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In 1999 when Bhutan announced it was going to bid for a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council there was hardly a ripple, leave alone a chorus of objection. That was partly because there was only one newspaper, no freedom of press, and most people probably didn't understand what it meant.

**INTERVIEW**

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With Karma Phuntsho.

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# A Buddhist practitioner who set up The Loden Foundation, Karma Phuntsho believes that Bhutanese society must now be more ethically driven.

**Q You have successfully managed to bring the knowledge of the past and relay it in contemporary language for people to understand today. And because of your work, you are one of the few well known Bhutanese Buddhist scholars abroad. Your comment.**

I am not quite sure if I am that well known. I would say that I am one of the very few Buddhist academics working abroad. There are so many Buddhist lamas and Khenpos, who are philosophers and who have a much better reputation than I. I may be one of the few who transmits our own culture and philosophy in the universal idiom, especially in the intellectual academic idiom.

**Q: Why did you choose to seek an Oxford education, when you were already a learned Lopen?**

I was very fortunate to get admission in Oxford with no under graduate degree or real academic credentials apart from the English language test and few essays I wrote. One main reason that drove me towards the west for a college education was of my experience as a monk. In the late 1980s and 90s, university graduates would have this great deal of

self importance and weird sense of sophistication. They would see education as equivalent to English and would look down on the monks, even though the monks were very learned. If you look at the depth of the Buddhist education to that of modern education, it is incomparable. University graduates at that time used to be very supercilious and arrogant and as a monk I could feel it acutely. Some of the monks I respected so much would suffer a lot of condescending attitude from these young graduates. Therefore, I decided to get a similar kind of education.

**Q: In your pursuit to digitize potis (Buddhist texts) for future generations, what challenges did you face?**

In the past projects which I have run, there were tangible challenges like finances apart from the cultural challenges. [Some] Bhutanese are very conservative, especially when it comes to their heritage. For example, a temple owner would want to be very protective about the relics, and books are part of the religious relics. And many monks would

also have a rather conservative stance on this because they believe in secrecy and the restrictive access to the materials, especially if the materials were of high esoteric content. So we have to respect the cultural sensitivity of course. In all our projects, we have given full copyright of the documentation of the archives to the owners, after all it's their ancestors who produced and protected it for this long. It's not at all fair for us to come with a camera and claim the copyright. We follow a policy that the copyright remains with the owners, but they cannot place restriction on educational purposes. Of course, they have the right in further development of the materials, commercialization of the materials, etc. Our main objective is to make it available for educational purposes.

**Q: Can you tell us how much progress you have been able to make in documenting these texts?**

For the last eight years, we have managed to archive 24 temples and two private collections. We have gone around the country visiting significant temples, especially those with significant libraries and we have so far digitized about three million pages. These are quite ancient books, and they come from [the] early 13th century all the way to



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**LOPEN KARMA  
PHUNTSHO**

1930s, 40s and 50s. Basically we cover all the pre-modern monasteries and their archives - anything that was printed on traditional paper, which was done before the industrial production was documented.

**Q: Has the government been supportive of these initiatives?**

Yes, they do provide support in terms of cooperation to enter a temple or lhakhang owned by the government. Also the work we are doing and its end product will be delivered to the National

Library's archives. So we are building their archive at no expense to them. All they have to give is official and moral support, and that they have given very willingly.

**Q: What about challenges from temple caretakers and owners of private lhakhangs? Is there resistance at that level or does the official government letter work all the time?**

The official letter does not always work. One example would be the Pagar temple, which is downstream from Thimphu, well known for



centuries as a book production temple. Our team went to Pagar with an official permission, and we photographed the archives for a month. Then a local lama came by and informed us that Pagar does not belong to the Central Monastic Body or the government. So the team was chased out. Eventually it was taken over by the Central Monastic Body, and the week we were preparing to revisit it, it got burnt. Pagar lost all their written materials, except for the set we photographed during that one month. If they had allowed us, we would have at least saved the digital copy of everything they had. These are exactly the kind of reservations we have faced from people be it for political, religious or social reasons, or because they were just generally unwilling.

