

## The Positive Impact on Gomchen Tradition on Achieving and Maintaining Gross National Happiness

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*Dhammapiti sukham seti vippasannena cetasa  
Ariyappavedite dhamme sad ramati pandito.*

Happily he lives who drinks of the dharma

--From the Dhammapada

### **Introduction**

Everything that exists does so with a dependence on combining factors. Happiness or freedom from suffering and the causes of suffering is no exception to this rule, even though happiness is a non-material object or state of mind. In fact, happiness entirely depends upon the several positive causes and conditions that arise from both the grosser and the subtler levels of mind, and it cannot be transferred from one person to another.

Happiness must be cultivated through right effort and an understanding of the causes and conditions which lead to happiness. This cannot be accomplished in a vacuum and requires a dependence upon the kindness of fellow sentient beings for this attainment. Sometimes, as a part of this dependence, our happiness or positive state of mind is fostered by help from a spiritual friend, someone who has experience in the cultivation and maintenance of this mental state. Such a friend or guide can give good direction and advice on how to attain this goal of happiness, which, in broader terms, we call Gross National Happiness. The gomchen or lay priest community is a unique source for this type of consultation. It has been a traditional spiritual and cultural support for Mahayana-oriented Bhutan. As the country increasingly faces challenges, the gomchens will play an ever-greater role in promoting Gross National Happiness.

The Buddhist doctrine guarantees that anyone can successfully bring about transformation through right effort, right motivation, and an understanding of causes and conditions arising dependently. Freedom from suffering is assured if one follows the correct path and holds the

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correct view, but this is something that one needs to be taught. The knowledge leading to such transformation does not come spontaneously out of nowhere. Fortunately, the gomchen is qualified to impart this knowledge for purifying karmas to the lay people. If they can learn from him, then they will be able to eliminate the obstacle forming ignorance and turn negative circumstances into better ones for themselves and others. This benefits the overall well-being and happiness of the community and results in fewer negative circumstances to disturb the communal mind.

Because the gomchens are primarily dharma teachers with several lay practitioners in communities that are positively effected by their spiritual teachings and services, the gomchens are clearly in a special position to exert a beneficial influence on the peoples' interactions with, and attitudes towards, the four basic pillars of GNH: (1) economic self-reliance, (2) cultural promotion, (3) environmental preservation, and (4) good governance.

In this presentation regarding the gomchen's role in promoting GNH, some key background information concerning the gomchen tradition will be discussed, followed by a demonstration of gomchen's role in effecting the four pillars of GNH.

### **Gomchen Overview**

In Bhutan, there are three primary types of dharma practitioners: monks, nuns, and gomchen. Monks and nuns stay in a monastic community, whereas the gomchen is free to stay either in a monastery or in a village. The gomchen is also permitted to marry and start a family and live within the lay community, where he can serve as a spiritual support for the society.

#### *Gomchens Role*

Gomchen means "great meditator". This is a title, which refers to the lay priests in Bhutan, but in other Himalayan regions the lay priests are referred to as Ngagpa which means "tantric practitioner". So the "great meditators" of Bhutan have played a major role for centuries in promoting and maintaining the spiritual well-being of their communities. The role of gomchen is similar to that of monks and nuns in the ways that they are helpful to others, but they have an extended role that goes beyond what a monk or nun can usually do within a lay community. The main difference between a gomchen and the monks and nuns has to do with ordination and the fact that gomchens can choose the family life for themselves while still acting as spiritual guides for others. A familiarity with family life on the part of the gomchen opens many possibilities for

the gomchen to serve one or another lay community in ways that are not common for monks and nuns.

While the gomchen observes the five precepts and is trained in all arts of ritual, Buddhist philosophy, meditation, astrology, and medicine, his role is mainly that of dharma teacher to the lay community.

It is the gomchen who provides teachings and instruction on dharma practice to the lay community and can open the minds of people to the attainment of greater happiness in their lives through the study and realization of certain Buddhist principles. Because gomchens are educated dharma teachers with right motivation to assist others, they are well respected and highly regarded in their communities. Many people come to them for advice in regard to a full range of issues. The gomchen advises and provides spiritual services on almost any aspect for life, including education, family relations, marriage, birth, death, business, healing, and even farming from planting to harvest.

