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Lhomon Education

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A gong rings, and a wave of maroon flows in the direction of the classrooms. Fifty young monks, between the ages of seven and seventeen, assemble on the balcony outside their classrooms, waiting to be admitted for morning classes. They kick off their sandals and line them up along the wall, laughing and joking as they wait. The teacher invites them inside and they find their places, seated cross-legged on cushions on the floor in front of low tables. The chant leader strikes a small cymbal, indicating the start of the class. Class begins with a prayer of dedication to Manjushri, the bodhisattva of insight and intellect, chanted in English, and is followed by several minutes of meditation. The room is still and silent, the monks’ hands folded in their laps, eyes cast down, until another strike on the cymbal. Then there is a flurry of activity and chatter, as they arrange their books, or get up to go to another classroom, until their teacher calls them to order and the lesson begins.

These monks are students at the Chokyi Gyatso Institute in southeastern Bhutan. They have entered the monastery to follow a nine-year course in Buddhist philosophy and practice, called Shedra. Their abbot, Dzongsar Khyentse, Rinpoche, has introduced a course of secular education that the monks follow alongside their Buddhist studies. This was prompted out of his concern that the monastic traditions in Bhutan are waning, as well as concern for the well-being of the monks in the twenty-first century who need to be literate and educated in order to function in the modern world. This school within the monastery, known as Lhomon Education (LME), has been created as a laboratory for an innovative approach to education in Bhutan, not only within the monastic setting, but also as a demonstration of how education could be approached differently in the public-school system. As it is not tied into the public-school system, there is freedom to take a different approach to learning and teaching at LME that impacts the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the philosophy behind it.

The Bhutanese Context

Bhutan is a small country with a population of approximately 750,000 people, nestled in the eastern end of the Himalayas. Bhutan is often compared with Switzerland, both in size and natural beauty. The far northern half of the country is adorned with majestic snowcapped peaks and the southern half with lush green subtropical mountains and foothills, with fertile river valleys in between. Despite its giant neighbors—India to its east, south, and west frontiers and the Autonomous Region of Tibet or China to the north, Bhutan has been independent throughout its history. However,
until recently, Bhutan has not opened itself to the outside world, and global movements had little impact on Bhutan, partly due to the country’s geography, making navigation of mountainous terrains difficult. Thus, topography shaped Bhutanese life, history, and culture, with little outside influence. Before any large-scale development activities took place, Bhutanese people largely lived on subsistence farming. As in other Himalayan countries, early settlers in Bhutan were semi-nomadic herdsmen, for whom the trees, lakes, and mountains were sacred. Bhutanese still regard the natural environment with great respect. Trade or commerce if any, existed only in the form of barter between the neighboring valleys. Literacy, either in Dzongkha or Choekey, received from monastic education was sufficient then. With the arrival of Buddhism in Bhutan in the eighth century, religion has played a significant role in the lives of Bhutanese people.

Bhutan has only recently become more open to the rest of the world. Television was introduced in Bhutan for the first time in 1999; satellite connections and internet services began after that. Thus, Bhutanese have only been exposed to the outside media in recent years, but its impact is already felt with the availability of Indian and American television and media, cellphones, and imported junk food gaining in popularity over traditional and locally produced foods and drinks.

A Thimphu [Capital City] high school student is more apt to choose a plastic bottle of artificial juice from Bangkok over a glass of locally pressed apple juice. The first cases of anorexia are surfacing in the country. Boys are beginning to model behavior they’ve seen in Korean gangster films. Villagers are selling their land or going into debt in order to buy flashy cars, or simply letting the land go fallow (LMS, 2012).