**Q: Talking about fire trag-**

**A** **I was very fortunate to get admission in Oxford with no under graduate degree or real academic credentials.**

**edies, what kind of loss did you experience when Wangduephodrang Dzong was burnt? What did you feel as a Buddhist and as someone trying to document these archives?**

It was a very sad thing to see Wangdue Dzong burn. But I would say it did not hit me as hard as the Kenchosum temple in Bumthang, which was razed by a fire a few years ago. According to records I had found, the Kenchosum temple was renovated by Pema Lingpa, about 500 years ago. It was a very old establishment with very old relics (which they managed to save), but there used to be a broken bell- a huge

gong- which certainly came from the 1st millennium (8th century) that was badly charred by the fire. I was hit very hard by this, probably because it was one of the oldest standing temples besides Jambay and Kichu Lhakhangs.

As a historian I was aware of how many times Dzongs have been razed to the ground by fire. This may be the second fire Wangdue dzong suffered. I don't also know if Wangdue had a major manuscript collection- probably they did. When I did the cataloguing of the Gangtey monastery, I found that the Kangyur there had been copied from the one in Wangdue.

**Q: When you talk about manuscripts throughout Bhutan, there are few monasteries that are really old and have original manuscripts. So does that mean the rest of the lhakhangs have reproduced manuscripts?**

Out of the 2000 or so temples, as per Department of Culture, we can probably say that 10% of them would have a substantial library. By substantial, I mean hundreds of books rather than thousands. Most temples, pre 20th centuries will have quite a lot of original and unique manuscripts with them, especially if they had a scholarly lama who was the member of the estab-

ishment. The scholarly lama would collect quite a lot of books, which would be left to the monastery. However, in most of the big monasteries, you will find a common set of books - the Kangyur, Tenjur or Sixty Volume Büm, the hundred thousand version of the perfection of wisdom, the Getongpa, which is the 8000 verses of Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom and Domang, the praise of the Bodhisattva Tara.

**Q: What kind of books would you consider valuable and original?**

There are books which can be printed from wood blocks. Unless the wood blocks are destroyed, the manuscripts printed from wood blocks are not very

rare. In case of Kangyur, it would be printed in Tibet- the Bhutanese would travel with huge collection of papers to print from wooden blocks and bring it back to Bhutan. For some books, there were wood blocks carved here in Bhutan. Punakha Dzong, Trongsa and Phajoding had a lot of wood blocks carved. With Punakha, we have lost all the wood blocks in the fire, so that basically means that even the books printed from these wood blocks are rare. Sometimes, we find very rare wood blocks and hand written manuscripts which is more valued. Our focus is mainly on the hand written ones, because they are by definition unique as they are the only piece- there wasn't [any]



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such thing as photocopy then. However, we should not mistake that a particular manuscript is the only copy - copies would be made by many scribes. Each scribe would attribute a different error and a writing style which is unique and more precious.

**Q: Apart from wooden**

**blocks and paper, what other kinds of materials did we use?**

Due to abundance of paper making materials, Bhutanese straight away went to write on paper. By the time literacy came to Bhutan, paper making practices was well known around the country. Local historians would claim that even as early as the 8th century, Bhutanese were making paper and taking it to Tibet, where paper was scarce. It was one of the best exports of Bhutan during those days, since Tibet did not have abundant plants to make paper.

It was one of the main presents made by the Bhutanese to Tibetan lamas for religious projects. Bhutanese paper was of the best quality and very thick. Due to lack or limited resource, the papers in Tibet were made as thin as possible. With Bhutanese paper, we find that special manuscripts pages are stacked to create more thickness, and can be as thick as a codex.



**Q: What methods do you use to document manuscripts?**

We use a digital camera for many reasons. The lack of electricity in remote lhakhangs, and the need to carry generators to charge our laptops and batteries is one reason. Two, with old books, they are so fragile that it might destroy the book while feeding it through the scanner. Also there is no portable scanner that would fit the big Bhutanese books like the Kangyur that are roughly 70 cm long and 20 cm wide. With cameras it's much easier - we just set up a station and start clicking.

**Q: There is a wealth of very old knowledge that Bhutan possesses. Do you think our mainstream population is even aware of what we are sitting on?**

When we are talking about mainstream, there are two kinds - the educated mainstream and the Bhutanese mainstream. When we talk about the educated mainstream, like us who have gone through the school system and who don't always have enough knowledge of Dzongkha or Choekey, then most people are not aware. When they see the 108 volume of Kangyur, they probably think it might have only prayers. But what we have in there is actually a lot of history, parables, and philosophies, ethical and moral theories. It's



## For the global population it's a wonderful project - making the Buddha's word accessible.

the collection of so many things - 108 volumes and almost the size of encyclopedia Britannica, though printed in tight format, both sides and loose leaved.

