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"Virtuous Beings": The Concept of tha damtshig and Being a Moral Person in Contemporary Bhutanese Society

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“VIRTUOUS BEINGS”: THE CONCEPT OF *THA DAMTSHIG*, AND BEING A MORAL PERSON IN CONTEMPORARY BHUTANESE SOCIETY

This paper sets out a preliminary investigation of *tha damtshig*. In particular, it examines the concept of *tha damtshig*, and its role in the creation of a sense of moral identity among contemporary Bhutanese. The concept of *tha damtshig* is central to Bhutanese social values and based on Buddhist teachings. However, more recently the concept has become intertwined with notions of loyalty to the state and political allegiance. By focusing on how the concept of *tha damtshig* is created and embodied in everyday life, and in its use to create and maintain a moral sense of personhood, we can discern the interplay between popular, ground-level understandings and perspectives and state policies as Bhutan seeks to balance social and political transformation with maintaining its traditional values.

INTRODUCTION

Ngawang scowled and exclaimed “they have no *tha damtshig*” as he described an attack on a small remote temple in central Bhutan. From the beginning of my fieldwork I encountered the term *tha damtshig* that left me floundering. Typically, I would smile—uncertain of what was being referred to or its significance. Gradually, the importance of *tha damtshig* and its meaning for lay Bhutanese began to emerge. I soon realised that my pre-field work readings on Bhutan and the wider Himalayan region had not prepared me for this concept and over the following two years, I found myself returning to it time and time again. *Tha damtshig* literally means “the highest promise” or “ultimate vow” from the word *damtshig* referring to the Buddhist vows (*samaya*). More precisely, the term *damtshig* refers to vows taken as part of a tantric commitment, or as a “pledge which ought not to be transgressed” (Phuntsho 2004:569).¹ Yet, sitting in the kitchen of Sengge’s house with his nephew Ngawang and his friends, the term did not refer to monastic or tantric vows.² More recently, a Bhutanese friend

and colleague wrote, “it may also be noted that *tha damtshig* is used more frequently in Bhutan than in other Himalayan countries and done so mostly in a social context” (ibid: 570).

My paper sets out a preliminary investigation of *tha damtshig*. In particular, I examine the concept of *tha damtshig*, and its role in the creation of a sense of moral identity among contemporary Bhutanese. The concept of *tha damtshig* is, in my opinion, central to Bhutanese social values. Sonam Kinga describes it as a “commitment and obligation of love, honour and loyalty in one’s relationship with other people” (2001:156). The social values of *tha damtshig* are based on Buddhist teachings, yet more recently have become intertwined with notions of loyalty to the state and political allegiance (Phuntsho 2004). The ethnic and linguistic diversity of Bhutanese is counterpoised by an underlying unity—the lives they lead, the social encounters and realities they experience as well as the selves they imagine and seek to project all “reflect or refract pervasive religious and moral values” (Parrish 1994:4).³

Accordingly, my paper describes and examines the “pervasive religious and moral values” that

1. See Dudjom Rinpoche 1996 for further details on tantric vows.

2. I have used pseudonyms throughout the paper. Sengge is a tailor and former monk from Lhunse. Aged in his 60s, he and his wife Palden, shared their small two room house with their nephew Ngawang and daughter, Chotsho. It was one of the first Bhutanese homes I entered and over the course of fieldwork it became my “home”.

3. My focus is on the northern Bhutanese, rather than the Lhotshampa, Bhutanese of Nepalese descent who are primarily Hindu. The northern Bhutanese cover two of the largest minority groups—the Ngalong and the Sharchop, as well as the smaller linguistic/ethnic groups who are predominately Buddhist. See Pommaret 1997a for more information on the “ethnic mosaic” of Bhutan.

pervade and shape Bhutanese society and their significance for providing a moral framework and vocabulary which permeates everyday life. By focusing on how the concept of *tha damtshig* is created and embodied in everyday life, and in its use to create and maintain a moral sense of personhood, we can discern the interplay between popular, ground-level understandings and perspectives and state policies as Bhutan seeks to balance social and political transformation with maintaining its traditional values. This everyday understanding and practice is therefore an ever-evolving process as a result of both an internal and external dialogue.

Driglam Namzha: a brief note

As I discuss *tha damtshig* I refer on occasion to *driglam namzha*.⁴ For many Bhutanese, *driglam namzha* refers to the code of conduct and manner of deportment introduced by the seventeenth century founder of Bhutan, the Zhabdrung, Ngawang Namgyal. A publication by the National Library of Bhutan states that the Zhabdrung “promulgated the ‘Chayig Chhenmo’ (Great Law Code) containing specific instructions, which are inscribed on slate at the entrance to Punakha Dzong.” (1999:xxxvii). Although the National Library text and other recent works (Dasho Khadro 1997; Royal Chamberlain 1999), on *driglam namzha* present it as being applied to all Bhutanese, my own reading is that it was primarily directed at the state clergy and government officials of the Drukpa government established by the Zhabdrung.⁵ Over time, the practices of *driglam namzha* were either applied to or adopted by ordinary Bhutanese.⁶ Unlike the concept of *tha damtshig*, *driglam namzha* is not “bound by a religious context” (Phuntsho 2004:572). The code of conduct or etiquette regulates the form of appropriate dress to be worn by Bhutanese when visiting various public or government buildings, the form of greeting and how to conduct specific forms of ceremonies that mark the beginning and end of public events. In 1989 a royal edict re-emphasised the importance of *driglam namzha* as a key feature of Bhutanese cultural identity. In January 2009

the National Assembly re-affirmed the importance of *driglam namzha*. Kuensel noted that:

the house agreed that a mere rule would not help in preserving and promoting traditional etiquette (Drig-lam –namzha). It should come from within people [They] must be made aware of its advantages and the harmony it can create in any relation[ship?] and to society as a whole. (Kuensel 3 January 2009).

