions (December 17)

118th National Day Celebration

The trek coincided with Bhutan's 118th National Day, commemorating the coronation of the first hereditary king in 1907. Participants attended celebrations at Changlimithang National Stadium, where the Royal Address was broadcast live from Bumthang. Dressed in traditional gho and kira, introduced the previous evening by fashion designer Karma Tshering Wangchuk, trekkers experienced firsthand the pageantry of the procession honoring the first King of the Wangchuk Dynasty.

Walking Tour of Thimphu

Following the National Day ceremonies, participants embarked on a guided walking tour of Thimphu, exploring the capital's blend of traditional architecture and contemporary development. The tour provided firsthand exposure to the urban planning principles that Mayor Ugyen Dorji would elaborate upon in the following day's symposium.

Discussion on Parliament and Democracy

Dasho Duba Yonten, former Secretary General of the National Assembly, delivered a comprehensive presentation on Bhutan's transition to constitutional monarchy in 2008. Unlike most nations where democracy emerged through struggle, Bhutan's parliamentary system was a gift from His Majesty the Fourth King to his people; a transition that preserved traditional values while embracing modern governance structures.

Day 2: Full Symposium (December 18)

Opening Address by Mayor Ugyen Dorji

Dasho Thrompon Ugyen Dorji, Mayor of Thimphu City, opened the symposium by reflecting on His Majesty the King's National Day address. The Mayor framed city development around three guiding principles: life, living, and love: "Life in the way cities sustain their people and environment; living in the quality, safety, and dignity of everyday experiences; and love in the care we show for our communities, our culture, and the generations yet to come."

He traced Thimphu's evolution from a quiet valley settlement through the early 1990s to the administrative, cultural, and economic hub it has become. "As I reflect on the evolution of Thimphu, I see a city that has grown not merely in size and infrastructure, but in responsibility and significance."

The Mayor outlined how Thimphu prioritizes life by planning with respect for nature and climate resilience; supports living through inclusive public spaces, accessible services, and efficient public transport for equity; and builds with love by protecting heritage, listening to residents, and growing with compassion rather than excess.

"Mindfulness in Thimphu calls for planning with awareness of our unique valley setting, cultural heritage, and social fabric," he explained. *"As the city expands, mindful decisions ensure that development respects natural contours, protects spiritual and cultural landmarks, and safeguards human well-being."* He concluded: *"Thimphu's progress is measured not by physical growth, but by harmony, resilience, and happiness for all who live within the valley."*

GNH Research & Methodology

Karma Wangdi, Chief Research Officer at the Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, provided a technical deep-dive into the GNH measurement framework. He explained that GNH operationalizes well-being through nine domains (psychological well-being, health, time use, education, cultural resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity, and living standards) measured through 33 indicators constructed from over 150 variables.

Mr. Wangdi detailed the survey methodology: the Centre has conducted nationwide surveys in 2010, 2015, and 2022, using stratified two-stage cluster sampling across all 20 districts. The 2022 survey interviewed over 8,500 respondents using computer-assisted personal interviews, with location data captured in real-time. Average interview length has been reduced from over six hours in early pilots to approximately two hours through questionnaire refinement.

He explained the "happiness threshold" concept: individuals are classified as happy if they achieve sufficiency in 66% or more of weighted indicators. The psychological well-being domain, for example, measures life satisfaction, emotional balance (frequency of positive emotions like compassion and generosity versus negative emotions like jealousy and selfishness), and spirituality. The time use domain examines not only working hours but time spent with family, volunteering, meditating, and screen time.

"GNH is not set in stone," Mr. Wangdi emphasized. *"As circumstances change, we adapt the indicators we measure."*

Beyond GDP: International Perspectives

A panel of Harvard Kennedy School participants, You Ting Lee, Camilo Jose, Koichi Tsukioka, and Julian Rico Gluck, shared international experiences and learning on alternative development metrics. Drawing on their expertise in policy analysis and their backgrounds with organizations like McKinsey and the UN, panelists explored how GNH principles might inform policy frameworks globally, particularly in an era of climate change and digital transformation.