**Q: What is unique to Bhutanese manuscripts that are different from the rest of the region?**

One of the amazing things about Bhutan is the life writing. We find that a lot of the lamas were very enthusiastic biographers. They would write their own biography or the biography of their lama, so quite a lot of historical knowledge has been retained through these biographies. Although you need to properly screen through what we call hagiographic information - hagiography is the study of saints - as these biographies might contain a lot of praise for the lama, miracles of the lama, meditation experience of the lama. But we finally get a little bit of history, perhaps a political leader the lama met. This trend is quite similar to medieval Europe. In the 18th and 19th Century, Bhutanese were very great biographers and historians - they were quite enthusiastic. Though

initially most of our literary heritage came from India, we basically follow the Tibetan way of writing namthars - religious history.

**Q: There is a huge project by Khyentse Rinpoche to translate the Kangyur to English. Do you think this will simplify the Kangyur for the Bhutanese and the world?**

We cannot expect the world population to learn the original languages, so I think for the global population it's a wonderful project making the Buddha's word accessible. For Bhutan especially, it is going to at least affect the cultural and linguistic heritage. I think people who would have had a little motivation to learn Choekay in order to learn the Buddha's word may give it up, when there is an easier way of reading the English version.

**Q: There has been a wave of renewed interest in Buddhism. Do you think that it's a compromise we have to make, rather than entirely lose the tradition of passing the Buddha lineage?**

Yes, I suppose so. You can't

stop the society from changing - we probably have to go with the change and as far as possible making the change positive and try to reduce the damage.

In the 1990s Bhutan had discovered Hollywood was following Buddhism (laughs). Richard Gere and Robert Thurman was visiting Bhutan and talking on Buddhism. It is a bit sad when we have really learned and almost enlightened lamas around us who would impart the same knowledge, in our own language, but we would rather have somebody from outside transmit that knowledge in a foreign language. Though a bit ironic, the good outcome is we are interested and want to know more about Buddhism and the Bhutanese culture. They found English was practical. I do understand how they understand it - some have truth in it, because some monastic[s] were very poor in transmitting and communicating with the younger generation. Still the irony is this lot wants to do it in a foreign language (laughs).

**Q: Let's talk about your**

initiative with the Loden Foundation. It was a perfect example of bodhisattva philosophy being implemented. How did you do it?

You put it across rather grandly by calling it a bodhisattva initiative. Yes, the inspiration definitely comes from bodhisattva ethics and morality. It is something that I wanted to do, partly to repay the kindness to the teachers who have imparted their bodhisattva idioms to me and others. It started basically as a small token to help others get the opportunity I got. I had the luxury of exploring a diverse range of education system. So while I was at Oxford, I befriended a potter who was a large Welsh ex-policeman, and during one of our conversations he told me of how his missing education was very difficult for him and he wanted to help someone get the schooling he didn't. That was how it started- Robert sponsoring a young girl from Bumthang. After which a few other people joined and that is how Loden began.

**Q: The Loden's efforts have diversified to early learning centers. What are your reasons behind starting this program?**

We saw that one of the areas neglected outside of urban areas during that time (2004) was that rural children did not have access to pre-school education and they had to compete with



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A DIGITAL COPY  
OF AN ORIGINAL  
MANUSCRIPT.

children who were pre-schooled. So we decided to set up these centers for rural communities, and try to blend traditional upbringing with modern early child care techniques. To make sure that we nurture the traditional forms of upbringing, we try to promote sitting on the floors (of course carpeted to keep them warm), play with locally made toys and keep the duration short so that they can help and be with their parents. There is also the local upbringing process which is in fact very educational, since the main part of education comes from role modeling and if children don't learn from their elders at the critical stage, that's when the child psychology is impacted.

**Q: Another initiative of the Loden Foundation is the Loden Entrepreneurship Program. Through this you have been able to help nurture entrepreneurial dreams. Yet, there are still so many out there unemployed and unwilling to take up blue collar jobs. Do you think it's a cultural issue?**

I don't think it's a cultural issue per se. When you go to the villages, you see the Bhutanese are most enterprising. I could compare the average Bhutanese to an average Briton and say that the Bhutanese is twice more enterprising and hard working, especially the farmers and villagers who have not been to school. Our own culture is not anti-entrepreneurship or laid back. I think it's the education system - the theoretical

learning though very important, left out the more practical and personal life skills. It is mostly the young school and college graduates who are more laid back and not willing to roll up their sleeves.