Following the 1989 edict, *driglam namzha* assumed a political significance as it became associated with what was viewed as the promotion of the cultural practices of the northern Bhutanese over their southern neighbors, the Lhotshampa (Hutt 2003).⁷ Whilst for northern Bhutanese, *driglam namzha* “came to be viewed more and more as the formal and structured display of official etiquette rather than as the fluid and spontaneous practice of good manners” (Phuntsho 2004). More specifically, *driglam namzha* has come to symbolise Bhutanese traditional values and cultural identity.

TRADITION AND MORALITY

Throughout my discussions with Bhutanese on *tha damtshig* were frequent references to “tradition” and morality. Before turning to consider *tha damtshig*, it is important to reflect on the meanings implied by these terms. The claim “It’s tradition!” can suggest a temporal framework that lacks a clear beginning and marks off the historical period from “modernity”. In effect, the past and present are distanced, if not, actually separated. This approach is deeply flawed. It suggests a rupture between past and present, whilst assuming that the contemporary or the modern are the products of such a rupture. A second approach to tradition emphasises it as strongly normative (Shils, 1981). For Shils, tradition is “far more than the statistically frequent reoccurrence over a succession of generations of similar beliefs, practices, institutions and works”(1981:24). Rather, tradition “is [the] normative transmission which links the generations of the dead with the generations of the living” (1981:24). So, tradition is not left behind in the transition to modernity, instead tradition is what modernity requires to prevent society falling apart. This second approach to tradition is reflected in the various representations and invocations of tradition made by Bhutanese scholars and lay people alike, as they discuss the process of social transformation in Bhutan (cf. Ura 1994, 1995, 1997; RGOB 1999a).

Hobsbawm in his well-known and oft cited introduction to *The Invention of Tradition* (1984), distinguishes between “invented tradition” and “custom”. He identifies “invented tradition” with super-structural institutions and elites whilst he conceives “custom” to be popular and capable of

4. *Driglam namzha* (Tib./Dz: sgrigs lam rnam gzha) is not examined in this paper since the focus is on *tha damtshig*. A separate paper on *driglam namzha* is currently in progress.

5. Phuntsho suggests that “The Zhabdrung and his immediate circle perhaps can be rightly credited with the earliest implementation of driglam as a formal practice at an institutional level” (2004:573). He rightly points out that “driglam, in the form of loose and informal adoption of proper behaviour and manner, existed even before the Zhabdrung and his establishment of organised institutions” (ibid).

6. I argue that *driglam namzha* was initially applied to government officials based on an eighteenth century law text that admonishes government officials about how to behave towards the people. More specifically, it is a very refined form of social etiquette that on the day to day level of village life would not be required. Rather, my informants talked about *bey zha* (*sb/bad bzha*), an everyday form of manners that embodied respect and consideration towards family and neighbors without either the formal or hierarchical aspects of *driglam namzha*.

7. I do not examine the conflict between the Royal Government and the Lhotshampa in this paper. For more information see Hutt 2003, Phuntsho 2006.

being mobilised at society's base. He presents tradition as imposing fixed practices and custom as flexible and capable of accommodating a certain amount of innovation, while still providing the sanction of "precedent, social continuity and natural law" (1984:). As Vlastos (1998) points out there are limits to the utility of Hobsbawm's approach. First, is the frequent criticism that all traditions are socially constructed, and therefore in some sense invented. Second is the unresolved dichotomy Hobsbawm creates between tradition and custom. There is a disjunction between the rhetorical aspect of tradition represented in the claim to invariance, and the continually shifting subjective aspect, which is institutionalised in practices and texts, which are reorganised and reformulated over brief periods of time without apparent loss of authority. Hobsbawm's emphasis on the elite/popular dichotomy stresses the role of the elite in the formulation of tradition. However, as Vlastos notes "Traditions, like customs, are embedded in larger social structures that are constantly reshaped by the forces of change . . . they aim to arrest" (1998:4). Therefore we need to recognise that they are not static, nor are they exclusively top-down.

It is therefore crucial to stress the "social and historical roles and statuses" of my Bhutanese informants who embody what are described as traditional values, for these are central elements to the narratives they produce. Their lives, and therefore the narratives they use to explain their daily lives, are deeply and firmly located within the wider narratives of their communities, from which they derive their sense of being Bhutanese. According to Alistair MacIntyre, each person is a "bearer of a tradition" (1981: 221). These traditional practices or values provide each individual with a moral identity, a base point from which he or she is able to develop their own moral particularity.

This leads to the next element—the role of morality. What do I mean by being a "moral" person? Based on the material presented, I have chosen to delineate the term "moral" to refer to notions of good and bad, of appropriate and inappropriate conduct, of respect and humility versus disrespectful actions, notions of civic responsibility and more recently loyalty to the nation-state. Kaviraj comments that "concepts are implicit in social practices" and "though not always verbalized, either in everyday or intellectual forms, these ideas are nevertheless social concepts" (1997:83). The concept of *tha damtshig* is part of the daily repetitiveness of everyday life, when people are engaged "in their everyday interpretation of the world – to describe what they see and evaluate what they approve or deplore" (Kaviraj 1997:83). In essence, I am seeking to delineate notions of "moral sense", as reflected and embedded in the practices, social interactions and narratives of the Bhutanese.

The emphasis on the performative aspect of morality is crucial. Rather than treating morality and moral states as restricted to highly marked decisive events, it is important to focus our attention on the practical routines of everyday life. Ideas of morality are intertwined in the personal choices

and actions engaged in on an individual level during the course of everyday life. A sense of the moral, or rather the virtuous, can be found in the continuous acts engaged in by people. However, whilst the communicative aspect of action and practice encompasses the moral domain, two other significant factors require to be considered: personal agency, on the one hand, and on the other, moral reasoning. Without wishing to become side-tracked by a discussion of ideas of moral philosophy, both of these factors form part of the weaving together of a personal sense of virtue and of moral conduct.