**Lhomon Education and Gross National Happiness**

In recognition of the impact of modernization, the LME program is founded on the belief that the goals of education for the twenty-first century must address the crisis of the environment and the social and economic consequences of a system that pursues growth at any cost. Education that focuses on material success and academic achievement by means of a homogenized curriculum, standardized testing, competition, and individual achievement does not address the human hardship and environmental devastation we are witnessing in the world at present. As mentioned, its impact is being felt in many ways in Bhutan. LME seeks to bring an awareness of the interconnection of all aspects of life to the students, and thus its goals are focused on cultivating an ecological consciousness in the students, through an understanding of the interconnected nature of our existence with others, wherever and however they manifest. It emphasizes the attitude of sacredness with which the Bhutanese regard the environment. The curriculum is thus place-based, in that it values the existing ecological wisdom in the community that has been formulated over the centuries. It furthers an understanding of sustainable practices, both old and new, that support a harmonious way of living in accord with the environment. Taking an integrated approach to subject matter, the curriculum highlights the relationships within and between subject areas. The emphasis is on the process of learning, as opposed to learning as a product. LME is holistic in its pedagogical practice, seeking to educate and nurture the whole child, body, heart, mind, and spirit. Mindfulness and contemplative practices, together with experiential learning, anchors learning and makes it relevant and meaningful.

At the heart of the LME program is a commitment to the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the inspiration for an alternative development policy for Bhutan as it entered the modern era in the 1960s. Soon after his enthronement in 1972, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, father to the present king, declared that Gross National Happiness was more important than Gross National Product, thereby launching Bhutan on a path towards sustainable development. The four pillars of GNH assert the protection of the environment, equitable economic development, protection of Bhutan’s cultural heritage, and good governance. They are interdependent aspects of an approach.
to development that puts sustainability and the well-being of the Bhutanese population at its heart, rather than one that is purely economic in its aims. The tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is drawing the attention of the world with its commitment to sustainable and equitable development and enlightened environmental policies (Global Vision International, n.d.). In 2008, a parliamentary democracy was established and elections were held for the first time. The king’s authority was now limited to that of a constitutional monarch. The people of Bhutan, however, continue to regard the King with the highest respect and reverence.

In adopting the vision of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the King and his government made a commitment to promote development that valued the people and the environment, as well as upholding the Buddhist traditions of the country. GNH comes out of, and is an articulation of, Buddhist wisdom and the inseparability and interdependence of all aspects of existence, reflecting an attitude of sacredness towards the environment. GNH provides guidance to policy makers as Bhutan enters the modern world and is a reminder and, since it came from the King, a Royal Command, to keep human values at the heart of development and a sustainable future for the people of Bhutan. The current King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck restated the importance of GNH in the following way:

Thus, for my nation, today GNH is the bridge between the fundamental values of Kindness, Equality and Humanity and the necessary pursuit of economic growth. It ensures that no matter what our nation may seek to achieve, the human dimension, the individual’s place in the nation, is never forgotten. It is a constant reminder that we must strive for a caring leadership so that as the world and country changes, as our nation’s goals change, our foremost priority will always remain the happiness and wellbeing of our people—including the generations to come after us. (Wangchuk, as cited in Gordon, 2013, p. 287)

Following the first election, the prime minister, Jigme Thinley, turned his attention to the education system and convened a conference in the capital, Thimphu, in 2009 to which educators from around the world were invited, along with Bhutanese educators, officials, students, and monastics. Called Educating for GNH, this conference laid out guidelines for instituting an approach to education that would be in line with the principles of GNH. Thinley recognised that for GNH to take hold in Bhutan, it would have to become implanted in the hearts and minds of the younger generation of Bhutanese. They would be the ones inheriting the task of making Bhutan a viable country in the twenty-first century, dedicated to sustainable practices and the well-being of its people. As it stood, he saw that the education system was not suited to the task. Its focus on standardized curriculum, rote learning, and exam results, geared towards competition and material success, was at odds with the vision of GNH. Following the conference, the definition of a literate population that could carry out the vision of GNH was expanded beyond that of basic literacy in language and mathematics, to include literacy in ecology, Indigenous knowledge, science and health, food and nutrition, civics and politics, multiculturalism, media, statistics, and the arts (Hayward, Pannozzo, & Colman, 2009).

