

New Times, New Challenges for Bhutanese Youth

Druk Journal (DJ) talks to Lama Shenphen Zangpo (LSZ) on youth-related issues in a society in evolution

DJ: *Lama, we know that you are helping our youth deal with a number of problems, including drug and alcohol addiction. Would you link these problems to change and modernisation that Bhutan is going through?*

LSZ: I don't think that we can attribute so-called youth problems specifically to modernisation. Youth have always pushed boundaries, and being rebellious is part of growing up. It is a way to say goodbye to the dependence of childhood and hello to the independence of adult life. A difference between youth of today and youth of the past is exposure. In former days, youth only had limited contact with the outside world and so their rebellious activities were naturally confined by their environment. In this respect, a mischievous act might be to steal food from an aunt's kitchen or to secretly try alcohol with friends.

Nowadays, youth have many more ways in which to channel their defiant streak. Also, an urban environment emboldens youth as there is less chance of being caught. In this way, we can at least say that modernisation has added a new dimension to the youth rebellious spirit and perhaps acted as a trigger to latent social ills, but I don't think we can fully attribute youth problems to modernisation.

DJ: *How serious are the problems in terms of the numbers as a trend, and in severity as in suicides?*

LSZ: The number of drug users is very high and increasing, though hard drugs are rare. Mostly, the younger kids sniff thinner, while the older ones are attracted to marijuana or prescription drugs, such as spasma-proxyvon (SP) or nitrosun (N10).

The number of suicides is worrying, and is a sign that many youth don't know how to deal with life issues and feel that there is no way forward.

DJ: *What is missing? In other words, what are we not doing to solve the problem? Is it a lack of leadership? Lack of expertise? Lack of interest? Lack of guidance from parents, teachers, and senior citizens? All of these?*

LSZ: Well, as Buddhists we understand that nothing appears from nowhere, but develops through a combination of causes and conditions. An increase in drug use is no exception. As a simple example, think of seeds that are producing unhealthy crops. Now, the quality of the seeds has not changed—basically the seeds that were sowed thirty years ago are no different from the ones sowed today—but what has changed is the environment in which they are planted. In this respect, a farmer will not focus too much on the seed as a means to improve the quality of the crop, but instead attempt to modify the environment by implementing changes, such as adapting the amount of water, sunlight, and nutrition that his plants receive.

It is the same with youth. It is not that babies are born with a greater propensity to become addicts now than in the past. What has changed is the environment in which they are raised. If the DNA of modern-day babies has changed, then there would be a comparable increase in the number of drug users worldwide, but this is not the case.

As an example, consider the US and UK, and Taiwan and Japan. All four countries have advanced economies, developed social structures and similar laws relating to drug use. Yet, there is a far higher percentage of youth turning to drugs in the two Western countries than in their East Asian counterparts. Now, obviously it is not that US babies are more genetically predisposed to addiction than their Taiwanese counterparts. It is the circumstances under which they are raised that are different.

Having said that, youth cannot be absolved from their personal responsibilities and it is unhelpful to allow them to blame their circumstances for their drug-taking habit. Yet, at the same time, we cannot deny that in many cases there is an undeniable correlation between a youth's upbringing and his or her use of drugs. In this respect, we need both short-term responses that focus on the immediate needs of the youth, and long-term strategies directed at transforming certain aspects of society.

I have not done any research into the reasons behind the high prevalence of drug use among our youth, but I do hear a recurring story when I ask long-term drug users about their background: “My parents are divorced and my step-mother/step-father is not showing concern for me.” Whenever I visit schools to discuss a student who is getting off track, the school principals inevitably confirm the validity of these kinds of stories.

So, to answer your question more precisely, there is a strong indication that lack of parental support and family breakups are key reasons for the high prevalence of youth addiction. Other major causes are peer pressure, teenage rebellious spirit, unemployment and a feeling that drug-use is cool.

DJ: *Have you worked with similar situations in a number of places or countries? Is there any hope that the problem can be solved?*

LSZ: Prior to coming to Bhutan, I was in Taiwan and Japan. Neither country has major drug or youth problems, though Japan does have an issue with school bullying. It is not that these countries solved their drug problems, but that the drug-culture never developed. In Taiwan, I feel that there are two prominent reasons why the youth are not turning to drugs: the families are close-knit and very attentive to the younger members, and the youth are kept fully occupied with school/college work and related activities. Basically, when their hormones are running wild and their rebellious spirit is at its peak, teens are kept engaged with study, sport, or music, and so their energy is productively channeled.