In addition, although I have used the singular "morality", I should be speaking of "moralities" (Howell 1997; Parrish 1994). This better recognises the diversity of moralities expressed by individuals. More importantly, as I have come to think about the connection between morality and law, it is important not to see morality as a coherent imposed system. Therefore, rather than treating morality as an unequivocal code, it is more relevant and fruitful to treat morality as the "form and acts by which commitments are engaged and virtue accomplished" (Lambek 2000:316). Central to this paper are the strong links between morality and practice as understood by the Bhutanese and outlined in the following section. However, I do not want to reduce morality and its practice to mere actions. Whilst I argue that morality is a learned practice, one embodied by the actor or agent, it is not reduced to mere habit. Indeed, morality requires personal agency and moral reasoning, for these are the basis from which people choose to act in a particular way—virtuously or non-virtuously. As MacIntyre notes "the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of the [good] life, not merely a preparatory exercise to secure such a life" (1981:149). The relationship between moral values, of moralities in the plural, and practices is a dynamic one: "Values are continuously changing and adapting through actual choices and practices, while, at the same time, they continue to inform and shape choices and practices" (Howell 1997:4). As Karma Phuntsho notes these values can become secularised and, in his view, distorted, as they are associated with political loyalty and submission to the ruling power of the government (2004).

'DUL WA AND TSHULKHRIMS: MORAL DISCIPLINE AND SOCIAL HARMONY

From a Bhutanese perspective the concept of *tha damtshig* seeks not only to promote social harmony, it seeks to establish and maintain social justice. This perspective is reminiscent of the concept of *wa*, the spirit of peace and harmony in Japan (Kimio 1998:300) and *li* or "principle" in the sense of underlying "source of natural order" in China (Perenboom 1993:47). In this section, I examine Buddhist philosophy, which I separate into two categories, doctrine and discipline, and the principle doctrinal features which shape *tha damtshig*. Underlying *tha damtshig* are Buddhist teachings on moral discipline (Tib/Dz: *tshul khrims*) and karma (Tib/Dz: *las*).

Buddhist teachings on morality and conduct form the basis for these concepts. These concepts revolve around developing a moral life based on social interaction on the one hand, and the cultivation of mental awareness on the other. There is a strong intertwining thread between the development of a sense of moral understanding and daily life.

'Dul wa means "to subdue, tame, overcome" and refers primarily to the *vinaya* section of the Kangyur (Buddhist commentaries) relating to monastic rules of conduct.⁸ The *vinaya* sets out the codes of conduct for the Buddhist monastic community. In the monastery, 'dul wa is used to refer to the various levels of vows, therefore the discipline to be adhered to by the lay householder, the novice monks and those holding full monastic ordination.⁹ However, the term 'dul wa is important for it carries beyond the monastic community, and is central to any understanding of *tha damtshig*. In her work on Ladakh, Day (1986) has, like other authors, highlighted the civilising process of the introduction of Buddhist teachings (*chos*). The teachings subdue, or rather tame, the region, not only the unruly, harmful local deities, but the human population as well (see also Ekvall 1968). In Bhutan, to embody *tha damtshig*, together with the practice and embodiment of good manners (*bey zha* or the more formal, *driglam namzha*,) is to train or tame one's natural wild impulses into a way of behaving that accords with Buddhist teachings, which emphasises the link between the actions of body, speech and mind (Whitcross 2002).

The teachings are distilled for lay people in the Sixteen Rules that claim a legitimacy based on the belief that they were originally promulgated by the seventh century Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo.¹⁰ The "sixteen virtuous acts"¹¹ are set out in a Class IX - X school text entitled *Bhutan Civics* as:

Michoe Tsangma Chudrug¹²

Not to:

- 1: kill, commit theft or robbery
- 2: have wrong faith

8.

- 3: go against the wishes of parents
 - 4: be disrespectful to elders, learned men and leaders
 - 5: foster evil thoughts towards family and friends
 - 6: refrain from helping your neighbours
 - 7: be dishonest
 - 8: follow bad examples
 - 9: be greedy and selfish
 - 10: foster evil thoughts in others
 - 11: be late in refunding(repaying) your debts
 - 12: cheat
 - 13: segregate human beings into rich and poor, high and low
 - 14: listen to wrong (evil) advice
 - 15: be deceitful: and
 - 16: lose patience or be short-tempered.
- (RBG 1999b:51).

These principles were referred to by many Bhutanese as we discussed *tha damtshig* (even if they were unable to recite all of them). According to Gendun Rinchen, a monk from Kurtoe in north-eastern Bhutan, these form "the basis for leading a good life". Later, these same principles were described by Ngawang, a traditional doctor from Dechencholing, as "the Bhutanese alphabet"—the fundamental moral basis of conduct. In one interview that explored reactions to a series of desecration of sacred sites, those responsible for the desecration of religious sites were described as "forgetting the alphabet". When asked to clarify, the response was that "they lack *tha damtshig*" (see Whitcross, 2000, 2008).¹³

Underlying the sixteen principles are the ten virtues (*dge ba bcu*) and their corresponding non-virtues. This presentation of the sixteen principles and the ten virtues appears in a number of contemporary Bhutanese texts, including a short introduction to the legal system of Bhutan on the website of the High Court of Justice.¹⁴ The frequency with which Bhutanese used ideas of virtuous and non-virtuous actions, or rather as it was described sinful ones (*sdig pa/lasip*), depended on their age and general level of education. However, even amongst those Bhutanese most scornful of the monastic community and critical of Buddhism, the notion of virtue and non-virtue permeated and informed their perspective on their own and other's actions. The ten virtues refer to the basic Buddhist teachings on karma. Rather than a simple litany of "do not kill, steal and so forth" the ten pious acts are set out with a degree of implied explanation:

The Ten Pious Acts

- 1: to love and be gentle to all living creatures;
- 2: to take things only with the permission of the owner;
- 3: refrain from committing adultery;

13. This phrase was one that I heard often during fieldwork.

14. It should be noted that this association of the sixteen principles and ten virtues is historically contentious. It is probably a post hoc rationalisation of Songtsen Gampo's laws which was in place by the fourteenth century (see Kapstein 2000, Richardson 1998, and Sorenson 1994).

