

Three Marks of Faith

by Karma Ura

Bhutan is a deeply spiritual country, where religious customs strongly influence people's values. Three marks of faith shape the Bhutanese personality.

The first is prayer. Prayer includes short, daily individual acts and liturgies led by monks or lay priests that continue for days. The purpose and duration of prayers vary greatly. Typically, prayers concern what people desire in this life, but they may stretch into the next life. Rituals and petitioning prayers are conducted frequently to solicit gracious and compassionate actions from protector deities. Prayers may consist of mantras or sutras (the Buddha's teachings). They may be profoundly lyrical and non-sectarian or philosophical. Prayers may represent narrow interests. But traditionally, most feature soul-lifting wishes for justice and the well-being of all life-forms—the path that will lead them to happiness. As teachings, prayers should stimulate reflection and practice of the central values of Buddhism, such as compassion. Their function is ultimately to shake off the believer's convoluted and cloudy conscience, which so easily relapses into individualistic self-centeredness. At a more sophisticated level, prayers help believers discover what Buddhist philosophers have described as the "wisdom mind," which can distinguish between the ultimate reality of things and the mental constructions people take to be real.

Another mark of faith, or shared trait among the Bhutanese, is the spirit of volunteerism in the construction of community temples and the installation of spiritual offerings in temples. A 2004 national survey confirmed that no infrastructure activity required more communal labor than that required for construction and maintenance of temples. The annual labor contribution of each household to large and complex temples surpassed the voluntary labor spent in building community schools and suspension bridges and safeguarding sources of drinking water. And it explains the profusion of temples all over the country.



There are about 2,000 temples in Bhutan, which means that people are never too far away from their objects of veneration. Serene statues are the centerpieces of temples. These statues contain scriptural teachings of the Buddha and body relics of eminent Buddhist masters. Thus, temples signify the presence and representations of the Buddha and help to project Buddhist insights.

Stupas (Buddhist memorials that usually house holy relics) remind Buddhists to open their minds to understanding the interdependence of everything, as explained by the teaching of Interdependent Origination. They should realize that every person can contribute to others' happiness and well-being and that each person needs contributions from others to achieve happiness. Happiness depends on sustaining a pattern of giving in meaningful relationships.

The third shared trait, or mark of faith, is the strong Bhutanese belief in the wrongness of killing any life-form, including livestock and wildlife. In the ideal Buddhist world, even flies or rats, which can spread disease, should not be killed. Poultry, swine, fish, and beef cattle should not be raised to feed human beings. In the real world, however, Bhutanese consume an increasing amount of meat as income rises. But they seem to feel morally more comfortable if the meat is imported or if others slaughter the animals. The future demands of an urban society may well clash with the very strong belief in not taking life, one of the virtues taught by the Buddha.

Human behavior is a delicate, dynamic balance between the ideal and the pragmatic, between individual pursuits of happiness and social justice. Lay Buddhist ethics include constraints on individual behavior and demands for social action. Together, they can shape the basic relationship not only between individuals (as a respect for human rights does), but also between individuals and other sentient beings (which human rights do not guarantee).

Dasho Karma Ura is the director of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, a prolific writer, and an aficionado of fine art. Karma Ura studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, and the University of Edinburgh where he earned a master's degree in economics.

A silk scarf (*katah*) is worn as a sign of respect while polishing a statue of Guru Rinpoche in Gangtey Monastery. Guru Rinpoche is depicted holding a *dorje* (thunderbolt), which symbolizes the energy and strength required to defeat ignorance. Photo by John Berthold

Further Reading

Bhutan: The Thunder Dragon Comes To Washington

- BERTHOLD, JOHN. 2005. *Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Monograph on Medicinal Plants of Bhutan*. 2006. Thimphu: Institute of Traditional Medicine Services.
- POMMARET, FRANÇOISE AND CHRISTIAN SCHICKLGRUBER, EDS. 1997. *Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods*. New Delhi: Bookwise (India) Pvt. Ltd.
- SONAM KINGA. 2005. *Speaking Statues, Flying Rocks: Writings on Bhutanese History, Myths, and Culture*. Thimphu: DSB Publication.

Treasures Of The Thunder Dragon

- ARIS, MICHAEL. 1994. *The Raven Crown: The Origins of Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan*. London: Serindia Publications.
- ASHI DORJI WANGMO WANGCHUCK. 1998. *Of Rainbows and Clouds: The Life of Yab Ugyen Dorji as Told to His Daughter*. London: Serindia Publications.
- . 2006. *Treasures of the Thunder Dragon: A Portrait of Bhutan*. New York: Penguin Global.
- Immortal Lines: Speeches of the 4th Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck*. 2007. Thimphu: Bhutan Times Ltd.

A Meditation In Dance

- DASHO SITHEL DORJI. 2001. *The Origin and Description of Bhutanese Masked Dances*. Thimphu: KMT Press.

Three Marks Of Faith

- BARTHOLOMEW, TERESE TSE AND JOHN JOHNSTON, EDS. 2008. *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*. Chicago: Serindia Publications.
- KUNZANG CHODEN. 2005. *The Circle of Karma*. New Delhi: Penguin/Zubaan.
- NATIONAL MUSEUM. 2001. *The Living Religious & Cultural Traditions of Bhutan*. Janpath, New Delhi: Ministry of Culture, Government of India.
- TULKU MYNAK, KARMA URA, AND YOSHIRO IMAEDA, EDS. 2002. *Festival and Faith at Nyimalung*. Tokyo: HiraKawa Shuppan Inc.
- WEHRHEIM, JOHN. 2008. *Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness*. Chicago: Serindia Publications.

Zorig Chusum: Bhutan's Living Arts And Crafts

- An Introduction to Traditional Architecture of Bhutan*. 1993. Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan.
- BEAN, SUSAN AND DIANA MYERS. 1994. *From the Land of the Thunder Dragon: Textile Arts of Bhutan*. London: Serindia Publications.
- KUNZANG DORJI. 2003. *Icons of Awakened Energy: An Introduction to Bhutanese Iconography*. Thimphu: Department of Tourism.

Reinforcing Culture: Tourism In Bhutan

- KUNZANG CHODEN. 2008. *Chilli and Cheese: Food and Society in Bhutan*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.
- POMMARET, FRANÇOISE. 2006. *Bhutan: Himalayan Mountain Kingdom*. Sheung Wan: Odyssey.
- ZEPPA, JAMIE. 2000. *Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey into Bhutan*. New York: Riverhead Books.

RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS

- JIGME DRUKPA. 1998. *Endless Songs from Bhutan*. Grappa Musikkforlag. HCD 7143.
- VARIOUS ARTISTS. 1978. *Music of Bhutan*. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. FW 04030.
- VARIOUS ARTISTS. 2007. *Zey Pi Karsel Dawa* [Musical tribute to 100 years of monarchy in Bhutan]. Youth Development Fund (Thimphu). www.ydf.org.bt.

SUGGESTED FILMS

- Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon*. 2007. DVD-Video. Thimphu: Bhutan Department of Tourism. 15 min.
- Bhutan: Taking the Middle Path to Happiness*. 2007. 35 mm. Maui: Verdeti Productions, LLC. 57 min.
- The Living Edens: Bhutan*. 1997. Video. Arlington, VA: PBS Home Video, Arlington. 60 min.
- Travellers and Magicians*. 2004. 35 mm. London: Zeitgeist Films Ltd./Prayer Flag Pictures. 108 min.