



Health Minister Dr. Jigmi Singay (left) in conversation with Yohei Sasakawa

According to Health Minister Dr. Jigmi Singay, the driving force behind Bhutan’s success was the powerful political commitment from the king down and the devoted efforts of health workers.

The role of religious figures has also had a big impact. A Buddhist priest who came down with leprosy meditated, attained enlightenment, was treated and cured, then traveled from village to village telling people about the disease.

Currently, about 10 designated staff work in the leprosy area, but the government program is to integrate treatment into the general healthcare system as the goal shifts from elimination in the direction of eradication.

### Bhutan began fighting leprosy in the 1950s, mainly through the efforts of the royal family.



Bhutan: 80% of people work the land

The national hospital at Gidakom, built originally as a leprosy hospital and once the main focus of elimination activities, is now a general hospital. Nearby is a dwelling-cum-workshop for cured persons, where I met a married couple earning a living making handicrafts.

However, stigma is deep-rooted, and there is a widespread fear that those who contract leprosy will suffer deformity. There is also a belief that

“unlucky people get leprosy.”

For Bhutan, the challenge will be to sustain its successes. For that, ongoing monitoring and surveys are important, as well as an integrated approach to the rehabilitation of those who have suffered from the disease.

With free healthcare and education for all, Bhutan has a national policy that the king has expressed as Gross National Happiness (GNH). It derives from the belief that the collective happiness of the people is the most important indicator of national well-being, and is based on a set of strategies for creating an environment in which people have the best chance of finding happiness. These involve equitable and sustainable development, conserving the fragile Himalayan environment essential to Bhutan’s survival, preserving the best aspects of its culture while carefully choosing what to bring in from the outside, and creating good governance. While it is difficult to put happiness into figures, reducing the infant mortality rate and raising per capita income are two ways that it can be measured. To maintain Bhutan’s identity, both men and women are required to wear national dress in public. The role of the extended family, which acts as a social safety net, is also something to which Bhutanese attach much importance.

In Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley’s words, GNH is a way of developing society that focuses on the human dimension, creating the conditions in which individuals can find happiness, reminding them that material wealth is not everything and that there needs to be a balance between the material and the spiritual. Listening to his explanation, I felt his words served as a warning, and that Bhutan has raised an issue that everyone should consider. But I wonder to what extent those of us who have grown accustomed to affluence will be able to change the way we live, and rethink our values. ■