- 4: not to tell lies;
- 5: not to create problems among friends;
- 6: not to be rude or hurt the feelings of others;
- 7: not to be jealous or talk wantonly;
- 8: not to be greedy, or want the belongings of others;
- 9: not to wish ill luck on others;
- 10: to have faith in religion.

(RBG 1999b:52)

The school text describes the Zhabdrung, Ngawang Namgyal, founder of Bhutan, as formulating the “first set of laws in our country . . . codification of laws were completed in 1652 . . . These laws were deeply influenced by the teachings of Buddhism. According to these laws people were required to practice Michoe Tsangma Chudrug (sixteen virtuous acts) and Lhachoe Gyewa Chu (the ten pious acts)” (1999b:50).¹⁵

Engaging in the ten virtuous actions is “said in the Ratnavali . . . to deliver beings from birth in the hells and the realms of pretas (hungry spirits) and animals” (Kangyur Rinpoche, 2001: 61). All actions, physical, mental or verbal have a consequence and this is usually referred to as *lejumdre*,¹⁶ the law of karmic cause and effect that is central to Buddhist teachings. The “ten pious acts” appear in a striking presentation in a Dzongkha language textbook (RBG 1991). The chapter sets the ten virtues and their antonym non-virtues at length and ends with a series of questions for the pupil to consider. The questions re-emphasise the three virtues and non-virtues of the body, the four virtues and non-virtues of speech and the final three associated with the mind. These final three are important for, according to Buddhist teachings, without control over one’s mind, there can be no control over the actions of body and speech. The importance of mental intention, including the mental aspect of self-discipline, is central to Buddhist teachings on karma and karmic effect stress. In particular, the karmic effect of an action is greatest when the action has been consciously and deliberately done whether it is making offerings with a pure motivation or killing another living being. (Kangyur Rinpoche 2001).¹⁷

Beyond the doctrinal aspect, the importance of the “sixteen principles for harmonious living” and the “ten virtues and non-virtues” lies in the major focus they place on social relations. Whereas monks and religious practitioners are encouraged to distance themselves from society, in

general for the laity the “social aspects of life are given a more important place” (Rajavaramuni 1990:49). Listening to Sengge, an elderly Bhutanese man and his conversation with family and visitors, the importance of these values in shaping and defining everyday social relations became clearer to me. Embodying a succinct synthesis of complex Buddhist doctrines, and legitimated by their associated legends of origin, for example their formulation by Songtsen Gampo, or the Zhabdrung, the concept of *tha damtshig* and the way of conducting oneself (*bey zha* and the formal *driglam namzha*)¹⁸ underpin Bhutanese notions of morality and social obligations. “Cultural etiquette such as showing respect, and being obedient, disciplined, loyal, and dedicated are a large part of the sacred Bhutanese tradition”, argues Tshering Dolkar (2000:87). The phrase “returning kindness” was often used by Sengge and other Bhutanese when explaining *tha damtshig* stressing, as I understood, the importance of mutual support and reliance based on good social relations.

According to Karma Ura, a contemporary Bhutanese scholar, the role of the tantric lama and the relationship between lama and disciple was mentioned as forming an important model of the social relationship between lay people. The lama, as the embodiment of the teachings is respected and followed faithfully by his disciple. Even if the lama appears to behave in an inappropriate manner, the faith of the disciple should not be shaken, for the lama may be acting in a certain way for a higher spiritual purpose (e.g. the Buddhist saint, Drukpa Kunley who behaved in an unorthodox manner see Dowman and Paljor 1980). This sense of devotion and respect is reflected in the concept of *tha damtshig*. However, it is the role of the lama as the person who tames or rather teaches the disciple how to control their nature in order to follow the teachings, that is most significant for our understanding of *tha damtshig*. In Bhutan and across the Himalayan region, stories of lamas having to re-subdue local deities who have become unruly and causing harm are common in Bhutan (indeed throughout the Himalayan region see: Mumford 1989; Dujardin 1997). Indeed, seventeenth and eighteenth century Bhutanese text present the Zhabdrung as taming Bhutan as he asserted his spiritual and temporal authority mirroring the tales of the tantric adept, Padmasambhava pacifying local demons in Tibet and central Bhutan in the eighth century.¹⁹ The need to re-subdue local deities is the corollary of the on-going need for human beings to exert control over themselves, often with the advice and guidance of the lama.

This brings us to an important consideration. The relationship between lama and disciple, on which the lay model is based, emphasises the importance of devotion and respect towards the lama. However, there is a reciprocal obligation on the part of the lama. As several informants

15. The Zhabdrung, Ngawang Namgyal, was a Druk Kagyu hierarchy who fled Ralung in southern Tibet in 1616 following a dispute over his recognition as a reincarnation of a major Druk Kagyu lama. Between 1616 and his death in 1651, the Zhabdrung established a religious form of government that was to last until the early twentieth century and the installation of the Wangchuck dynasty as hereditary monarchs. See Pommaret 1997.

16. *Lejumdre* (Tib./Dz: *las rgyu 'bras*).

