

Inspired and Driven: Aiming High

Karma Yonten in conversation with Tshewang Dendup

A few kilometres from the hustle and bustle of the cosmopolitan city that is Thimphu, in the anonymity and seclusion of an almost invisible location, Bhutan's first-ever waste transfer station is coming up. The transfer station, on nearly one acre of land, will have magnets to pull metal objects and blowers to separate light waste such as plastic and paper. Some 70 people will be working on site with many scanning and picking up designated and particular types of waste. The transfer station, slated to kick-start operations in March 2017, is a manifestation of the drive of a young Bhutanese entrepreneur to establish himself and his company as Bhutan's top-notch private waste management firm. The person is Karma Yonten and the firm, Greener Way.

Karma Yonten started Greener Way in March 2010 by providing door-to-door waste collection services. Greener Way also bought scrap from informal waste collectors. The firm saw the burgeoning population of the capital city and the services it could provide in the area of solid waste collection and disposal. Greener Way now has an annual turnover of Nu 12 million.

In 2014, more than 10 entrepreneurs responded to the Thimphu Thromde's call for bids to collect and dispose of municipal solid waste. Karma Yonten and Greener Way won the bid and signed the contract with the Thromde in December that year.

The capital city has the highest population in the country. The Greener Way office is located in a central part of town but in a structure devoid of the trappings of a modern Thimphu office. Black coffee seems to be the fuel that drives the energy of the place. Karma Yonten's wife looks after the finances. His friend, Subash Sharma, heads human resources and is also the firm's strategist. Another friend, Dorji Wangchuk, is the chief operations officer. Under these four captains, 73 people work for Greener Way.

A conversation with Karma Yonten takes you from the abyss of the capital city's mounting waste dump to the heights of a person's unbridled ambition. The visitor quickly learns that, for this young businessman, time is a limited commodity. He

is agile and swift in his bodily motion, as well as on social media. If you contact Greener Way via the social media platform Facebook, the firm will “typically reply within minutes”.

This interview with Karma Yonten (KY) was carried out on a sunny November morning, at Greener Way’s upcoming transfer station construction site in Thimphu by Tshewang Dendup (TD).

TD: *What does Karma Yonten the CEO of Greener Way think when he wakes up in the morning or goes to bed at night?*

KY: I like to make sure that our initiative is very much stable down the line. That’s what I am focused upon. I want to build an empire of waste management. I’ve been focusing on that.

TD: *So you dream big?*

KY: We dream big and we also execute big. We’ve been trying to execute big. We’re trying to build a bigger team.

TD: *Let’s go back. Did you have an easy childhood?*

KY: I was brought up in Samdrup Jongkhar. Childhood wasn’t easy. I remember doing many temporary works during the winter vacation. Every time I was back from school, that three-month break, I used to work.

TD: *What did you do?*

KY: I did work for a coal company, collecting papers, documents, running around. And I also worked for a labour agent to make permits for labourers for the Kurichu project.

TD: *Karma Yonten is today a successful businessman. What has contributed to this success?*

KY: Maybe the lessons that I learnt are one thing. I’ve made lots of mistakes. But through each mistake, we’re learning many things. And we don’t want to make the same mistakes repeatedly you know. I’ve a very strong family as well as a very strong team. So, with their help, I’m able to reach where I am.

TD: *How does your family help you?*

KY: They've always been behind me you know. The mistakes that I make, they accept them you know. Sometimes my mistakes have been very expensive. But they were always there behind me.

TD: *You have more than 70 people working for you. How do you manage the team?*

KY: Dorji looks after operations. My wife looks after the finance part. And we've lots of people under Dorji who look after operations and manage the day-to-day affairs. We sit down together once in a month or once in two weeks and we discuss all things.

TD: *How do you keep your team strong?*

KY: We have a very close bonding. We make sure we sit together, drink together, discuss together.

TD: *All 77 of you?*

KY: Yes, we do that once in a month. We dine together. And we discuss issues together.

TD: *Do you pay them well by Bhutanese standards?*

KY: Yes very much, we are paying lot more than the national minimum daily wage.

TD: *Why did you go to study in India?*

KY: There was no alternative.

TD: *Why?*

KY: There was only one college in Bhutan, Sherubtse. I didn't get through. So went for my Commerce degree in India.

TD: *Were you a good student?*

KY: No, very bad.

TD: *Why?*

KY: I don't know why but I wasn't a good student. I wasn't academically very sound.

TD: *You didn't work hard?*

KY: Yeah, I didn't work hard you know, although expectations from my teachers were good.

TD: *What do you mean by that?*

KY: I was very confident you know.

TD: *What did your teachers say about you?*

KY: They thought that I would be doing good in life. In general they used to feel that but every time after my result declaration time, I wasn't good. I was overconfident. I didn't do my homework well.

TD: *That means you didn't work?*

KY: I didn't work hard, you know, in class 11 and 12. I really didn't work hard.