When people are successful because of the gomchen's wise and meaningful advice which is rooted in dharma, this promotes faith in the Buddhist principles and culture and further enhances the societal structure in which the gomchen can serve a useful purpose. For example, someone could become ill or have a sick family member who needs the healing services of the gomchen. They request the service from the gomchen in particular because they feel a need for a spiritual type of healing. So if a gomchen does a special puja for them and the sick become well, then people develop even more faith in the Buddhist principle that all obstacles are temporary and are capable of being transformed through spiritual means. Thus, more conviction is developed concerning the Buddhist doctrine which contends that all suffering is due to dependently arising causes and conditions which are later experienced as karmic circumstances.

Consequently, when the gomchen shares his spiritual understanding and abilities with members of the community, and educates them in the dharmic approach to life's challenges, not only does their faith in the gomchen increase, but their faith in their own ability to change also increases.

After witnessing the example of the healing gomchen, some might ponder the following thought: "If a gomchen is following dharma and is motivated by pure bodhicitta to help others and he can effect a positive change, then why can't I also learn how to do this?"

#### *Education and Training*

The gomchen tradition was started in Bhutan during the 8th century when Guru Rinpoche introduced Vajrayana Buddhism into Bhutan. Guru

Rinpoche was himself a fully enlightened being, an unsurpassed teacher of dharma, and a gomchen as well. He was able to reach into the minds of countless scores of lay people and successfully turn their hearts and minds toward dharma practice. He had an assistant named Haminatha from central Bhutan, who was a student of the Guru and was the first official gomchen; Khandrom Monmo Trashi Kheudren was the first female gomchen. So the gomchen tradition actually begins at this point in history.

Under Guru Rinpoche's guidance, gomchen Haminatha accompanied him to Tibet. Being highly skilled and trained in all the arts, Haminatha helped construct Guru Rinpoche's treasure boxes, which were used to guard precious dharma texts and objects.

As a result, generations of gomchens have been trained in the same arts, such as painting, calligraphy, etc. In addition to the arts, the young gomchens have been trained in astrology, medicine, sacred dance, and drawing mandala. They develop competency in all ritual arts and spend years becoming competent at using ritual instruments such as the short and the long trumpet, the vajra and bell, drum and cymbal. Then they learn how to set an altar and make tormas.

There are two ways that a young gomchen can train for this path. One way is to study individually as a student of an older, established, reliable gomchen who can direct his mind to successfully train in all areas of the gomchen path. In this case, the youngster is like an apprentice and learns directly from the master, who can lead him through the training from start to finish. Many children of established gomchens train this way directly from their father and assist him in rituals as he goes to different villages to meet the people's requests. The fathers teach their children all the arts of ritual, the Buddhist texts, mind training and meditation.

If a parent is a non-gomchen, he can bring his child to a relative who is a gomchen to request the gomchen education and training, or he can request a non-relative senior gomchen to take his child as a novice gomchen for individual training.

The other way that a gomchen can receive training is by being enrolled in a monastery school. Many parents see this as a good choice for their son's education; the parents see the gomchen path as highly regarded, since it honours the dharma, and is a path which is able to provide a good living for the child in later adult years. It is an appealing choice for education since every aspect of the gomchen path provides ample opportunities for the accumulation of merit and helping other sentient beings. Many parents have a desire to see their child focus on

this spiritual type of education, which is a departure from the ordinary education that is more focused on worldly concerns.

The focus of the gomchen's education is mind training and training in bodhicitta, so their children will learn how to be non-violent, disciplined, compassionate, and contented. This type of education is designed to promote confidence and a positive, responsible attitude towards self and others in the society. This pleases the parents and makes them very happy to know that the correct causes and conditions are being sown for the happiness of their children. Parents want good things for their children, and the gomchen path leads to higher rebirths through the lifelong commitment to dharma practice and meritorious action in the form of communal service. This alone gives the parents much peace of mind, and they are happy to know that their child is on a noble and highly respected path.

The parents are also aware that if the child enrolls in initial monastic training for the gomchen path, he will certainly learn how to read and write, as this is a requirement for studying sutras and writing calligraphy and poetry. In fact, later, the gomchen will be reciting the Buddha's canon in the homes of villagers as a part of rituals. So there is a firm emphasis placed on reading in the gomchen's education. Each gomchen is required to read within one day, a volume of text that contains five to six hundred folios. Therefore, the parents feel confident that gomchen training will result in a high level of literacy for their child.