17. For a detailed explanation on the connection between action and karmic effect see Kangyur Rinpoche 2001 Chapter 3.

18. See footnote 7.

19. Mills (2003) provides a very good discussion of this see p260, 314 – 315, 330 – 331.

emphasised, the lama, as the moral superior, is responsible for uplifting his disciple and helping release the individual from *samsara*. Therefore, the lama has a major responsibility to fulfil. The disciple can do, so it is claimed, anything except break his or her trust in the lama. This would represent an unredeemable stain of their *damtshig*, or vows. This relationship of lama and disciple was described to me by Karma Ura as representing “the fundamental order which must be maintained”.²⁰ There is an obligation on the part of all those to whom respect is given to help those below. The metaphor of a waterfall was used on one occasion to describe how this social obligation cascades down from the king, to his ministers, the government officials, down to grandparents and parents and siblings. Yet, for many informants this represents an abstract ideal. Although certain individuals would be commented on as being “good” exemplars of possessing *tha damtshig*, few could identify exemplars that all Bhutanese would recognise. The king, a person who is generally highly regarded, was described as too distant to be a practical exemplar. Although his actions and those of his grandfather and father are praised, the majority of Bhutanese tend to look closer to their own families and communities for examples of how to conduct themselves.

Finally, as various writers have noted (Aziz 1981, Levine 1981, Ardussi and Epstein 1978, Epstein and Lichter 1983, Mumford 1989, Samuel 1993), the belief in karma, with its emphasis on virtue, co-exists with concerns which emphasise this-world. Attending a day long ritual on Nagarjun Mountain to the west of Kathmandu with a group of 16 monks, Pema Namgyel, a former government driver turned monk from Mongar in central Bhutan, explained the purpose of the ritual as being conducted for the general well-being, health and prosperity of his adopted father and mother. Although his own birth parents were still alive and he continued to look after them, Pema was supported through his education by his adopted family. Therefore, funding the ritual demonstrated his respect and affection for his adopted parents, in other words, demonstrated *tha damtshig*. Mumford (1989) notes a similar issue with regard to funerals. The performance of merit-raising for the deceased could only really be performed by those who shared inheritance (broadly defined) with the dead person. Similarly, the household rituals I attended in Thimphu and Kabesa mirrored the same concerns with the removal of obstacles, as well as, creating merit. Epstein and Lichter note that the belief among Tibetans in karma coexists with concerns about their own good fortune. Thus, they attempt to achieve worldly success, while maintaining a “slightly ironic detachment” from it due to its impermanent nature (Epstein and Lichter 1983:257). As Levine notes:

20. This can be illustrated from the namthar of the Buddhist saint, Milarepa. The principal obstacle to his spiritual development was not his use of black magic. Rather the fact that he forged a letter from his teacher, Marpa. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this useful example.

on the one hand, one can point to a set of unvarying moral precepts, fixed in Buddhist textual tradition to which all . . . overtly subscribe. On the other hand, there are also implicit values which are manifested in actual patterns of behaviour...The various cultural messages encountered – from given moral precepts, implicit societal values, inner impulses and public valuation of conduct – may well prove contradictory (1981:122 – 123).

It is necessary therefore not simply to look at the notion of *tha damtshig* as an abstract idea, but a set of practices in everyday life.

THA DAMTSHIG: RESPECT AND RECIPROCITY

In the previous section, I outlined the religious context that informs and shapes the concept of *tha damtshig*. However, its importance for Bhutanese emerged gradually as I listened and observed and, to be honest, asked initially at least, naive questions. I recall one evening as Sengge and I sat amidst bolts of silks and brocades. Sengge was a tailor (and former monk) who with amazing speed and accuracy cut the materials and began to lay out the fabric frame for a *thangka* (religious painting) depicting Guru Rinpoche. Over a period of several months, I had become close to Sengge, his wife, Palden and Ngawang, his youngest nephew. Haltingly, I asked him about *tha damtshig*. “I don’t know how to explain it. It is *tha damtshig*.” Ngawang intervened. As he spoke, a general sense of how he and his family understood *tha damtshig* emerged. He explained that due to Sengge’s age, his knowledge, and his kindness to Ngawang he was to be honored and respected. It was at this point that I heard the phrase “repaying kindness” for the first time. Ngawang’s own father had separated from his mother when Ngawang was still an infant and it was Sengge who cared for Ngawang and encouraged him to pursue his studies of Tibetan medicine at the Chakpori Institute in Darjeeling.

A few days afterwards, I observed Ngawang greeting various men at a social gathering: he politely greeted the most senior men before turning to greet the younger men with whom he watched football and generally spent time when not working. Depending on their age, and the degree to which he knew each man, he altered his demeanor to mark the distinction between peer group friends, and those to whom a more formal display of respect was due. Yet his friends, mainly apprentice sculptors or school students a few years younger than Ngawang, would address him formally as *drungtsho* (doctor) with broad smiles. Although he was accepted as part of their group, they all at various times commented to me on his intelligence and knowledge, as demonstrated by the completion of his medical studies. Ngawang could, and often did play the part of the mischief maker, the joker, and this was expected of him. However, this did not detract from the respect offered to him. Even the older men to whom he demonstrated respect through his body language, the tone and phrasing he used when speaking, returned the