Parliament Visit

The group toured Bhutan's Parliament building, witnessing the physical space where the nation's democratic governance unfolds. This visit provided tangible context to the morning's discussions about Bhutan's unique political evolution.

Entrepreneurship & Investment Opportunities

Mrs. Sonam Lhamo, Chief Industries Officer of the Invest Bhutan Division, reframed Bhutan not as a conventional emerging market but as a sustainable investment destination. She explained how GNH translates into investment policy: "Having GNH as a development philosophy means predictable policy, transparency, environmental constraints that do not change overnight, and valuing long-term development over short-term quick wins."

She challenged the assumption that Bhutan's small size is a constraint: "As a small country, it is so much easier for us to coordinate, to get feedback, to test new models. We believe Bhutan is uniquely positioned as a testbed for sustainable, high-value, low-volume investments."

The investment philosophy centers on viewing foreign investors "not just as a source of capital, but as a strategic lever for development of a green and sustainable economy." All projects are subject to environmental clearance before licensing and ongoing compliance monitoring. Priority sectors include renewable energy, sustainable tourism, ICT, agriculture, creative industries, and education.

Mrs. Lhamo highlighted the upcoming Bhutan Investment Forum in February 2026, inviting participants to consider how they might contribute to Bhutan's development story.

Governing for Happiness: The OCASC Approach

Director Chencho from the Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination (OCASC) outlined Bhutan's national aspirations. The Prime Minister's Office guides the country's long-term strategic direction around three pillars: becoming great people, or compassionate citizens guided by integrity, kindness, and the ability to live in harmony with each other and nature; building a progressive society, or a knowledge-based nation investing in education, innovation, and human capital; and achieving mindful prosperity, or sustainable growth ensuring well-being for current and future generations.

He provided striking context: until 1961, Bhutan was essentially medieval. Life expectancy was approximately 48 years, literacy was around 12%, there was not a single school in the country, and not a single kilometer of paved road. Only in 1961 did modernization begin; in 1972, the Fourth King at age 16 proclaimed the philosophy of Gross National Happiness.

Director Chencho connected these aspirations to the Gelephu Mindfulness City project, describing it as Bhutan's flagship undertaking to create a progressive, purpose-built development embodying GNH principles from inception.

Day 3: Final Sessions (December 20)

Inspirations from the Global Peace Prayer

Bhutan has hosted the Global Peace Prayer from 4th to 19th November, 2025 where over 100 Buddhist masters from all over the world will be congregating in Bhutan.

Given the highly uncertain geopolitical situation starting from tariff war to actual conflicts between nations, Bhutan will be leading this special peace prayer for a better future where practice of compassion, love, joy and equanimity as universal human values will reinforce the value for peaceful co-existence.

This session was led by the Venerable Choten Dorji and participants from the group who shared their vision for a global peace both at policy level and personal practices.

PART II: Cultural Immersion

Punakha Valley Excursion (December 19)

The journey to Punakha, Bhutan's ancient capital, began with a stop at Dochula Peak (3,100m), where 108 memorial chortens offered stunning views of the snow-capped Himalayas. The route descended through blue pine forests to the subtropical Punakha Valley, where the confluence of the Mo Chhu and Pho Chhu rivers creates one of Bhutan's most fertile regions.

Peace Prayer Address by Minister Namgyal Dorji

H.E. Lyonpo Namgyal Dorji, Minister of Industry, Commerce and Employment, addressed the group during a peace prayer ceremony at Punakha. Drawing on his extensive diplomatic background, including 17 years at Bhutan's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York where he served as Deputy Permanent Representative and Minister Counsellor, the Minister reflected on Bhutan's unique position in the global community.

He spoke of Bhutan's leadership in environmental conservation as the world's only carbon-negative country, absorbing nearly three times more CO₂ than it emits. The Minister emphasized that Bhutan's approach to development, rooted in GNH philosophy, offers a model for pursuing prosperity without sacrificing environmental integrity or cultural identity.