Since the gomchen path is the path of meditation and imparting the dharma to others, from an early age gomchens are educated and trained in the Buddhist principles. They study from the three following sutra texts: Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*, Chandrakirti's *Madhyamika*, and Vasubhndu's *Abidharmakosh*. They gain a thorough knowledge of these texts and others as well, but their main training is in tantric practice and in training the mind.

Mind training is taught from the beginning, step by step. This is a particular focus of the gomchen education, since it promotes happiness as a result of dispelling ignorance and, therefore, eliminating the afflictive emotions and misguided desires which are negative causes and conditions that lead to more suffering within cyclic existence. So mind training is required for every individual to bring happiness for them and for others.

What is the purpose of mind training for the gomchen? Gomchens train for enlightenment because they are motivated to serve the benefit of all sentient beings. In this way, they cannot afford to have any afflictive emotions causing disturbance for themselves and others. They must have realization of peace and equanimity by disciplining the mind. After they

have learned to be thoroughly calm and content, and have had a certain spiritual realization, the gomchen will pass this technique on to others who also wish to learn the mind science of peace and happiness.

Gomchens know that this mind training is a means by which happiness can be attained, and they are glad and feel fortunate to be in a position to teach these same techniques to the lay community. The gomchen's motivation is to assist others to become enlightened and this includes all sentient beings, who should attain the true un-fabricated happiness that does not come from transitory material attachments. Those types of attachments to the material grosser levels of relative existence, even if seemingly very pleasurable for a moment, will ultimately lead to suffering due to their impermanent nature. So the gomchen wants to pass on the techniques of lasting contentment to others after he has practiced them and has come to know them so thoroughly. He can teach the same techniques to others who are interested to learn.

What makes the gomchen training special is that the gomchen is not training for his own personal happiness and acquisition of material objects. Many ordinary careers train in just this way, with an emphasis on competition. Unfortunately, one person "wins" while another has to "lose" because of the other's bid to 'get ahead' or 'go up' in the world. Most people feel that this is the way to effectively improve their life circumstances.

The gomchen's goal is the opposite of this: he always puts the countless other sentient beings first, before himself, and then he tends to their needs for peace of mind and ultimate spiritual well-being. If the beings are struggling to make a living, he advises them and does pujas for their increased good fortune and the removal of hindrances.

The gomchen trained in how to alter weather patterns will even go into retreat during the summer in order to pray for rain for the farmers, if the farmers think that this is needed for yielding better crops. Then the gomchen can also stop the rains if the farmers make this request. If the lay people want instruction in meditation, the gomchen is there to show them the way onto this path.

Thus, the gomchen can serve a multitude of external and internal needs of the people with a focus on the fulfilment of their wishes.

A part of the gomchen training is to do Ngondro practice. This is done in order to purify physical and mental obscuration. The gomchens go into retreat for one year so they can do the tantric practices that will help purify their own karmas so that they can be better benefactors to their communities. The gomchen knows that his responsibility to others' happiness depends upon his own enlightenment for the sake of all

sentient beings. By engaging in tantric practices and doing the retreats, he will further purify his awareness so that he can improve his service to others.

#### *Tantric Practices*

There are two tantric practices that gomchen train in. The first one is called *kerim*. This is the part of deity yoga that focuses on seeing oneself as the deity and transforming one's ordinary consciousness and sense of identity into that of the particular deity. This type of meditation helps the practitioner overcome the feelings of being simply 'ordinary' and aids in extracting more of his potential for enlightenment. The second practice is *dzogrim*. Here, the practitioner sees himself as the deity but practices no attachment to the deity form. Instead, he is realizing the emptiness within the deity form.

These two practices serve as a means by which the practitioner can attain an inseparable unity of method and wisdom. If the mind can realize the emptiness of the deity while maintaining the form, this serves as the eventual cause for the omniscient mind. If the gomchen can train in this way by doing retreats, then he will attain some spiritual realization that will make him a better dharma teacher for others to follow. He will want to teach the methods for enlightenment to others, so it is imperative for him to do intensive practices that can quickly result in the omniscient mind of buddhahood.