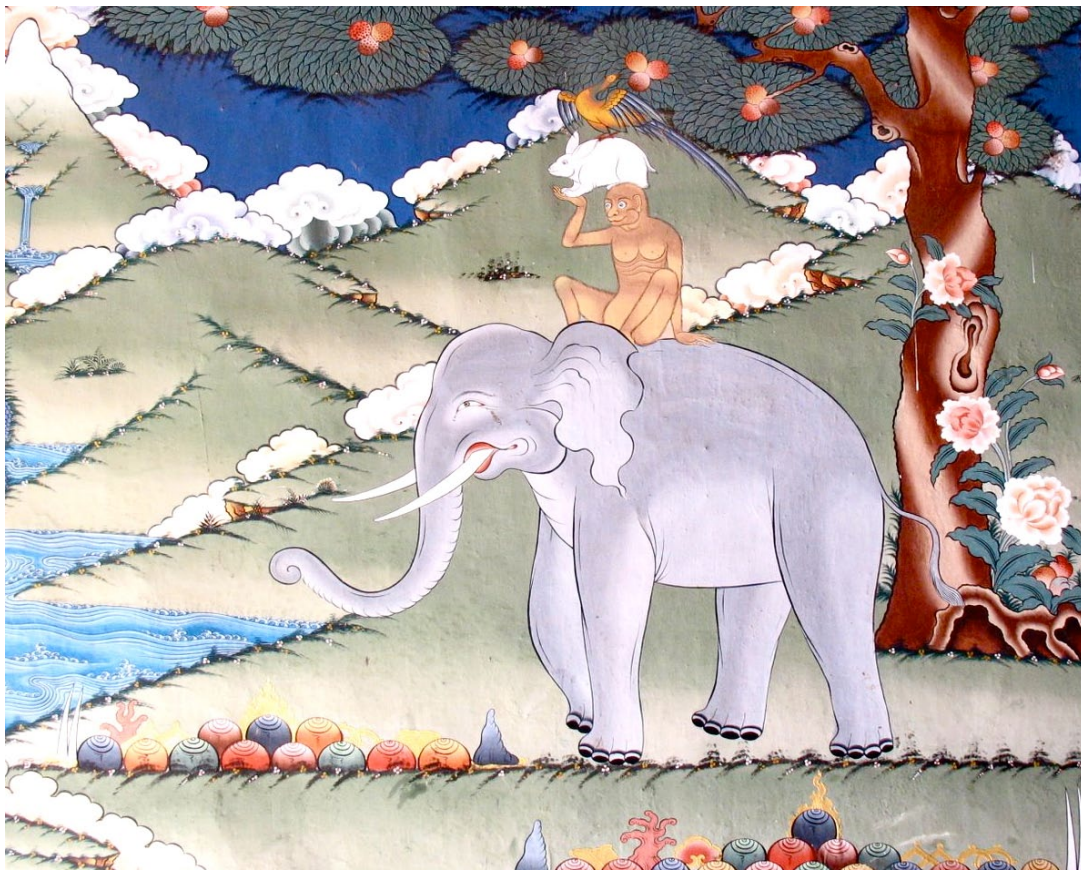
respect to Ngawang. It was equally revealing to watch how he interacted with his elder brother, a junior abbot in the monastery. Although, Ngawang would laugh and even repeat quite bawdy stories in his elder brother's presence, Gendun was always treated with the respect due to his rank—small details of everyday contact reflected this – the serving of food, the seating arrangements and the tendency to use more “honorific” language.

Reflecting on what I observed, was told and overheard I gradually realised that *tha damtshig* is not an easily defined concept. Rather, it is simultaneously a concept, an ideal to be striven for, and an embodied practice demanding full awareness of one's social status, and the actions of body, speech and mind thereby linking it with good manners. At its core is a deep sense of social responsibility and reciprocity. In a detailed text on *driglam namzha*, the Royal Chamberlain in his discussion of *tha damtshig* refers to the importance of showing “faith and respect” as well as “repaying kindness” to a range of people. In part this is based on their rank—king, the queens, ministers and officials, as well as teachers (1999:32). However, it also emphasises showing respect to one's parents

and elders. He illustrates his comments with a reference to a popular folk story, “The Four Friends” (Dz: *spun bzhi*).²¹

In the Bhutanese version, as in the Tibetan one, four friends, a bird, a rabbit, a monkey and an elephant, live below a banyan tree. There had been a decline in their mutual respect for each other, and in order to decide which amongst them is the most senior, they begin to discuss the age of the tree. The elephant recalls that, when he was a baby, the tree was as small as a bush. The monkey recalls it was a mere shrub when he was young. The rabbit describes the tree as having been a leafless sapling. Finally, the bird comments that he had swallowed the seed, and that the tree had grown from his droppings. Thereby, the bird was honoured as the eldest, senior in rank to the rabbit, the monkey and the elephant. This restored harmony to the animal kingdom. Accordingly, it is said that the Buddha used this story to decree that age would confer priority in the sangha (religious community). The image of the four

21. This story is derived from the Tittira Jataka, though in the original only three animals are mentioned.



THE “FOUR FRIENDS”. FROM A MURAL IN PUNAKHA DZONG, BHUTAN.

PHOTO: ARJUN GUNERATNE

friends can be found painted on buildings, in small wood carvings and on calendars. Occasionally, the image shows the four friends standing on each other's backs, in order to pick the fruit of the banyan tree. Here the image refers to the equally important moral of co-operation. The circulation of this and other such tales was revealed when walking from a popular picnic area overlooking Thimphu with the three eldest children of a close friend. This second version of the story was retold by the youngest child, Kesang, as the group tried to reach pine cones in the branches overhanging the side of the path.

To show respect and indeed devotion to one's elders, and especially parents and grandparents, was the most frequent way in which Bhutanese explained *tha damtshig*.²² Yet, this devotion can be difficult. As his life story gradually unfolded a close friend from central Bhutan, Kezang, repeatedly stressed how much he owed not to his father but to his maternal uncle (Dz. azhang), Dorji. After Kezang's mother's death, when he was about ten years old, Dorji, who had been able to attend school while living with Kezang's parents in Trongsar, decided that he should look after Kezang. Although only nineteen years older, Dorji felt that it was his duty to care for Kezang. Kezang's father is a small farmer and, more significantly, a heavy drinker, who could not provide for Kezang. When he was brought from his home village of Nabji, Dorji recalls playing with young monks in Trongsar dzong and leaving Kezang aged two on the roof of the dzong. Only when he heard Kezang's father bellowing across from the town and pointing to the roof did he remember and rescue Kezang. "I always feel bad when I think of what could have happened to my Kezang". The frequent use of "my Kezang", and the plans to buy a plot of land for him near Dorji's own land in Thimphu, emphasised the bond between them. For Kezang, respect and devotion to his uncle is absolute. Yet, although Kezang sends money to his father in Gelephug, he seldom mentions or discusses his father. Respect and devotion are not so simple to command. Kezang does the minimum he is required to do to be seen to respect his father, but his heartfelt emotional tie is to his maternal uncle. His bond to his uncle was also reflected in his devotion to his grandmother. These bonds, however, go beyond the outward requirement to show respect. They draw on deeper ties of affection, in which respect is only one dimension.