Connecting the peace prayer to broader themes, he noted that Bhutan's hosting of the Global Peace Prayer in November 2025 demonstrated the country's commitment to serving as a sanctuary for contemplation and dialogue in an era of geopolitical uncertainty. He encouraged participants to carry the spirit of mindfulness and peace from Bhutan into their professional lives and home countries.

Chhimi Lhakhang & Punakha Dzong

Participants visited Chhimi Lhakhang, the "Fertility Temple" dedicated to the Divine Madman Drukpa Kunley, before exploring Punakha Dzong, the administrative center and winter residence of the Central Monastic Body. The dzong's strategic position between two rivers and its magnificent architecture embody Bhutan's integration of spiritual and temporal authority.

Village Feast & Traditional Activities

The day culminated in a village feast featuring hands-on cultural activities. Groups rotated through traditional archery using bamboo bows, dart-throwing (khuru), cow milking, and rice dehusking using wooden mortars. A cooking team learned how to prepare Ema Datsi, Bhutan's national dish of chili and cheese, under local guidance. The village treasure hunt challenged participants to locate landmarks without GPS, fostering interaction with local community members.

Phajoding Monastery Hike (December 20)

Before the final forum sessions, a group of adventurous participants undertook the challenging Thimphu–Phajoding–Sangaygang trek. The 13.5-kilometer route climbed from Motithang through blue pine forests to Phajoding Monastery at 3,640 meters, then descended via Sangaygang to the BBS Tower viewpoint.

Phajoding, established in the 13th century, houses a community of monks and offers meditation retreats. The 6–7 hour trek provided participants with both physical challenge and spiritual contemplation, embodying the mindfulness theme of the forum in lived experience. The panoramic views of Thimphu Valley from the trail served as a fitting metaphor for the broader perspective on development the week had cultivated.

Alternative: Yoga and Meditation (December 20)

For participants who did not join the Phajoding hike, the morning began with a yoga session led by trek participant Dana Yoo followed by a meditation practice led by Venerable Khenpo Choten Dorji of the Central Monastic Body. This contemplative alternative embodied the mindfulness theme of the forum, offering participants an introspective experience grounded in Bhutanese Buddhist tradition.

Tiger's Nest Pilgrimage (December 21)

The trek concluded with a pilgrimage to Paro Taktsang, or the Tiger's Nest. This is Bhutan's most iconic monastery, clinging to a cliff face 900 meters above the valley floor. Legend holds that Guru Rinpoche flew here on the back of a tigress to subdue a local demon, meditating in a cave for three years, three months, three weeks, three days, and three hours.

Participants divided into three hiking groups for the 3-hour ascent through prayer flag-festooned trails. The climb, while strenuous at altitude, offered time for reflection on the week's themes of mindfulness and spiritual practice in daily life.

Following the descent, participants experienced traditional Bhutanese hot stone baths, where river stones are heated in fire and placed in wooden tubs of artemisia-infused water. This provided restoration for weary muscles and a final immersion in Bhutanese wellness traditions.

PART III: Key Insights

On Mindful Urban Development

Mayor Ugyen Dorji's address articulated a vision of city development fundamentally different from conventional urban planning. Where most cities measure progress by physical growth, Thimphu aims to measure progress by "harmony, resilience, and happiness for all who live within the valley."

Three principles emerged as central to this approach. First, cities must sustain both people and the environment, recognizing that human well-being is inseparable from healthy ecosystems. Second, urban design should prioritize dignity in daily experience through accessible public spaces and efficient public transport. Third, development should express love for community, culture, and future generations rather than serve short-term economic metrics alone.

For participants from Harvard's Graduate School of Design and MIT, these principles offered a counterpoint to density-focused urban planning models. The challenge, as discussions revealed, lies in operationalizing such values without sacrificing the practical efficiency that growing cities require.

On Gross National Happiness

Karma Wangdi's presentation demonstrated that GNH is not merely a philosophical aspiration but a rigorous measurement framework. The quinquennial surveys generate data that inform policy decisions, budget allocations, and program evaluations across government ministries.