The gomchen's practice of doing retreats and performing rituals are for the happiness of all sentient beings. Here gomchen education differs vastly from the modern mainstream education. Senior gomchens always encourage and give advice to the younger gomchens about how to be devoted to happiness not only for the local people and town areas but also for all other sentient beings. The gomchen understands very well that he has a responsibility to be a good example in the mind of society. The countless sentient beings are an object of devotion for the gomchen, and he sees that through them there is a source for the accumulation of merit. Because of the kindness of these sentient beings, he is able to serve their need for happiness.

A high gomchen is sometimes a lama or a rinpoche to whom people can come for the instructions on the path of enlightenment. They know that he is always there to help them further their spiritual realization, and this causes a feeling of devotion on the part of the lay people. In this way, the gomchen can be a sort of refuge for the lay people, because they will regard the gomchen as a protector of their happiness and spiritual well-being. When people know that the gomchen is there to serve them with

the pure heart of bodhicitta, this automatically relaxes the communal mind and creates an atmosphere of peace.

*Gomchen as Consultant*

Gomchens have always been consultants and counsellors for the lay people. It is a well-established fact that in Bhutan, before the modern education system, the gomchen was usually the most educated person in a town or village and was needed for a variety of services. Gomchens had to be a sort of "jack-of-all-trades" and fulfil a variety of requests.

Today, just as in the past, students, farmers, business people, civil servants, and various others come to the gomchen for help and advice. They are searching for some understanding as to where their karmas are leading. They will ask for the invocation of luck if they are feeling unlucky. They will ask for relationship advice if a couple is having some obstacle. If they are in business, they will request some type of divination to see where their fortunes are heading. There are countless requests and reasons for seeking out a gomchen, so the gomchen becomes a consultant for persons from the full range of society.

When he gives a divination or imparts some wise and helpful advice, the people usually relax because they trust that the gomchen has some special insight due to his spiritual realization and constant maintenance of the meditation life path. This trust puts the lay people automatically at ease and promotes their happy state of mind.

Gomchens can do predictions for a person or use clairvoyance to see what career path, business activity, or relationship best suits them. In doing so, he can help them make better choices for themselves in life, thereby avoiding more suffering. The gomchen can also advise specific spiritual practices for individuals in order to help them avoid hindrances and eliminate more negative states of mind.

This advice from the gomchen increases the lay person's faith in maintaining dharmic practices and meritorious activities when they see for themselves that what the gomchen has advised has indeed helped them with given karmic circumstances. Then people return to the gomchen again and again for advice because he is helpful to them. This is evidenced by the fact that in Bhutan, people usually want to get counselling from a high gomchen before embarking upon any important life matter.

Gomchens are also in a unique position when it comes to giving advice to the lay people regarding family matters, since many gomchens are married with family. Parents who have difficulties or concerns about their children will find a sympathetic and able advisor in a gomchen who has his own children. He will have a clearer understanding of how the



parent feels, because he too is a parent and familiar with some of the karmic challenges of family life.

The lay people who need spiritual advice in the way of relationships will also find an able counsellor in the gomchen who is married and is familiar with the psychology of marriage relationships in particular. Because the gomchen is married, the persons needing advice in this area will feel more relaxed in seeking advice from him. They will feel more comfortable approaching him for advice because they know that he understands some of the karmic challenges in relationships.

The gomchen is often a mediator for other people and serves in this role without bias, since his intention to help comes from pure bodhicitta.

#### *Female Gomchens*

The gomchen's wife and family life can make the lay people feel at ease. The gomchen's wife is the female counterpart of the gomchen and therefore is also a type of gomchen too. The gomchen's wife plays an important role in supporting the gomchen and his spiritual work for the community. In doing so, she is developing spiritually through the ways that she helps maintain the spiritual focus of her family. The female gomchen raises her children according to Buddhist principles and encourages them to engage in spiritual practices and to gain a spiritual education. She also engages in dharma practices and performs pujas with her husband. The female gomchen will also do retreats and meditation in addition to looking after all the household matters such as cooking, cleaning, etc. Thus, she is a good example of how a person can run a household, raise children, help her partner and still do several dharma practices. She maintains a home that has a foundation in dharma.