TD: *So how is it that a young Bhutanese boy, who was overconfident, not hardworking, who didn't do well in his 11 and 12 classes, now looks after one of Bhutan's most successful and most talked about private firms? What changed?*

KY: I think it is my attitude that has changed. Now I like to work hard you know.

TD: *Do you work hard?*

KY: I don't know but I'm investing almost 12 hours a day in my organisation. I think that's very good long hours you know.

TD: *Would you say that now you are focused?*

KY: Yes, very much.

TD: *What changed? You said attitude. What do you mean by that?*

KY: I wanted to be a successful businessman and without working hard, I realised I couldn't be successful. I realised I wouldn't be anyone.

TD: *When did that change take place?*

KY: In 2008.

TD: *What happened?*

KY: When your wallet is dry, you feel that. I was very much broke. As I said, I was doing this hotel business. I ran into big debt. I borrowed money from people. I couldn't pay back on time. I became a bad borrower and realised that I had to make money.

TD: *What are your weaknesses?*

KY: Temper management.

TD: *Has that affected your business?*

KY: Oh yes. I had some issues with my employer whereby I realised that I was going wrong. When I'm talking about my employer, it's the Thromde Municipality. Now things have changed. I have repaired my relations with them.

TD: *How did you do that?*

KY: I went to them saying I was wrong, I was sorry, I was unprofessional.

TD: *You had the humility to apologise?*

KY: Yes, I did that.

TD: *How did that work out?*

KY: They didn't accept me but now it's been quite some time, after repeatedly requesting them, informing them that I was wrong, please forgive me, you know. Now things have changed. Now they're looking in a different way. They're finding a different Karma Yonten now.

TD: *What do you tell your children?*

KY: I've been telling them that you got to work hard in life. Even my son, right now, the best thing that I've learned from my son is he knows the value of waste. Even when making his first speech in school, he talked about waste and he was indirectly promoting my company. That was the best thing I could ever see from my child.

TD: *So you're grooming him?*

KY: I think I would like him to be the second generation for my organisation.

TD: *What do you need to survive in Thimphu and in modern Bhutan?*

KY: Well, money is not the primary thing I must say. We need to have ideas and we need to have that attitude and, of course, hard work is what you will have to do.

TD: *What do you think about the young people of Bhutan?*

KY: We're so busy thinking that we've very little time to work. Almost all the time that I meet young people, they have visions, they have plans you know. But we plan so many things that we've very little time to actually work, real work, you know. So that's where we're going wrong, our young people. Many young people approach me, they share their ideas. A year ago, they will tell something. Next year they'll tell another. So they're not investing their time in working for real you know.

TD: *Do you think our youth can contribute to the global economy?*

KY: Yes, very much. Having access to a 1.3 billion market, I think our young people can get it done. Having a free trade agreement with India, we can do a lot of manufacturing work that deals directly with the Indian market.

TD: *What are the strengths of our youth?*

KY: We're smart. We can find solutions easily. And we communicate well. We've good communications skills.

TD: *You meet a lot of young Bhutanese. You go to schools, you deliver talks. People come to you. What have you found in your interactions with the youth of Bhutan?*

KY: We want to do easy things you know, where there are quick returns. They don't want to struggle a lot and they don't have long-term visions, they're very short.

TD: *So what do you tell them?*

KY: I tell that whenever you have visions, try to convert your vision into reality, work hard. You're going to face problems. I tell them facts.

TD: *What facts?*

KY: You cannot get things easily done. So my advice has always been please go for the long run. Keep on taking the pain because not many days are going to be good days. Sometimes your days are just gone, your days aren't productive. I tell them to go for the long run and keep on pushing things and not to lose hope.

TD: *What practical advice do you give to young Bhutanese?*

KY: I've always told them to be a disciplined man.

TD: *What do you mean by that?*

KY: Once we start doing a venture, we become very reluctant, complacent once things are moving. So that's why I talk to them about being disciplined. Many young people they lose focus I feel, two or three months they do good, then they get distracted, they lose focus. So I tell them, make yourself disciplined.

TD: *What does discipline mean to Karma Yonten?*

KY: For me, everything has timing. So that's what I tell them. You make sure you're a disciplined man. You cannot reach your organisation at ten when your employees are there by 8.30. You be with them on time. Balance your time between work and family. And financial discipline as well.

TD: *People say that Karma Yonten is a driven businessman to the point where he can be pretty unpleasant in competition. Is that a valid observation?*

KY: I think this is my industry. I feel that way. I don't know. Maybe me being a pioneer in this industry, I feel that this industry belongs to me. At least in Thimphu I feel that way.

TD: *So you're very possessive?*

KY: Yes, very much.

TD: *What is your vision?*

KY: We want to make sure that we handle every sort of waste in Thimphu. All waste is taken care of by Greener Way: compost plants, e-waste, medical waste. My vision is to make sure that Greener Way is the one stop solution for all sorts of waste.

TD: *Any other practical advice for our young budding entrepreneurs?*

KY: In any venture that you do, make sure that the social dividends are more. That's how I think any venture can be a socially responsible company. And we need a lot of socially responsible companies.