With regard to the latter part of your question, well, there is no society that is totally problem-free, and so we have to accept that there will always be a certain amount of discord. Still, with right intervention, the level of drug use and youth violence can certainly be reduced and kept within acceptable boundaries.

For a strategy to be effective, however, it needs to be based on the rationale and understanding that everyone possesses basic goodness—our natural state when purified of defilements. As an example, take a diamond buried in mud. No matter how thick the dirt or irrespective of how long the diamond has been buried, it is never tarnished or tainted by the mud. Once the diamond has been dug out and washed, it appears in its natural, pristine state. In this example, the diamond represents our mind, while the mud is the ignorance that causes us to do harmful action.

Now, if the mud could somehow enter the diamond and permanently contaminate it, then there would be no point in washing it, but this is not the case. That is why a diamond hunter seeks diamonds in soil and mud. He knows that the dirt is not part of the diamond and so can be washed away.

It is the same with addicts. The addiction was not there at birth and any negative action that is being committed is a result of their addiction or other circumstances. Consequently, like the soil on the diamond, it can be washed away.

Of course, if someone is a danger to themselves or others, there may be a need to isolate them from society or to place them in a safe location, but we should never give up on them. In the same way that a diamond caked with thick mud might take longer to clean than a diamond covered with a thin layer, we understand that a person with a long history of addiction or anti-social behaviour might require more attention and support than a short-term user. Yet, in both cases, the dirt or ignorance can still be cleansed away to reveal a pure and untainted essence.

For real-life examples of people who harmed others but finally became good, we need look no further than our own Buddhist tradition. Both Milerapa and Angulimala killed many people, but when “cleansed” of their ignorance, they became masters of the Dharma who have offered countless generations a shining example of human goodness.

So, to return to your original question, the problem can definitely be dealt with effectively, but our approach needs to be rooted in the wisdom that all people possess basic goodness. If it is not, then there will always be a tendency to criminalise and banish, rather than rehabilitate and reintegrate. And, when this occurs, the problem is merely shunted around—from school to street, from street to prison and from prison back to street—and is not effectively addressed.

Finally, from my personal experience, I can honestly say that the “mud” is not that thick with our Bhutanese youth. In general, they are still very innocent and polite. In fact, in all my interactions with youth who were high on drugs and carrying knives, I have never once encountered a teen who was offensive or aggressive towards me. In contrast, they have always been respectful and expressed remorse for their action. I see this as an indication that they still respond well to kindness and don’t see it as a weakness to exploit, as occurs in many societies.

DJ: *What is the impact that this is having on our society?*

LSZ: I see a certain dichotomy developing where seniors tend to avoid the youth rather than reach out to them. In turn, the youth are losing respect for elders, often stating that their advice is focused more on attaining or maintaining social status rather than addressing real issues that affect their lives. Still, generation-gap misunderstandings are a worldwide phenomena and not something that specifically affects our youth.

DJ: *What was the saddest incident that you have come across?*

LSZ: A number of youth have overdosed and died since I came to Bhutan. Whether the incidents were a deliberate attempt at suicide or a cry for help is unclear, but it is really heartbreaking to see anyone unnecessarily losing their life at such a young age. If only someone had heard their cry for help and persuaded them to wait, rather than act on impulse, there is a high chance that these people would be alive today.

DJ: *What was the most inspiring experience that you have had?*

LSZ: I guess seeing youth who were once considered hopeless outcasts now being role models, and reaching out to other youth who are still lost in the hell of addiction.

DJ: *Is it development, modernisation, westernisation, or urbanisation?*

LSZ: Well, as I stated earlier, from Buddhism we know that situations arise from many causes and conditions and not from one isolated cause. Take a plant as an example; the potential for growth is latent in the seed, but it requires other conditions to bring it to fruition, such as moisture, heat, etc. Social problems likewise lay hidden in social structures and are triggered by external events, such as the advent of modernisation or westernisation. However, we cannot solely lay the blame for social ills on these two causes. If they were the only reasons for adolescent problems, then every country that has gone through a period of modernisation or westernisation would have the same social ills, and that is clearly not the case.