All this is possible due to the female gomchen's devotion to service and maintaining the spiritual well-being of the family. She is an example of action bodhicitta in that she is always generous in granting the wishes of others and in maintaining her commitment to dharma practice and in supporting the gomchen lama as he tends to the various needs of the community.

The female gomchen receives training from her husband and becomes proficient in chanting, performing ritual, and meditation. She is frequently the motivating force in giving an early education to her children in how to read and write Buddhist texts. Therefore, she is an example of the positive state of mind which comes as a result of commitment to dharma and can inspire many of the lay persons to keep doing their own dharma practices. When they see how busy the female gomchen is, but how she still manages to do dharma practice, they feel that they too can make dharma practice a natural part of the structure of

their own lives. She gives them inspiration through her example and shows how a mother can play a key role in integrating dharma into the lives of her children from a very early age. In this way, she is responsible for promoting the earliest gomchen training for her children because she knows very well that they can live to serve others' happiness in life through a commitment to boundless bodhicitta and through living to impart dharma teachings and services to the whole community.

When the gomchen takes on novices for training, the female gomchen has added duties regarding the novices since the gomchen lama is now responsible for their food and shelter. The female gomchen engages in the work of supporting the novices as they get education from the senior gomchen. She is providing a positive structure for their learning and is doing so because she believes it will help maintain the well-being of the community to have highly trained gomchens. So as a part of service to the community, she serves the needs of the novice gomchens as well.

### **The Importance of Retreat**

Retreat is a key part of mind training for dharma practitioners and integral to the life of gomchens. They usually do retreat for a short period of time in the summer while farmers are working in the fields. During the retreat they dedicate merit to the welfare of local people and for all sentient beings. Gomchens divide the day and night into six periods, during which they fully dedicate themselves to peace and the happiness of the people.

As a part of their daily routine, every morning the gomchens perform purification prayers to counter any defilement that might have occurred as a result of the people working in the fields. Gomchens try to negotiate with local spirits for cooperation by praying for the sake of the peoples' happiness. Therefore, in direct conscious ways as well as those of the more subtle consciousness, the material and psychological well-being of the community is being served by the gomchen's pure intention to help and by the very power of his prayers. The community members appreciate this effort and pure intention on the part of the gomchen to maintain good conditions for them as they farm, so they bring offerings to provide for basic needs during the gomchen's retreat. In doing this, a harmonious mutual symbiosis is attained. Because the gomchen is being helped by those he is helping, the gomchen makes even more intense efforts to bring about favourable conditions on behalf of others. Both the gomchen and the community he is serving become even more contented through their faith in the dharma.

For gomchens, their life purpose is to become enlightened for the sake of all other sentient beings. So the retreats serve a purpose in allowing the gomchen an opportunity to become more detached from the outer appearances of reality and to gain spiritual power and insight as a result of tantric meditation practices. The retreats motivate the gomchen to put more effort into the achievement of supreme happiness because of the resultant realization and spiritual developments that emerge during the retreat period.

There are many stages in a retreat. The first retreat is called Ngondro. This is a preliminary practice which starts from the point of going for refuge to the three jewels to engaging in guru yoga. It is a complete training for both physical and mental purification and is a year-long undertaking.

Then the next stage is a three-year retreat which focuses on the three roots: lama, yidam, and khandro. After completing this retreat, the gomchen will be authorized to lead major ceremonies. The three-year retreat is a highly desirable undertaking because it is an opportunity for one to gain profound experiences of spiritual insight and develop more spiritual power based upon wisdom, realizing emptiness and pure awareness. After this retreat even an ordinary gomchen will be able to give teachings to people and will be able to show others the correct path to enlightenment.

Retreat centers for gomchens are typically found in the high mountains and solitary places. These are locations that are difficult for most people to traverse easily. The location choice accords with a religious text which asserts that a retreat place should be located at least one mile from the village or town, preferably in an elevated place such as a mountain. Only then does the location meet the requirement for *gonpa*, which means 'solitary place'.