**Q: Then perhaps it is a cultural issue, considering that there is lack of dignity for blue collared jobs, which our system and society perpetuates?**

Our education system has gone wrong somewhere. If we look at the farmers, who have not gone through this system and brainwashed by it, they don't have any problems rolling up their sleeves to do hard labour. They have worked on their land with dignity, and if they had more land they would be dignified farmers. Dignity

in more ways was measured by the amount of land you had. But now when you look at the younger generation who has been through [modern] the school system, that's where they have acquired a new sense of dignity and the notion of what is a respectable job. The education system sort of develops on it; when you have a child going through for good 12 to 15 years, and imagine those years swallowing things from the text books. Unless we bring them up with the respect for both blue collared and white collared jobs, after 15 years of thinking and respecting them as different, we will not be able to change the mentality. We have to gradually change it through the system. Of course, it would help if the bureaucrats and the leaders would lead by example, but I sometimes wonder how many of them actually do farming or their own gardening. It's how we look at it- we could either look at it as manual work, or a luxury to be in touch with nature.

**Q: To move to an entirely different topic- Do you think you were portrayed correctly in the movie - *The Lady*?**

Well, I must say a lot of my friends who went to see the movie called me up immediately to tell me that the guy who played me was not at all like me. He was more masculine and scarred.

**Q: Have you watched the movie yourself?**

I have, and I was rolling in my chair, I couldn't help laughing

when a well built Karma appeared. But the role was more or less accurate. He tried to once meet me, but I was not in London that time.

**Q: I believe you performed the last rites for your friend Michael Aris. How does that feel, performing the rites for a close friend?**

When you use the word 'perform', I don't know how people will react. It was a not a grand funeral ceremony that happened. But I as a very close friend and a supporter of the family and also as somebody who could be slightly more composed than the rest of the family, I had to organize things. The family members were totally shattered and I was in a slightly better position. So I basically had to put together the events with the help of Michael's secretary. We had a very unique funeral for him - it was a cremation of course - we had a Tibetan lama, a Benedictine priest, and I, who chanted prayers for Michael. So it was a funeral I performed in that sense, not in the traditional sort of way.

**Q: Was it heart breaking for you to see a man estranged from his wife, the Burmese leader Aung Sang Suu Kyi, on his death bed?**

Well I have seen far greater unfairness in my life. I have lived with the Tibetans in India- I actually ran a nunnery for two years, and most of the nuns were political prisoners who had been tortured.

But of course, it was heartbreaking for Michael, who was not only knowledgeable but cultured and sensitive. He was very helpful to me - he was more or less my local guardian. For him to be separated

from his wife and not allowed to go to Burma was devastating. As soon as he was diagnosed with cancer, he said: "Karma we are going to Burma." But, the visa never came through. So it was heartbreaking in that sense that a remarkable man who was so devoted to his wife and her cause, be destroyed by a disease. It was a very rapid decline - he was walking fairly well in January, in February and March he needed a walking stick, and then he was bed-ridden - it was so fast. It was partly because he went through so much stress - for his children, his wife, and his work which sped the cancer.

But what I felt sad about is that for a highly educated person, who had access to so many lamas and books, he was not spiritually prepared for death. One can imagine how a person like Michael could be prepared - he was a cynical academic to begin with, he had two boys to bring up, and his wife's cause - he wouldn't have thought of dying, but rather what to do next. So I sort of understand that he was not prepared. It was sad especially when the ability and lack of internal composure and wisdom to deal with the stress, anxiety and emotions that was churning inside him. It is much easier to deal with other people, perhaps, but very difficult to deal with your own emotions when they run wild.

**Q: You were near him till the end. What kind of comfort were you able to provide Michael at his death bed?**

I suppose as a Buddhist monk then, I was of more comfort to him by his side than the others



because I knew what to do and say, and also because we had a lot in common to talk about - I was a Buddhist scholar and he was a Bhutanese historian and we had so many people we knew in Bhutan. I think that helped.