Participants from economics and policy backgrounds raised questions about GNH's scalability and replicability. Can a framework developed for a nation of 780,000 people inform policy in countries of millions? The consensus emerging from discussions was that GNH's value lies not in wholesale adoption but in the questions it prompts: What outcomes do we truly value? How might we measure and pursue them systematically?

On Investment & Entrepreneurship

Mrs. Sonam Lhamo's presentation revealed Bhutan actively seeking foreign investment while maintaining distinctive conditions. The Bhutan Innovation Fund and Investment Forum signal openness; GNH-screening of projects ensures alignment with national values. This selective approach, neither closed economy nor unrestricted capitalism, presents a novel model for development finance professionals to study.

Discussion surfaced tensions inherent in this approach. How does a small economy attract sufficient investment while maintaining high standards? Can GNH principles survive the pressures of economic growth? The Gelephu Mindfulness City project, mentioned in several sessions, represents Bhutan's attempt to resolve these tensions through purpose-built development designed from inception around mindfulness principles.

Acknowledgments

The Institute of Happiness extends heartfelt gratitude to all who made the 16th Harvard/MIT Bhutan Trek a transformative experience.

Distinguished Speakers

Dasho Thrompon Ugyen Dorji, Mayor of Thimphu City

H.E. Lyonpo Namgyal Dorji, Minister of Industry, Commerce and Employment

Dasho Duba Yonten, former Secretary General of the National Assembly

Director Chencho, Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination

Mr. Karma Wangdi, Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies

Mrs. Sonam Lhamo, Invest Bhutan Division

Ven. Khenpo Choten Dorji, Central Monastic Body

Forum Panelists from Harvard/MIT

You Ting Lee, Camilo Jose, Koichi Tsukioka, Julian Rico Gluck, Boya Gong, Nikki Vereczkey, Raessa Pradeep Rane, Da Na Yoo, Adin Becker, Dharshan Baskar, Feiyang Dai, Pranathi Gummadi, Margherita Bruti, Lydia Brosnan, and Felipe Vergara Iduya.

Organizing Team

Kinga Tshering, Founder, Institute of Happiness

Kinga is the founder of the Institute of Happiness (IOH), a think and do tank inspired by Bhutan's development of Gross National Happiness (GNH). IOH focuses on research, training and collaboration for curating ideas and knowledge on happiness, wellbeing and mindfulness for promoting a happy humanity. Kinga is a former Member of Parliament in the National Assembly of Bhutan and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in the banking and the financial sector. Played lead role in reforming the energy and the corporate sectors in Bhutan. Kinga is a Fulbright scholar (Kansas University, USA), Royal Government of Bhutan Fellow (Pepperdine University, USA) and a Ford Foundation Fellow (Harvard University, USA).

He is still enrolled for the Masters in Divinity program at the Harvard Divinity School. He has been organizing the Harvard/MIT-Bhutan trek since 2017 and the December 2025 trek is the 12th group with over 350 alumni members of this extremely popular trek.

Chencho (Bull), Sangay, Rinzy, and Kuenga Namgay – Trek Leaders

Zhu Bhutan Travels

Adin Becker – Student Liaison

Adin Becker works at the intersection of climate governance, sustainable industrial policy, and territorial planning. His work spans Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, focusing on how governments and multilateral institutions can build adaptive capacity for decarbonization and economic resilience. He has led diagnostics for the Harvard Growth Lab and OCP Group in Morocco, designed community development initiatives in India and Zimbabwe, and contributed to governance research at Harvard's Building State Capability program. A former Watson Fellow and co-founder of Divest Oregon, Adin brings experience across research, policy design, and institutional reform. He is pursuing concurrent master's degrees in Public Administration and Urban Planning at Harvard University.

Venues & Accommodations

Hotel Thimphu Towers

Zhichenkhar Conference Center

Rema Resorts, Paro

Zhiwaling Heritage Hotel, Paro

Babesa Village Restaurant

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