Before Bhutan opened its doors to the outside world, the only education available was through the monasteries. Following the introduction of a modern education system, Bhutanese students could choose a traditional, monastic education or a secular, modern one. From a Bhutanese perspective, “traditional” would mean anything Indigenous passed on through the generations, while “modern” is viewed as ideas and concepts that come from outside the country, especially from the scientific, Western world. Bhutanese traditional learning is focused on spiritual content, the fundamental goal being the attainment of the Buddha wisdom, “the benevolent thought of seeking enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Education is to be viewed as a process of edification and knowledge as a tool for benefiting the world” (Phuntsho, 2000, p. 100). Modern education, by contrast, is, among other goals, a means of acquiring knowledge and skills for a career. According to Hayward
et al. (2009), most Western education initiatives today are driven by the belief that improvements in economic performance will lead to the enhancement of societal well-being. The key role of education, therefore, is to prepare students for their role and function in the economy. While preparing students for the job market to secure a livelihood is important, it is only one of the elements of what is needed for overall well-being and happiness. Hayward et al. (2009) write:

GNH values define quality of life and wellbeing broadly to include physical and mental health, time balance, vital communities, a healthy environment, and good governance. From the GNH perspective, therefore, an effective education system is one that, as its outcome, enhances well-being in all these domains.

(p. 2)

Lhomon Society (Bhutan Foundation, 2017) is a major civil society organization in Bhutan, is one proponent of holistic education that advances the vision of GNH. Its mission is to foster genuine GNH-based development, in collaboration with existing education institutions and in harmony with government goals. The impact of modern media on Bhutanese youth is one of Lhomon Society’s main concerns. They believe that Bhutanese youth are being indoctrinated by powerful consumerist messages, which are not only contradictory to the Indigenous social and cultural values, but also undermine the very philosophy of Gross National Happiness. In the face of so-called “modern development,” Lhomon Society worries that Bhutanese youth are losing their connection to the wealth of their own traditions and culture (Idealist, n.d.).

With the launch of development activities in Bhutan from the early 1960s, and changing socio-economic conditions, the meaning of “success” has changed; for many young Bhutanese people these days, “success” is determined not only by a college degree, but also by becoming a civil servant, and hopefully rising to the status of a Dasho, with power, privilege, and respect in society. People began to view English medium education as the path to success (Ueda, 2004). Opportunities to climb the ladder of success are almost exclusively for those in English medium education.

It is one of the aims of Lhomon Society, and of LME, its education program, to reverse the value orientation that has overtaken the youth of Bhutan so that they gain a real appreciation for the traditional ways of their people, ways that go beyond wearing national dress and attending festivals. The wisdom and knowledge that has evolved through the centuries has allowed the people to survive through their understanding of the climate and the land on which they live. When enhanced with new techniques and ideas, this traditional knowledge has great potential to establish personal well-being and security which then extends to the security and well-being of Bhutan as a whole, through self-sufficiency in the rural areas, which is where the majority of the population still live. By extending entrepreneurial education and opportunities to the villagers, LME hopes to create a climate that attracts young people back to the villages. At the same time, it educates and promotes the values of GNH in an active and hands-on way, giving youth an understanding of the ideal that is not purely theoretical. There is an emphasis on the value of community, counteracting the increasing influence of individualism that comes out of a competitive education system and media that are focused on consumerism. The LME program integrates these values into its education program for the young monks. The highly respected status of monks in Bhutanese society means that they can be powerful proponents of these values in the future. Not only are they learning the skills with which to put these values into practice, but because the program is approached from a holistic and integrated standpoint, they are also developing a deeply felt appreciation for the interconnectedness of all aspects of being in the world.

Lhomon Education (LME), developed by Lhomon Society, seeks to create education alternatives that reinforce ancient Bhutanese wisdom traditions while introducing the best of progressive sustainable development practices. The aim is to educate the whole person by engaging the heart and mind in a
holistic and integrated curriculum [which draws] upon local resources and knowledge making it relevant to the local culture, and that of Bhutan in general . . . Taking the view that education is a process of lifelong learning, students will engage in exploration of the environment, ask big questions and find answers based on their experience . . . They will appreciate, not only intellectually but also in their hearts, that everything is connected and everything matters. (Mitchell, 2017).

What is being practiced at LME has the potential for unification and harmonization of the two systems of education in Bhutan—one that is traditional, monastic, spiritual, and focused on students’ affective development, and the other that is modern, school-based, secular, and focused on students’ cognitive development. Educating for the GNH approach is holistic—incorporating mind, body, and spirit, hence holistic education—education with values.