### **Retreat Etiquette**

In keeping with the requirement of having the retreat in a solitary place, there are certain retreat etiquettes and disciplines to be observed by both retreatants and non-retreatants. For example, when people pass nearby a retreat area, they should be mindful of this and make efforts not to see the gomchen in retreat. Visitors are not allowed to pass beyond a certain place. However, if someone wants to leave offering items for the gomchen, he is advised to leave them at the entrance with a message that the offering items come from a certain person. Names of deceased can also be left so the merit can be dedicated for them.

Being able to make offerings to the gomchen retreatants who are seriously on the path to full enlightenment fulfils the need for the

accumulation of merit on the part of the lay people and promotes their happiness. For them, the offering is the aspiration to do far reaching positive actions. By having the gomchen there to accept such an offering, their wish has been actualized. Similarly, the gomchen retreatant feels fulfilled in being able to use this life in a very appropriate way, not wasting the rare opportunity of a precious human life. Both gomchens and lay people enjoy happiness by acknowledging themselves to be the luckiest amongst millions of human beings, because they recognize the preciousness in this life and do not want to waste the opportunities for spiritual realization and the dedication of accumulated merits.

During the retreat, gomchens are not allowed to cut their hair, nails, or shave moustache and beard, because the whole body is transformed into a certain deity. They are only allowed to meet three people during the entire retreat: their root lama, who is the guiding teacher during the retreat, a food carrier and a doctor.

Communication with these three people is done by writing on a slate or by talking at a particular time, depending on how the gomchen retreatant and the root lama have set the rules at the beginning of the retreat. Some retreat persons prefer not to speak for the entire three years.

What is the reason for this silence? It is because ordinary speech is being transformed into the divine speech of a specific deity. Also, the ordinary body and mind are transformed into the deity's body and mind. This is in accord with specific deity tantric practices that are being used to purify the gomchen's body, speech, and mind. Therefore, the retreatant's body is generally not allowed to be shown to other people unless those people are themselves blessed.

During retreat time, gomchens enjoy genuine happiness and bliss without attachment by practicing the dharma. Moreover, the gomchens fully dedicate their realization and prayers to the happiness of all other sentient beings in the three realms.

When the lay people witness the blissful transformation of the gomchen's mind due to doing retreats, the lay people are inspired to renounce the mind of attachment and have fewer destructive self-grasping worldly desires. They realize through the example of gomchen retreatants that true happiness and contentment cannot be attained through an attachment to wealth and the accumulation of material things. So they seek to have the same happiness that gomchens are experiencing by listening to the dharma teachings and instructions for practicing as directed by the gomchens.

### **Ceremony/Puja**

Ceremony is one of the most important activities in the life of gomchens. That is why gomchens are trained from an early age in the practice and theory of a wide variety of ritual arts and performances. The four different types of pujas in which they are trained fall into the four categories of peace, increase, power, and subduing. The most popular request from the lay people is to perform pujas promoting their happiness and success. People strongly believe in invoking luck and becoming successful by means of performing pujas. An individual needs so many outer conditions and circumstances to be met in order to attain what is perceived to be happiness, so that in addition to material accumulation, people are still seeking spiritual help to attain more of whatever object they feel will bring them the most happiness and success. This is because people's desire has no limit, and they are always searching for the means to become satisfied.

Through pujas, people may feel that a positive cause and condition has been set into action through the gomchen's prayers, and this has the effect of making people feel more comfortable, more psychologically balanced. They feel more contented, because although they had a desire it was directed through a dharmic action and resulted in the accumulation of more merit. Some positive spiritual force was put into action through the ritual and prayers performed by the gomchen on their behalf.

There is such a demand for these pujas that sometimes trains of gomchens travel in the morning into huge towns and village communities because every available gomchen has been invited by a household. For the entire day, the gomchens are engaged in performing pujas in that particular household in order to bring peace and happiness by dispelling any obstacle and negative force.

Gomchens also try to help others through an effort to prolong this life by invoking the long life Buddha through performing puja. Similarly, if people become sick, gomchens are invited to perform the Medicine Buddha puja. If households lack economic resources, gomchens will perform the God of Wealth puja in those houses in order to invoke the blessing for increased material resources.

If there has been a loss of earth blessing which results in infertile soil that will not yield crops, the gomchens insert holy vases underneath the earth so that the soil will produce abundant of crops.

