

Himalaya Happy Mandala Education

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Bhutan was a mostly invisible Himalayan country, wedged between its two giant neighbors of China and India, until its fourth reigning king proclaimed the idea of Gross National Happiness to be more important than Gross National Product, or Gross Domestic Product. Suddenly the tiny Buddhist kingdom stepped onto the international stage in a big way. Although considered a third world country, this land half the size of Switzerland with less than a million people has become recognized as a world leader for declaring that human well-being is more important than and not entirely dependent upon economic factors. Bhutan, where one finds the tallest unclimbed mountains in the world (it is against the law to climb them), has taken the moral high ground!

Organized by Yankun Duan, known as Kunkun, the Himalaya Happy Mandala Education tour spent ten days in the mountainous kingdom learning about Gross National Happiness (GNH), Happy Schools, Green Schools, Bhutanese history and culture, while singing, drawing and practicing mindfulness meditation together. With a group of 20 people from Hawai'i, Australia and China, I was invited to join and contribute to the tour (in a small way) on the importance of the visual arts in education and culture. We drove in a van and small bus between Paro, where the international airport is located and



above which the picturesque Tiger Nest monastery crouches; Thimphu, where the country's capital city is nestled within a steep river valley; and Punakha, a beautiful rural province in the eastern kingdom where the former capital was situated until 1955. We stayed in what would be considered luxury hotels for Bhutan standards and humble, very basic, farmhouse homestays. We eat similarly, with a range of Western foods at times but mostly Himalayan and traditional Bhutanese dishes. The weather was fair with some sunny days at times but also cold with very changeable grey skies, mist and rain at the 8 to 9,000-foot elevation.

On the day of arrival, we drove from Paro, up the long river valley to Thimphu, stopping at the large bronze and gold gilded Buddha Dordenma statue watchfully overlooking the capital city. Inside the enormous, painted Buddha sanctuary, one of the largest in the world, are over 125,000 statuettes of the Buddha. We were told how Buddhist masters from Tibet came to the region and tamed the elemental mountain spirits, including the druk. (The Bhutanese name for Bhutan is Druk, meaning *thunder dragon*). That first evening we had a cultural presentation of traditional song and colorful dance.

The next morning began with an excursion to Tango (horse head) Monastery, a sacred site where in the 8th century the Tibetan Guru Rinpoche identified the place where the compassionate bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara appeared in the form of the wrathful Hayagriva (avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu) or Tango. The monastery, built in sections, clings to a steep cliff-side where pilgrims come to see the cave of the 13th century Tibetan, Phajo Drugom Zhigpo. Here he meditated and witnessed the cliff in the form of the horse-headed god. Our group gained an audience with and a blessing from the resident 7th Tri Rinpoche, we sat in on a Drukpa Kagya Buddhist chant and offering ceremony, and we had lunch prepared by the monks of the monastery. In the late afternoon we visited



the Early Learning Center Primary School back in Thimphu where we also had dinner.

On our third, fourth and fifth day, we had a seminar with Dr. Ha Vinh Tho, founder of the Eurasia Learning Institute for Happiness and Well-Being, and former active civil servant in the Bhutan Ministry of Education. Each day began with a mindfulness meditation, singing, and an overview of the importance of GNH and its relationship to social and emotional learning in Happy Schools. We also practiced some visual art by following the process involved in children's drawing and exploring the nature and practice of mandalas, or *essence containers*. A visit to the ELC High School and the Royal Thimphu



College, with presentations, performances and a lecture, was also a part of these three days. We had the rewarding experience to hear Thakur Powdyel, dean of the Royal Thimphu College and former Minister of Education speak about Green Schools. Through conversations and sharing we also began to get a better picture of why such a diverse group of educators, farmers, tree planters, nutritionists, entrepreneurs, artists and tour specialists were brought together for this Himalayan Happy Mandala tour to Bhutan.

On the sixth day we left Thimphu and drove over the high pass of Dochula with its 108 chortens and view of the snowcapped Himalayas for the warmer province of Punakha where we visited the rural Tahogang Village School. This small primary school was to be closed down due to its isolated location and small size but was adopted by Her Majesty the Queen Mother Tshering Pem Wangchuck and kept open for the tiny local community. We had lunch here, sang songs and played games with the children. We almost couldn't leave the deep valley for our bus and van kept getting stuck on the slippery





led over a hundred student teachers in singing, I presented on the importance of visual art in education, and Shirley Rivera talked about how she works with social emotional learning.

Our last full day was for hiking up to the famous Paro Taktsang or Tiger Nest Monastery that is pictured in all of the travel brochures for Bhutan. I had been having difficulty breathing the entire week and when it was clear how long the hike would be and the morning was freezing cold with pouring rain accompanied by thunder and lightning I decided, together with a couple of others, that a day of rest was in order. However, those from Hawai'i (nine of us all together) who did engage in the hike started by giving a customary Hawaiian "entry" chant. As soon as the chant was pau (finished) a booming thunderclap acknowledged the request

slope and muddy mountain road. However, we eventually made it to our very backcountry, Aum Om Farm Stay. This was now a much closer experience to how an extended Bhutanese family lives on the land with very basic facilities, sleeping on mats on the floor, bathtub out by the stream and waterfall, three cows in the paddock beside the terraced rice paddies, everything around lush and green.

The next day as the mist burned off the hillsides we hiked down the old trail beside the stream to where the bus had to stop the day before due to mud. We then went to the Punakha Fortress and Dzong (Green Tea Temple), former capital of Bhutan. The blooming Jacaranda trees surrounded the impressive riverside edifice and laid a beautiful blue carpet for all of the tourists and pilgrims to admire. The dzong was part monastery and part administration building, filled with impressive Buddhist iconography. Lunch was prepared by monks at the nearby monastery school Lekshey Jungney Shedra (the Source of Buddha Dharma). We then made the long drive back to Thimphu along the narrow potholed, winding mountainous roads. There are no super highways in Bhutan.

On the eighth day we rose early and drove through Thimphu, up the mountainside overlooking the city to an area that had been cleared for replanting after a fire. Under the supervision of the Bhutanese Forestry Service each one in our group planted an apple tree with its own GPS location number. We then drove on to Paro for a visit at the Paro College of Education. Here Jeffery

(druk, the thunder dragon responded) and the rain stopped, the sun came out and it quickly turned into a beautiful day for the hike. This was a kind of elemental smile upon the journey of the past days and a confirmation of a successful Himalaya Happy Mandala Education tour.

Kunkun and her Happy Mandala team hope to organize educational and cultural tours for mostly Chinese families to Bhutan, Hawai'i and areas of China, which hold special cultural and spiritual significance. This trip to Bhutan was meant to explore some of the many possibilities that may be tapped for such a unique tour experience.