The Lhomon Education Curriculum

The LME curriculum for the young monks, therefore, is founded on the need to bring education into a context of place and language that is relevant and ecologically coherent, one that brings the ideal of GNH into practical reality. It does this using a holistic and integrated pedagogy. The aim is to encourage students and their teachers to see themselves as part of an integrated whole, valuing the wealth of knowledge that exists in the traditions of the locality. It aspires to generate in the students a heartfelt respect and love for nature of which they see themselves a part, extending from the local context to the larger context of the world beyond their community and to the nation. This provides the rationale for the way the curriculum is constructed, that being: integration of subject matter, the inclusion of Indigenous and traditional knowledge and the language, customs, and practices associated with it, and bringing a contemplative and ecological perspective to the whole. Addressing the whole child within the context of the environment within which they live, work, and study, makes education meaningful and heartfelt.

The curriculum is structured around the four pillars of GNH. Referencing the 2009 conference materials (GPI Atlantic, 2009; Hayward, Pannozzo & Colman, 2009), thematic units concentrate on each of the four pillars as a starting point, covering most of the twelve literacies in the units. In the first year, for example, the environmental pillar is addressed by an in-depth examination of the monks’ immediate environment and their place in it, that being the monastery and the local community, and the plant and animal life surrounding it. This is extended to an exploration of their own villages in the context of the district and of Bhutan as whole. It is also an opportunity for the teacher to get to know the students, their backgrounds, and their abilities. This includes extensive education on the idea of Zero Waste, which is actively practiced at the monastery and in the local town and villages. The cultural pillar is introduced through tracing the evolution of human culture from hunter-gatherers to farming, comparing the latter with present day agriculture in Bhutan, and integrating local customs and traditions. For the focus on sustainable development, the monks make an organic vegetable garden, with the help of local farmers, and all subject areas are related and integrated with that activity. For the governance unit, they learned about the Indian Buddhist king, Ashoka, in the third century BC, who has been dubbed “the first environmentalist” by some for his work planting trees, digging wells, and protecting wildlife. From a violent start in life, Ashoka had a change of heart and from then on worked to bring peace, prosperity, and equality to all his subjects, including women, prisoners, and animals. Buddhism and Buddhist values, as the root of Bhutanese culture, are addressed in all units throughout the curriculum, which also build upon and expand those that have preceded them, giving depth and scope to the program.
Given the integrated and interdependent nature of GNH as a philosophical standpoint, it soon becomes evident that one cannot talk about one pillar without referring to the others. Through activities, exploration, and field trips, the environmental, cultural, and policy issues around development and sustainability are addressed through the experience of the students and on the local level. This extends to an examination of how they are played out on the national and international level. The curriculum, while adaptable to other environments, strongly emphasises the importance of becoming familiar with the local environment and the traditional ecological knowledge of the local people. By starting at the point of students’ experience, the context for future learning is established. Stories from Bhutan, as well as from other cultures that address the topic at hand, create the ground for understanding how ecological knowledge is rooted in the culture and is not just an abstract concept. During the topic on fire in the environmental pillar, students heard a story of how fire came to humans. This was followed by students’ stories of fire that they had experienced. The story talks about making fire from friction so the students made bow drills from materials they found in the locality and had some success in using them to make fire. On a field trip, we took a bow drill and a local farmer and his wife, both old, whom we happened to meet on the way, told the students about how they had had to rub sticks to make fire in the olden days. A senior monk addressed the class on the significance of offering fire in Buddhist ritual. We made a sundial and solar cookers. We discussed forest fire prevention, and adopting solar technology on a grand scale and the impact it would have to reduce the dependence on fossil fuels. The interweaving of the aspects of environment, culture, sustainability, and national policy was achieved and presented as an integrated whole in order to ground the students’ learning. Writing, drawing, and reading, speaking, and writing in English, as well as related math projects were part of the whole.

**Indigenous Knowledge**

The LME program and the curriculum strongly emphasises the wisdom and knowledge of the local Elders and community members. Wherever possible, the Elders and knowledge holders in the community are invited into the classroom, and the students are taken out to visit these people in their own settings. Local farmers instruct them on making compost for the garden they grow at the monastery, and on the care of an orchard and the young plants; they also teach the monks the signs in nature that have traditionally indicated when to sow and harvest. There are songs and rituals bound up with all these practices that the monks learn too. Breaking new ground is always determined by the astrological calendar and accompanied by prayers and offerings to the local deities. Besides the spiritual and contemplative benefits of practices in which people engage in the natural setting, being outdoors gives rise to an ecological understanding that is born of direct connection and engagement with the earth, the plants, and the animals. It also offers multiple opportunities for integrated learning. Plant biology, the symbiotic relationship of insects and animals to plants, chemical components of compost, the role of micro-organisms and decomposers, photosynthesis, the carbon cycle, measurement—the list of learning opportunities that arise out of creating a garden is extensive.

