

Real Learning Endangered

*Reflections on nature, sanity, and education from an ashamed
Indian well-wisher*

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One of the similies for the Buddha Nature, or the basic goodness, that we are all said to possess is like pure gold that has been lost by the side of the road which then gradually accumulates so much waste and dross around it that it cannot be recognised any more. It lies there, useless, waiting to be released from its filthy tomb.

When I remember my first and only visit to Bhutan a few years ago, in my mind's eye, I feel Bhutan is like gold, in danger of being lost amidst an ignorant and feverish, slinking and insidious so-called progress, unleashed in large part by the industrial revolution over 200 years ago, and later aided and abetted by the subcontinent's experience of material and mental colonisation, hastened recently by uniquely modern technology, hubris, and violence.¹

Sadly, unlike the Buddha Nature which never degenerates Bhutan can, and perhaps is already doing so, though what the country represents for me, and others no doubt (which I hope will become increasingly clearer as you read on) can, thank heaven, never pass away completely from this universe.

My visit in 2016 to this precious realm was prompted by the kindness of both Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, who suggested casually in a café in New Delhi's bustling Khan Market that I should go, and who generously facilitated the visit in so many ways, as well as by my Guru Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who had recently revisited Bhutan and had almost 60 years ago benefited greatly from the kindness of some Bhutanese people when fleeing Tibet. I understand that Rinpoche has a Bhutanese "mother."

¹M.K.Gandhi. Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1938. Many editions exist. Ashis Nandy. The Twentieth Century: The Ambivalent Homecoming of Homo Psychologicus. Multiversity and Citizens International. 2004. Dharampal. Section 3 on European Dominance in Rediscovering India. SIDH. 2003.
John Mohawk. A Basic Call to Consciousness, Indigenous People's Address To the Western World. Citizens International. 2002.
Samdhong Rinpoche. Uncompromising Truth for a Compromised World. Edited Donovan Roebert. World Wisdom, 2006.

So I too set out in their footsteps, (reckoning that two Rinpoches couldn't be wrong, especially if one added the great Kuenchen Longchenpa to the list), lazily forsaking the long walk in favour of an amazing Druk Air flight from Kathmandu to Paro on a day when the Himalayas revealed themselves in, what one might call, an epiphany of majestic beauty, when one began to be conscious of something of vital importance that had hitherto been smothered by self-centred habitual patterns in unholy alliance with the traffic, aggression, shallowness, ugliness and noise of urban living.

What I found over the next 10 days, like a beggar finding the proverbial jewel in the garbage pit, blew my cramped metropolitan mind as well as giving occasional pause for concern, and that's why I, and many others, would suffer a grief, feel an unutterable loss, were this land of near-pristine wooded hills and healthy flowing waters, of dharma practitioners and *dzongs*, to be bartered to the modern hydra-headed juggernaut of selfishness, carelessness, speed and consumerism in return for a short-lived "progress" and its comforts.

I'm well aware of the dangers of romanticisation but I have a strong feeling that a modernism-induced² ignorance and cynicism has numbed our ability to even understand what the ingredients of an integrated, healthy, and beneficial life are. What might they be?

To answer this let's look at the question by investigating, first, why I've introduced myself in the title as an ashamed Indian well-wisher.

I live in a country that has all but laid waste not only the foundations of its former spiritual integrity and healthy economic self-sufficiency, but also the means for its viable future survival. I feel shame when I read the inspiring words of the great translator, Marpa, who states that he visited India three times "without concern for life or limb" because he felt he'd been born in an "inferior land," meaning Tibet, and that the place he went to, India, was "supreme."³ Let's look at some aspects of what has happened between Marpa's time and the present.

²Rajan Venkatesh. Learning at Bodhshala. Re-orienting the School to its Community. Other India Press and SIDH. 2015, p. x.

³Tsang Nyön Heruka. The Life of Marpa the Translator. Nalanda Translation Committee. Shambhala. 1982, 1999. pp. 116-117.

To help in this let me quote Sri Aurobindo, a wise sage in tune with the Indian *parampara*, (authentic lineage of true sanity sprung from the wisdom mind of kindly sages), who wrote some memorable words in 1909:

“The nineteenth century in India was imitative, self-forgetful and artificial... it aimed at a successful reproduction of Europe in India... better the law of one’s own being though it be badly done than an alien dharma well-followed; death in one’s own dharma is better, it is a dangerous thing to follow the law of another’s nature.”⁴

If Indian teenage students are to memorise anything, I’d say to have them carve the above words indelibly into their smartphone-bewitched memory banks. I’d have Bhutanese children as well learn by heart: “Beware the successful reproduction of the West in Bhutan, dragon-land blessed by Guru Rinpoche!”