Seniority and age may be held up as requiring respect and honour. Yet, on an everyday level among peers, there appears to be a levelling out. Here rank tends to be less important than the idea of co-operation and mutual assistance. Drinking tea with Sengge and his wife, it was common for neighbours to arrive and ask for help. Either Sengge or his wife would leave to provide whatever assistance was required. Often, due to Sengge's background as a monk and his knowledge of rituals, he would be called upon to assist with household

rituals when members of a house fell ill. His wife, Palden, would often provide help by preparing meals and caring for children. The frequency with which people called on one another for assistance, and the apparent lack of resentment at the disruption these demands created, prompted me to raise the importance of co-operation. Several Bhutanese, notably Ngawang and his uncle, explained it in terms of *tha damtshig*. *Tha damtshig* is not only due to one's elders or one's family, or to those of high social rank. *Tha damtshig* is due to your community and your neighbors. This was demonstrated when a mutual friend's daughter fell seriously ill. Ngawang spent three days and nights with the family looking after her. He took her pulse, checked her urine, and prepared medicines for her, as well as assisting Sengge in performing various rituals in front of the family shrine.

Although my observations among ordinary Bhutanese men and women suggested that *tha damtshig* remains an important social value, concerns were expressed over who should be passing on Bhutanese values and customs. Should it be school teachers acting as role models, or should parents and grandparents take responsibility for teaching their children? The process of the internalisation of traditional values, of *tha damtshig*, begins in childhood and, in general, most Bhutanese agree that children should start being taught them from infancy. The period from infancy until their entry into primary school has been stressed as a vital period to teach children the "traditional values" (Kuensel, 10 July 1999:5). In a recent study of values in Bhutan "being guided and united by a common set of values and a common direction", as well as "moral structure that provides guidance and encourages comfort" were identified as key values underpinning Bhutanese cultural values (Evans, 2009). However, the patterns of family life, especially close contact between children and grandparents in Thimphu, are changing. Children raised in Thimphu are experiencing closer peer group contact as increasingly both parents may be in full-time employment, whilst grandparents may reside in distant parts of the country and rarely visit Thimphu.

The transmission of "traditional Bhutanese values" is a matter for ongoing debate in contemporary urban and rural Bhutan. In his coronation address in November 2008, HM Jigme Khesar Wangchuck stated that:

Throughout my reign I will never rule you as a King. I will protect you as a *parent*, care for you as a *brother* and serve you as a *son*. I shall give you everything and keep nothing; *I shall live such a life as a good human being that you may find it worthy to serve as an example for your children*; I have no personal goals other than to fulfill your hopes and aspirations. *I shall always serve you, day and night, in the spirit of kindness, justice and equality.* (emphasis added).

(HM Jigme Khesar Wangchuck,
Kuensel 8 November 2008)

The language used by the king in his coronation address

22. This is encapsulated in phrases such as "*pha dang bu gzhi gi tha damtshig*"—the reciprocal duties and obligations of parents and children.

emphasises a familial bond between the Bhutanese people and the monarch. As monarch, he hopes to serve as an example for young Bhutanese, yet as noted earlier, there is a distance between the king and the ordinary Bhutanese that makes him too distant from the everyday lives of the young to be an effective exemplar. However, the speech does re-emphasise the reciprocal nature of *tha damtshig*—as the people of Bhutan expressed their devotion to the young king across Bhutan at the time of his coronation, the king acknowledged and reciprocated their respect.

Frequently the emphasis in many of the descriptions of *tha damtshig* I heard or read, was on the creation and maintenance of social harmony. As described above, social harmony is central to the Bhutanese perception of society and community. By internalising *tha damtshig*, a person learns how to negotiate his or her way through life and to lead a socially fulfilling life. Where the harmony is disrupted by disagreement or other difficulty, it is important that the matter is resolved and that social harmony is restored.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND TRADITIONAL VALUES: EDUCATION AND BELONGING

A Bhutanese saying touches on the transformations experienced throughout life and recognises that nothing is unchanging:

There are nine transformations in a man's life. If it is not nine, it's eighteen

(van Driem 1998:436)

Although *tha damtshig* is considered to be important, several Bhutanese stressed the importance of thinking about what it means, and not simply accepting something because one's parents or teacher "tells you to". This raises two important and interlinked issues. Education has been central to the process of development in Bhutan since the 1960s. As in neighboring Nepal, the school curriculum has sought to promote government policies. The foreword to one senior school text states that, "The Education Division is making all endeavours in fulfilling the directives issued by the Royal Government to make education meaningful to our children and outline the roles they are expected to play as future citizens of the country" (CAPSS 1997:iii). This is echoed in a text book written for Class IX–X, *Bhutan Civics* that describes civic duties and responsibilities as meaning that "each individual citizen has a moral responsibility to assist the government in implementing national policies and in maintaining peace and prosperity in the country" (RGB 1999b: 6). The emergence of the nation-state as a political entity during the twentieth century and in particular in the second half has transformed the political and social landscapes. Loyalty, as *tha damtshig* is translated in a recent Dzongkha language textbook (1991) has acquired an abstract quality.