Gomchens can also control evil spirits that may be haunting and causing disturbances. To keep the evil spirits from harming others, the gomchen uses methods to subdue them and expel them from the location of disturbance and emancipate them into the sphere of dharmakaya.

Gomchens also perform a public service by conducting funerals for the lay population. They can aid in directing the consciousness of the deceased during the intermediate state to the pure land. In the vajrayana tradition, it is known that the consciousness of the deceased wanders in the intermediate state for 21 days and is like a feather being blown about by the force of karma. But in this intermediate state there is a special opportunity to realize pure primordial wisdom or clear light mind.

If the consciousness is able to realize this pure state even for a brief second, there is a chance that the consciousness of the deceased can go on to a higher rebirth. The gomchen is experienced with the subtle stages of consciousness during the intermediate state and can help direct the consciousness during its transit from one phase to another. During the time when a person is sick and about to die, rinpoches and gomchens usually try to direct the consciousness onto the correct route through prayers and the transference of consciousness. If the enlightened lama's spiritual power and strong intention conjoin with the faith of the deceased person's consciousness at the correct exact moment, then the consciousness of the deceased is able to realize the dharmakaya nature, the pure primordial wisdom which is beyond life and death. If this occurs, then the mind of the deceased becomes a Buddha who can manifest anytime and anywhere in accordance with the wishes of sentient beings. This consciousness has become a wish-fulfilling jewel for all others, and the gomchens and rinpoches who facilitate this outcome accumulate great merit which they use to continue benefiting others. The surviving relatives and friends of the deceased feel very relieved that the gomchen can offer this service to their loved ones for whom they have affection and attachment.

After the gomchen has finished with the prayers and ritual, the surviving relatives and friends naturally feel a loss and are saddened, but they also feel contented, knowing that they did their best to help the consciousness of the deceased gain a higher rebirth. This thought alone helps them maintain some small happiness even in the midst of their loss.

Gomchens also lead public ceremonies like festivals and weddings in the villages and towns. During the festivals, gomchens entertain the community by demonstrating many sacred dances. In some villages, the lay people pray for world peace, like the annual one billion times recitation of the six-syllable mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum" and the recitation of the Vajra Guru mantra. In some instances, villages sponsor the fasting prayer and rituals in spring in order to make confession because they may have taken the lives of insects and worms, and other sentient beings during the summer farming work. It relieves the mind of the farmers to know that they can make a confession and have prayers

done by a gomchen on their behalf in order to alleviate any possible ill karmic effects due to the negative action of taking life. By conducting the pujas and doing these types of prayers, the gomchen is able to help lessen the guilty burden on the mind. This helps to unstress the emotions of those who may have unintentionally harmed an animal while trying to make a living ploughing a field.

In addition to the summer retreats and prayers, the gomchen also does pujas in winter in Bhutan, when there is more leisure time for farmers and other laypersons. During this time, the gomchen devotes much time to the public's need for religious ceremonies, such as the *Tshog Bum* puja or the hundred thousand offerings of *tshog*, and the *Nyungney* or the fasting, as well as the *Zhingdrub* or actualization of pure land ceremony. People from all sections of the community come for these ceremonies conducted by gomchens. Many elderly people will come to recite the six syllable mantra, and during the session, they will observe the five precepts. The ceremonies can last for a week or more.

The community gathers at a local temple or builds a temporary shelter for the puja ceremony. The atmosphere is alive with socializing and a shared sense of purpose in invoking the puja. This pulls the community together in a united effort to do dharma practice that will benefit all sentient beings and invoke blessings for the entire community. This cohesion due to a shared desire to do dharma practice knits the community together even more tightly and creates an atmosphere of happiness in joining together to do meritorious actions, lead by the gomchen lama.

The head gomchen will give teachings during the winter on various Buddhist philosophical topics and practices, including such topics as the law of cause and effect and dependently arising conditions, the significance of puja, how to develop the inspirational bodhicitta mind for the benefit of all sentient beings, the transformation of consciousness through the tantric method of deity visualization, and the benefits of virtuous practice. At the end of the pujas and teachings, the merit is dedicated, and some lay persons' hearts are so moved that they themselves even become gomchens after realizing the benefits of a spiritual life.