What’s the essence of the “alien dharma”, the so-called civilisation of Europe and the west? It involves, among other things, a relentless war against, and a conquest of, the natural ecology, the destruction of small communities and their local markets embedded in nature, cooperation, conviviality and creativity.

Above all, it believes that the endless multiplication of wants, rather than the purification of human character, is the mother of all answers to what human beings really need.⁵

It tears humans apart from the source of their spiritual and economic satisfaction and happiness. It leads to governments and large segments of a nation congratulating themselves for blowing a satellite out of the sky with indigenous missile technology. It elevates cleverness and specialisation over a caring wisdom and sacred overarching perspective that would promote and enhance human happiness and goodness.

⁴Aurobindo. The Awakening Soul of India. Karmayogin: Weekly Review. 26th June 1909-No.2.

⁵E.F. Schumacher. Small Is Beautiful. See Chap. 4 on Buddhist Economics. Sphere Books. 1975. pp. 45-46.

For Mahatma Gandhi, true civilisation meant “good conduct.”⁶ In modern India, what does civilisation mean? More shopping malls, less forest cover, hundreds of extra cars per day introduced onto Delhi’s roads alone,⁷ and a ceaseless drift from the villages to towns and cities. It means top rankings for a host of Indian cities in a World Table of the most polluted. Ironically, Gurugram, village of the Guru, (Gurgaon), being one of the worst offenders.

Rather than constantly looking to the west to define what our future economic, social and political trajectories should be, might it not be better to carefully question the very viability of this imitative behaviour and reflect on what we already have which is of lasting value? When his people suffered the consequences of the steamroller of careless capitalism, John Mohawk, a Native American, categorically stated:

“... the way of life known as Western Civilisation is on a death path on which their own culture has no viable answers.”⁸

If we are unaware of this, it is largely because our so-called education has not taught us even the most basic discriminating intelligence and also because we are being so craftily entertained, from one corner to the next, by a network of devices unknown a generation or two ago. We “uninstructed worldlings,”⁹ unawakened humans, are easily entranced by short-term gratification and excitements, however unsatisfactory they may eventually turn out to be. Have we also, perhaps, lost that innate understanding that more rooted cultures had, namely that human life, divorced from a wise and nurturing relationship with the natural world and other sentient beings, is an invitation to hell on earth, a *koyaanisqatsi*, a shattering of the fragile balance, of both the manifest and the hidden ties of interdependence? We’ve truly been self-forgetful in this regard.

⁶Gandhi. op.cit. p. 53.

⁷Delhi Economic Survey: Number of vehicles on Delhi roads over 1 ... <https://auto.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/.../number-of-vehicles-on-.Delhi-roads/6812>. The figures are frightening. About 10 million motor vehicles on the roads, showing a growth rate of 5.81% from 2017-2018. A report of 13-2-2014 mentions a figure of 1400 cars being added to Delhi Roads daily. Unsurprisingly, bicycle usage is down 7% for 2017-18.

⁸John Mohawk. op. cit. p. 15.

⁹Bhikkhu Bodhi, Editor. In the Buddha’s Words. An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon. The Tribulations of Unreflective Living Section. pp. 32-33

“We should be happy,” says Kagyu Master Tai Situ Rinpoche, “that we are not all in a state of total nervous breakdown or insanity,” given, he says, that our modern, artificial environments make us forget that life can be basically simple. Love, caring for oneself and others, healthy balanced relationships, and discipline become very complicated and problematic in these circumstances. Basic emotional states, birth and death, all become big deals, full of pitfalls and frustration. Rinpoche goes on to say that people who have grown up with nature might not have seen any books, and they might not have the ability to explain what love, respect or kindness are but “they know and feel these principles in a way that gives them stability.”¹⁰

I watched “Travellers and Magicians”, by Khyentse Norbu¹¹ for the second time. It’s amazing what one forgets from the first viewing! The film so felicitously clarifies the tussle between the slow, hard-working rugged stability and sanity of the “old ways” and the restless and frustrating modern search for an imagined “dreamland” where money and forbidden pleasures invite one, seductively, to enjoy the fruits of craving-driven aspirations.

My limited understanding suggests to me that Bhutan is like the one surviving sober member of a world club of addicts. There, one is able to confront space and wild places where, like a wounded deer, we head to so as to be healed and from where we return with a fresh perspective on our human economy and cramped urban abodes.¹² There is, yet, a beauty, a natural outcome of balance and harmony, where man-made objects do not jar the sense but blend with the landscape. In a world intoxicated by economic growth and novelty, Bhutan needs to continue to be the disloyal one, the brave nonconformist. I say it’s Bhutan’s duty to the human race.¹³ In a world gone, increasingly insane, Bhutan must continue to stand alone, if necessary, an essential reminder of what it means for humans to live in balance with the natural world.