The second issue relates to the broader theme of the development of the nation-state, during the second half of the

twentieth century. Although the Drukpa state was established in the seventeenth century, allegiance and loyalty were probably more localised and based on personal relationships than on abstract notions of loyalty to the state or nation.²³ The emergence of a stronger centralised government under the monarchy, especially under the third king, supported the development of a new political language about the "nation" that came to the fore in the 1980s and 1990s in Bhutan. The role of education in creating an image of a modern, united nation-state is salient for the role of the schools as sites for promoting development and a particular vision of the Bhutanese nation. However, there was and remains an on-going tension as a balance between social and economic change and Bhutanese traditions and values is sought. This theme remains ever present and was illustrated in the coronation address of the fifth king in 2008. Speaking about the future and Bhutan's value, HM Jigme Khesar stated:

As citizens of a spiritual land you treasure the qualities of a good human being—honesty, kindness, charity, integrity, unity, respect for our culture and traditions . . . Throughout our history our parents have upheld these values and placed the common good above the self. My deepest concern is that as the world changes we may lose these fundamental values on which rest our character as a nation and people. It is critical that we are able to recognise Bhutanese character irrespective of how far we look back into the past or into the future.

(HM Jigme Khesar Wangchuck, Kuensel 8 November 2008)

The significance of *tha damtshig* as underlying organisational value or concept in Bhutanese society has without doubt been used in recent years as part of a new vocabulary that seeks to create and foster a shared Bhutanese identity. As a result, its meaning may be interpreted in terms of its function as part of a modern political discourse, rather than as timeless truths. This dimension of *tha damtshig* and *driglam namzha* are explored in by Karma Phutnsho (2004).

Herzfeld suggests "the use of moral-value terms represent social diagnoses of where the boundaries lie" (1996:45). This can be illustrated by an oath and written pledge to be administered on the appointment of a new member of the judiciary.

I . . . in the name of the Triple Gem and the guardian deities of the Kingdom of Bhutan do solemnly swear and affirm that I will faithfully perform the duties of my office without fear or favour, affection or ill-will and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend *Tsa Wa Sum* with *Tha damstig* and *Ley Jumdrej*. (RCJ 2000:5).²⁴

23. See Whitecross (2010).

24. I have retained the anglicised spelling used in Act of Ley Jumdrej.

Here the terms *tha damtshig* and *lejumdre* (Tib/Dz: *las rgyu* 'bras—cause and effect) are heightened in their significance by being linked to the concept of *Tsa Wa Sum* ("the three foundations")—king, people and nation.²⁵ The use of traditional concepts of behavior, respect and duty by the Bhutanese state merits its own consideration.²⁶ Karma Phuntsho publicly voiced his concerns over what he saw as the mixing of traditional values with a new political rhetoric that conflates what he views as traditional Bhutanese values with loyalty to the state (2004). His arguments are important for they seek to generate a public debate within Bhutan. To what extent that has occurred is hard to gauge—I do believe his provocative article illustrates the need for public reflection on what are held up to be "Bhutanese values". From my own observations, I think there is a tension between how they are used and understood by the majority of rural Bhutanese and the way the urban, educated Bhutanese understand and use them. Several Bhutanese described feeling that the urban voices "are louder" suggesting that the views of the rural Bhutanese may be subtly altered by those perceived to be better "educated". Phuntsho himself comments on this rural/urban divide and is critical of the invocation of traditional values by urban Bhutanese when they themselves do not uphold them.

CONCLUSION: MORAL VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD

In my paper, I have outlined one of the principle features of the moral landscape of the Bhutanese. Bourdieu comments that:

It is not easy to evoke the subjective experience associated with this world of the realised ought to be, in which things that could scarcely be otherwise nonetheless are what they are only because they are what they ought to be, in which an agent can have at one and the same time the feeling that there is nothing to do except what he is doing and that he is doing only what he ought (1977:166).

In trying to express an understanding of the moral basis of Bhutanese society, one is faced with the task of trying to grasp hold of something, which for many appears to be fading away. Parrish comments "Events, actions, practices acquire moral force because people live in an actual world, but partly in terms of a possible world—dreamed of in the moral imagination" (1994:287). Beyond the imagined moral unity of Bhutanese society there are different "possible worlds" emerging. The

values discussed go beyond respect and an acceptance of the status quo—they convey ideas concerning morality, justice, duty and obligation, relatedness and affection.

To these ideals newer forms of expression and nuances are being introduced—notions of citizenship and political participation, of human rights and enterprise. In March 2008, the first general elections based on competing political parties was held and in July 2008 the first written constitution for the country was enacted. In his discussion of the transmission of "traditional values" Wangyal argues that they can be interpreted "from the point of view of social justice" (2001:112). Similarly, the Royal Court of Justice emphasises the correspondence between Buddhist principles and contemporary socio-legal concerns. The Constitution sets out both the rights and the responsibilities of Bhutanese citizens—nothing surprising for a western lawyer, yet one can see in the Constitution the influence of local Bhutanese values, including *tha damtshig* that will shape the application and interpretation of the constitution.

Moral values and the meanings they construct are active features of social life. The discussions and concerns of my Bhutanese informants, whether concerning the purchase of land, the breakdown of a marriage, or accusations of witchcraft, cannot be separated easily from the meanings created by cultural practice, informed by the available discourse of moral values. Yet, this discourse drawing on various visions of the past, of national identity and the tensions between the transformation of Bhutan and increasing external influences, is far from homogenous. In seeking to create a sense of national identity and unity in the face of the apparent onslaught of non-Bhutanese ideas and values, *tha damtshig* has been politicised.

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There is a general lack of consistency over the anglicised spelling of Dzongkha words.

25. Dzongkha Rabsel Lamzang (1990:198) gives a different, yet significant, definition for *tsa wa gsum* as being "the king, the government and the kingdom". The Dzongkha reads " 'brug gi rtsa ba gsum zer mi 'di 'brug rgyal po 'brug gzhung 'brug rgyal khab gsum lu slab ain".

26. Paper in progress

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