DJ: *We know that addiction, even suicides, are not the problems in themselves. What are the most obvious social ills that are afflicting Bhutanese society? How can we address these ills?*

LSZ: Well, as I mentioned earlier, I hear a lot of stories about broken families and so I am just wondering whether traditional marital systems that once served the family and rural communities well are perhaps not providing the same protection and inspiration for the youth in a modern, urban environment.

In this regard, I think it may be helpful to educate the youth to develop stronger family bonds. At the moment, it is very common for two people to meet, marry, have a child, and divorce all within a twelve to eighteen month period. When this occurs, the parents often quickly remarry. And, from what I hear, many new step-parents are not mentally prepared to take on the responsibility of a child who is not his or her

own. Education can play a big role in encouraging youth to postpone starting a family until their relationship is stable and they are mentally and financially prepared to give a child the love and support it needs to develop into a well—adjusted and caring adult.

Furthermore, there is a large category of youth who are not qualified for white collar jobs, but who are unwilling to take blue collar work. With nothing to occupy their time, this group is very vulnerable to begin taking drugs. So it is in everyone's interests that such youth begin to accept dishwashing, carpentry, construction work, etc. as respected employment. However, as the youth are a product of society, this is not going to happen until the general population begin to respect and appreciate this kind of work.

Basically, until there is a social shift regarding manual work, the youth will always feel uncomfortable to be a bricklayer or a dishwasher. Now, it is for the educators and researchers to investigate why there is a social stigma attached to this kind of work, and to put in place programmes that change this perception. As I stated in an earlier example, a seed cannot flourish in isolation from its environment. Therefore, if we want the youth to do manual labour, we need to challenge the social barriers that are discouraging them from doing so.

DJ: *From a Buddhist perspective, is Bhutanese society missing the compassion that could help deal with youth issues? Should we try to create a more compassionate society? How can we do this?*

LSZ: Well, there is nowhere on the planet that would not benefit from more compassion. To quote HH Dalai Lama: “Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive.” From this statement we fully understand the importance of compassion for social cohesion, and so, yes, we definitely need to create a more compassionate society.

However, we cannot merely tell people to be compassionate. It cannot be evoked at will. Basically, we cannot expect people to jump out of bed one morning and shout: “Hey, from today I’m going to be compassionate!” That isn’t going to happen. Instead, we need to implement educational policies based on the understanding that compassion is actually our natural state, and it is ignorance that blocks its flow. In this way, education should be a means to spark curiosity and investigation, not merely a source of facts and information.

As a practical example that is related to the topic of this Q&A, many people view

an addict as a bad person. They see guys with spiky hair and tattoos as people to avoid. However, if they are curious and investigate the people to whom they have an aversion, they will discover that they do not exist in the way that they perceive. Basically, they are not solid statues of darkness that must be avoided at all costs, but complex beings with many characteristics that are constantly changing. This is not merely an abstract idea, but actually based on the Buddhist concept of emptiness.

As an example, think of the page you are reading. Without investigation, we see it as an independent entity called paper, but deeper inquiry will reveal this observation to be untrue. In reality, the paper includes wood from a tree, which in turn had absorbed sunlight, rain, and nutrition. In this respect, we understand the piece of paper to be a complex entity that exists due to the combining of many factors. Under further scrutiny, we will also understand that the composition of the paper will change in time and its form will disappear and change.

Why is this important to know? Why is it relevant to the discussion? Well, this concept is not only true for a piece of paper, but all phenomena, including people. Now, if we accept this reality, we will not consider a person as intrinsically bad with a single, unchanging personality, but instead see him or her as a living being whose character is the result of many combining factors, such as DNA, *karma*, education and past experiences. Moreover, we will recognise that the person can change according to time and circumstances.

Basically, investigation will remove our dark glasses of prejudices and allow us to see people in multi-colour. With regard to an addict, we will no longer just see him or her as a hopeless drug-using youth, but someone whose habits and personality have been molded by his or her past, and, most importantly, who has the potential to change. As a result of this understanding, our minds will naturally become more flexible and open, which is the root of compassion.

In this respect, we should see education as a flame to ignite curiosity and investigation and not merely as a shovel to stuff heads with knowledge. If this can occur, then we will plant the seeds of a compassionate society. Basically, when rigid and fixed views decrease and are abandoned, compassion will arise.

In short, as HH Dalai Lama stated, we need compassion, but we also require a practical way to remove the obstacles that are blocking it.