¹⁰The Twelfth Tai Situpa. *Relative World, Ultimate Mind*. Penguin. 1992, 1999. pp. 40-41.

¹¹Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche. *Direction and Script*. Released 21st April 2004.

¹²Wendell Berry. *The World-Ending Fire. The Essential Wendell Berry*. Edited and Introduced by Paul Kingsnorth. Penguin 2017. Essay Entitled “Getting Along with Nature.” pp. 170-171.

¹³J. Krishnamurti. *Think on These Things*. KFI. 2017. Chapter 5 on Creative Discontent. pp. 45-46. Also see the intriguing Story “Under the Garden” in *A Sense of Reality* by Graham Greene. 1999 for refreshing comments on disloyalty. p. 48

Why do I mention all this? I hear the message, “are we in Bhutan not the first to introduce GNH above GNP? Why are you, of all people, a Delhi-wallah, who are already damaged goods, preaching to us, as the yet unviolated?” A pertinent point, but surely if I am damaged, am I not duty-bound to warn Bhutan of the perils that have led to my woe?

What I hear from others, and what I’ve seen for myself during my visit, leads me to believe that some damaging changes are indeed already occurring in your porous land. Television and the Internet seem to have brought mixed blessings and are accelerating a move towards consumerism and further hastening the end of pastoralism and rural economy already in decline for a century or more.¹⁴ With drug addiction and crime on the rise in the urban areas, as well as the physical and mental move westwards of many fine young minds, a road-widening drive creating ecological damage, as well as more and more cars in evidence,¹⁵ how long can Bhutan resist what some consider the irresistible? How long, heaven forbid, before the outskirts of Thimphu begin to resemble the worst aspects of Gurugram, Kanpur or Patna in India?

Near the entrance to the Jamba *Lhakhang* (monastery) in Bumthang on August 14, 2016, I found a shop that sold packet crisps among other items so familiar street-side in India. An intriguing girl of magisterial demeanour, 10 or 12 years old perhaps, forcefully informed me it was “junk food.” On the very same shop verandah a kind young man, Kelsang la, secretary to Dasho Karma Ura, unexpectedly gave me a copy of the latter’s “Longchen’s Forests of Poetry and Rivers of Composition in Bhutan.” A supremely meaningful conjunction of events within minutes of each other!

Therein I read, regarding Bumthang: “The land is unlike a land of people, but a paradise transplanted.” Further on it said: “Character is gentle and befriending is easy... Here, morality is not just adventitious, people exude loving kindness. Wherever one goes, there is no need to carry travel-provision.”¹⁶

¹⁴Karma Phuntsho. *The History of Bhutan*. Random House India. 2013. pp. 30-31.

¹⁵Conversation with Neten Zangmo which suggested that the Bhutanese were purchasing cars, that many could not properly afford, simply to keep up with the Joneses.

¹⁶Karma Ura. *Longchen’s Forests of Poetry and Rivers of Composition in Bhutan*. The Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research. 2016. p. 67.

I am wondering if Bhutanese, given to reflection on such matters, consider whether this basically gentle and ethical character has changed already, or will do so in the next few decades or less, once the shiny, widened roads have brought into the interior their full complement of speed, traffic, heavily packaged material stuff of all kinds, chemicalised medicine, modern “education” - in short, all the kaleidoscopic fragments of modernity and artificiality in all their guises? This is not a rhetorical question. A road is not just a road... they have multiple consequences and, like roads to hell, are paved with good intentions.

It’s time to introduce another mantra-like quotation with the potential, perhaps, to begin a process of restoring sanity and balance anywhere on the planet and which may act as a lodestar for some fortunate, eccentric, “disloyal” sons and daughters of the land:

“Slow down. Pay attention. Do good work. Love your neighbours.
Love your place. Stay in your place. Settle for less, enjoy it more.”¹⁷

These are words from the introduction to some writings from an American farmer-author, a “modern Thoreau”, Wendell Berry, who, please note well, eschewed the glamour, fame and financial promise of New York in favour of intelligent, caring and patient hard work on his land in Kentucky. My own, no doubt biased opinion, is that these words serve as a quintessential life and soul-preserving mantra for our times, as vital for long-term happy flourishing as are the Mani or Guru mantras - for happiness, liberation, and the full awakening of Buddhahood.

Each short phrase begs a commentary of its own, but might one dare say the purpose of these words encapsulate the essence of what an education should be?

“Education should help the individual to discover the true values which come with unbiased investigation and self-awareness...