The monks manifest a keen awareness of their environment and what occurs within it. They demonstrate a knowledge of the way the animals and birds have adapted to their environment, as well as knowledge of their habits and habitats. These young monks, generally sheltered as they are from the pressures of media and modernity, have a relationship to the world as sacred which was not only born of their circumstances in the monastery, or even from their rural backgrounds. When teaching and learning is integrated and not piecemeal, the ability to see the relationships between and within phenomena is enhanced. This gives rise to wonder and delight in what they experience, whether in school, the garden, or community work in the monastery, and extends out into the environment.
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Language

The Indigenous language group of Eastern Bhutan is known as Sharchop, or Tshangla. As this language has never been written down, there is a rich oral culture, and a wealth of stories, customs, music, and dances, as well as agricultural, healing, and religious traditions that have been passed down through the generations. It is these that are in danger of being lost, and which LME program integrates into the educational program. Given the importance attributed to local and traditional wisdom in the LME program, Sharchop, which is the language of almost all the young monks, is actively encouraged. At the same time, English, with extensive Sharchop translation, is the language of instruction because the huge majority of materials, the internet, and much of the media is in English. On the premise that the knowledge that is bound up in a language will be lost if the language itself is lost, the program encourages the students to record words and phrases in Sharchop in their dictionary, gathering a record of the names of local plants, animals, and practices. These transcriptions are phonetic because there are no formal rules for transcription. Classes at LME are, therefore, conducted in a mixture of English and Sharchop.

Contemplative Practice

The ubiquitous relationship to the sacred in everyday life in Bhutan, combined with the fact that the setting is monastic, obviously impacts the students and the way that the curriculum unfolds. It is human, however, to become busy, distracted, goal oriented, and preoccupied, even within a monastery, and neither students nor teachers are immune to that. Mindfulness and contemplative practices are, therefore, an important aspect of the LME curriculum. What makes the learning of the LME program contemplative is the integration of body, heart, and mind in the teaching and learning process. When these three are synchronized and addressed in the curriculum in the context of an ecological approach to pedagogy that is culturally relevant and place-based, the interdependent nature of reality is less of a concept and more experiential.

Bringing body, heart, and mind into coherence creates the ground for a teaching and learning experience that works with and through the world as the source of all life. By taking this holistic approach to curriculum and pedagogy, LME takes a cautious view of modern education, while maintaining a connection to the social, cultural, and spiritual values of Bhutan’s unique heritage. The long-term view of the LME program aspires to shift the paradigm in education from one that implicitly supports materialism, individualism, and human and environmental chaos to one that acts on behalf of community, ecological sustainability, and wisdom in whatever form that appears. Although LME is specific to the Bhutanese context, the principles upon which it is founded—contemplative practice, ecological perspectives, and compassionate action—are universally applicable. When applied with sensitivity to the culture and ecology of place, education can be relevant, joyful, and effective in addressing the problems of modernization in both East and West.

Notes

1 Bhutan’s national language
2 Choekey literally means dharma language, the classical Tibetan language specified for expressing dharma [Buddhist] teachings as opposed to Phalkey, the language used for general communication in Bhutan.
3 Lho means south and Mon region. Lhomon therefore refers to the people of the region south of the Tibetan plateau, meaning Bhutan.
4 Dasho is the title of a high-ranking officer in the government. Traditionally, commoners wear white scarfs, Dashos wear red, Ministers wear orange, and the kings wear yellow. The coloured scarves are awarded only by the King. When a person gets the rank of Dasho, he or she is given the red scarf by the King, together with a sword.
There are about 24 languages spoken in Bhutan, besides Dzongkha and English, each with their own traditions and customs, which are enshrined in the different languages. There is an overall national culture that is expressed through dress, architecture, and adherence to Buddhist practice and principles, among other things. The advent of a broadcasting network and television has helped establish the uniformity of the national culture.

References