**Q: Can you describe how Suu Kyi's mental state was, towards the end of Michael's life?**

I wouldn't know for sure, because I only had one phone conversation and few letter exchanges with her. On that one phone call, the time when I had to break the news to her that we are losing Michael, she sounded very desperate at the other end saying: "Karma there must be something we can do, there must be." They hadn't seen each other for some time. But one couldn't help admiring Suu more by knowing this story, because she sacrificed her personal happiness and welfare for her people and democracy is outstanding and probably incomparable. There are very few people, Mandela perhaps, who gave up what they already had for the sake of a greater cause.

**Q: Do you still keep in touch with Aung Sang Suu Kyi?**

We have never been in constant touch. It was around Michael's death we were closest. After his death, she again went through a long spell of house arrest. It was difficult to get in touch with her.

**Q: Owing to your popularity, you have been able to find support in celebrities like Joanna Lumley, the Dalai Lama and our His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck- what brings such**

**luminaries together for a cause?**

Not quite sure about my popularity (laughs). Among the three, I would say they are all driven by kindness. I have known our king as The Crown Prince in Oxford, and one of the things that stood out was that he was very kind, gentle and highly compassionate. Of course, the Dalai Lama is well known for his approach bringing compassion into real life. And Joanna Lumley, she is among the British celebrity who is most engaged in charity work and that probably means kindness and compassion. So, these three certainly share a sense of compassion and kindness.

**Q: Has it been difficult to find the spirit of volunteerism in Bhutan?**

As a cultural scholar, investigating the Bhutanese cultural transition - there are two different worlds we are talking about. Look at our traditional world, which had a great deal of social volunteerism. When I was young, houses would be built through voluntary labour. If my family built a house, the rest of the village would come to help. If our neighbour built [one], then all of us would go and help out. All we had to do is feed the people; the volunteers. Now it's difficult to find voluntary labour even in villages. There is a serious disintegration of community happening all across Bhutan. And I think it's partly because of the economic boom - or the supposed economic boom - that probably created the cash labour and the gradual detachment from the community. It's tragic that with this community spirit break down, a lot of cultural heritage is lost.

But religious volunteerism is still alive and healthy and also deeply



**It was after Michael's death we were closest. But, after his death, she (Aung Sang Suu Kyi) again went through a long spell of house arrest.**

ingrained in our culture. You build a chorten or a temple, many people will volunteer labour. If we want to paint the Changangkha lhakhang turret in gold, many rich people will contribute.

But helping somebody go to school is something very new. Such things didn't exist in the past and it's a new culture to provide scholarships or help somebody with medical bills, etc. This is something Bhutanese will have to learn slowly and we are learning. We are trying very hard to inculcate this new spirit of volunteerism even with the Loden programs.

**Q: What are your future plans with the Loden Foundation?**

We are looking more toward the corporate sector to garner their social responsibility and make it mu-

tually beneficial. Now that our private sector is growing, it is necessary that we promote a more ethical and far more responsible business model. We don't want to go the same route taken by the west to end up with economic recession and ecological degradation. What we want to do is make the idea of ethical business a common thing - it's always a matter of habituation and we need to make it a popular culture that rubs on so people believe in it. It would be great to have the Bhutanese wanting to do business only with ethical business houses, which will in turn change the CSR policy of the business houses.

One of the challenges is bringing Buddhist values into business, and more Bhutanese are going to face it. Spirituality and religion are part and parcel of our own daily lives. Your business should be your religion in a way - you are doing it properly and it should lead you to enlightenment as much as you sitting in a meditation cave. That is one artificial dichotomy we have whereas we should merge the secular and religious lives so that a businessman can feel quite at home inside running an ethical business and thinking he is doing good for the society and also accruing good karma.

**Q: Since you have achieved a great deal, what are your plans for the future?**

It would be to complement



textual heritage with the oral heritage. Our heritage has largely been oral. But things are developing quite fast and the only sad part is how much are we losing in this course of development, especially in respect to culture? We have gone straight from oral to audio visual society and skipped the literary phase. That's why we probably have very poor reading culture.

But seriously, in order to get a holistic picture on our past we cannot completely rely on the books. We have to also listen to the folk stories and local narrative that ordinary villagers

tell, learnt and passed down by memory. We are probably the last generation the oral culture has touched. There is so much being lost - for example, no one makes mustard oil anymore, because we can easily buy vegetable oil. Such local knowledge is slowly dying and this is the kind of thing I want to do - record this whole process. It is a five year project if it comes through. 🐦