What is the good of learning if in the process of living we are destroying ourselves?”¹⁸ My strong hunch is that a fair amount of modern education has proved to be a convoluted and ignorant way of increasing our ability to destroy ourselves and our planet, birthed, as it were, as a necessary partner

¹⁷Wendell Berry, op.cit. Introduction, p. x.

¹⁸J. Krishnamurti. Education and the Significance of Life. p.15.

to the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution, which heralded the raising of the machine above humans, an ignorance of how much is enough, when to stop economic growth and start actually living.

Such education enlarges our desires, the “psychological holes in our stomachs”,¹⁹ rather than nourishing an appreciation of our basic goodness and its accompanying beneficence. These can only arise out of an education that promotes greater self-awareness, compassion, and a skillful engagement with the world based on a thorough appreciation of our interdependence. In other words, a social and emotional intelligence nurtured through investigation, patient inner scrutiny and self-respect that then flows naturally outwards, towards others in a meaningful and beneficial manner.

We would do well to consider education as the primary means to prepare human beings for good, lifelong, wholesome and creative (not repetitive mind-numbing), work with these three characteristics:

First, work that gives a person the opportunity to develop and utilise beneficial qualities such as kindness/compassion, patience, courage, forgiveness, integrity, generosity and gratitude, among others. Second, work that enables a person to overcome his or her egocentricity by uniting with others in the fulfilment of common tasks; and third, work that enables one to create the goods and services needed for a satisfying and non-violent existence.²⁰ Gandhi said that true education is “an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man’s body, mind, and spirit.”²¹ The current farce of education, on the other hand, ensures that “The higher he goes, the farther he is removed from his home, so that at the end of his education he becomes estranged from his surroundings...(it is) calculated to wean him from his traditional culture.”²² Hence, for Bhutan, proper education would be the means to “link the children, whether of the cities or villages, to all that is best and lasting”,²³ to paraphrase Gandhi.

¹⁹A phrase used by Lama Thubten Yeshe, founder of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, one of my teachers.

²⁰Schumacher. op.cit. p.45. Also Rajan Venkatesh’s profoundly important work already cited.

²¹M. K. Gandhi. *Towards New Education*. Navajivan Publishing House. 1953, 2005. p. 38.

²²*Ibid.*, p.31.

²³M.K.Gandhi. *Constructive Programme*. Navajivan. 1941, 2006. p. 14.

This also means that teaching any subject whether it be English, Science or Mathematics outside of a local and appropriate cultural and natural wisdom context, is not going to help Bhutan preserve its unique wisdom, culture, and its many languages, nor help people love and stay in their places but rather to flock to dirty overcrowded cancers called cities in search of office jobs hunched in front of computers. How about thinking along the lines of an education that generates a sense of inner richness, rather than impoverishment? That only happens when children are nurtured in an atmosphere of love and safety and in the right environment by kind and skilful bearers of the authentic *parampara*.

Rabindranath Tagore felt forest schools to be a vital learning environment since he saw that human beings learned best amongst nature. To establish this kind of learning would be a huge, but essential task, demanding that we let go of preconceived notions of what a school should look like. Some, like Ivan Illich, even go as far as to cogently argue for the total de-schooling of Society so that education can naturally occur in home and community living with the result that the one-dimensionality and inequalities - endangered by normal schooling - can be avoided.²⁴ But, for that, we require healthy homes and communities which are increasingly rare.

I witnessed just this week a home-taught child responding to the question of how they were being educated at home, saying that it was like a “wild school.” Cultivation of a sane wildness, an independence of spirit, allied with respect for a life in balance with the natural world is what, I suspect, will save Bhutan from making the same mistakes as almost every other country in the world. But for this to happen the dangerous alliance with modernity and its delights will have to be deeply, and critically, pondered upon. That requires not only a thorough understanding of the shortcomings but also a trust in the alternatives. Sometimes the media itself helps push us in the right direction, witness this from the Guardian website:

“Why bother designing robots when you can reduce human beings to machines? Recently Amazon acquired a patent for a wristband that can track the hand movements of workers. If this technology is developed, it could grant companies almost total control over their workforce.”²⁵

²⁴Ivan Illich. *Redefining Education. Why We Must Disestablish School*. Citizens International. 2003.

²⁵George Monbiot. “As Robots take our jobs, We need something else. I know what that is.” Article in Opinion section of Guardian website. 7th February 2018.

To prevent a large-scale descent into such a techno-dystopia will require students to develop a robust, discriminative intelligence, allied with a warm-heartedness that stops the war we're waging within ourselves and inflicting upon the planet Earth. I firmly believe that Bhutan has to be the primary torchbearer in this regard and keep lit a flame of awareness that burns up the dross that is currently preventing a worldwide flowering of goodness.²⁶

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