The pujas and teachings are happy events where the minds of lay people can be turned towards the dharma and virtuous activities. Sometimes people feel so happy and privileged when they realize the preciousness of their human life and their access to the triple gem that they cry from joy when they receive teachings from the gomchen lama. The teachings and subsequent realization become a basis for the sober contentment of their minds. This has a further impact on their society,

because there is less crime and destruction where the minds of people are at peace. The quality of life automatically improves when the people feel content, and the presence of the gomchen lama working on behalf of the community provides the means for this to be maintained through his constant commitment to ceremonies and teachings.

### **The Dharma Teaching**

Gomchens also give teachings after they come out of retreat. At the conclusion of the retreat, it is typical for the lay community to receive teachings from the gomchen. The lay people have an interest in these post-retreat teachings because several of them are also doing ngondro practice and guru yoga in addition to their daily work. Many lay people do not know how to read the religious texts, so they are appreciative if the gomchen can give them instructions regarding the visualization of deities. Lay people try to seek a gomchen lama as their spiritual guide, one who has completed the three year retreat.

After this retreat, the gomchen lama has merited some spiritual authority and can give public teachings. Even if the gomchen lama is not well versed in the Buddhist canon, he still retains spiritual authority due to his realization and spiritual powers. What is truly necessary for the gomchen to be an authentic spiritual guide is that he have the genuine pure bodhicitta in his heart. Then he can lead others through the path of liberation by communicating his actualized compassion and Buddha nature. This is the main reason that Bhutanese people develop and maintain respect for the gomchen: he has the correct motivation and spiritual means by which to lead them to the experience of peace and happiness in their own minds. If the lay people have faith in this, then they will be able to use the gomchen to help them develop a deep respect for the Mahayana tradition and its methods for developing the special insight of wisdom-realizing-emptiness. Step by step, the gomchen lamas can lead the students' minds toward the actual realization of the primordial state.

Gomchens teach the lay community that there is a method for becoming free from the negative conditions of cyclic existence, and this is appealing to the community when they have many hardships or challenges to face in their lives. It routes their minds in a positive direction to know that there is a means by which one can become free from samsara and that the gomchen has promised to help them accomplish this. This is the primary purpose of the gomchen-lama's life: to help free others from suffering through external acts of compassion and kindness while simultaneously using the subtler methods of giving mind training directions and transmissions to his lay students.



For this type of instruction, gomchens are more easily available than the high lamas and rinpoches who live in monastic communities. To get a teaching from a rinpoche or lama in the monk community, one has to go to the monastery to make an appointment and submit a request for the teaching. The gomchen, on the other hand, lives within the lay community and is a constant presence, so it is easier to go directly to him. He will give oral teachings or transmissions directly to them. If the gomchen has regular students and sees them all the time, he is also familiar with where the student is with his/her practice and realization and can help them direct their minds through the methods that are most suitable for them. Because the gomchen is immediately available and an integral part of the lay community, he can efficiently dispense the spiritual teachings that people need and would otherwise find difficult or impossible to obtain. When the lay community knows that the gomchen lama is a spiritual constant in their community and that they can always go to him for teachings and transmissions, the people feel hopeful that they can make unlimited progress with their dharma practice and will not have a limited approach to how much spiritual progress they will be able to make in their lifetime. It boosts their enthusiasm for dharma practice and decreases their worry, to know that there will not be a limit for their spiritual studies and practices. They will feel happy knowing that there are lamas who can help them become enlightened, perhaps within this very lifetime.

#### **The Practice of Generosity**

Usually gomchens come out from their summer retreat at the beginning of October and start going for alms for a few weeks, if they stay in the villages. Normally gomchens travel around the village from house to house making prayers for the different households. Then the householders give a donation to the gomchen in appreciation of the beneficial prayers. The householder's donation is typically some portion of grain. Then the gomchen also makes a prayer in gratitude for the householder's kindness and generosity. Both the gomchens and monks engage in this type of right livelihood. They do not compete for or demand something; they accept whatever is freely given and are satisfied with it.

By going for alms, the gomchens allow the householder to let go of self-grasping attachment to material objects. This opportunity allows the householder to develop more bodhicitta and perfect the meritorious action of generosity. So the gomchen is able to make a right livelihood and the householders are able to accumulate more merit by supporting

the gomchen as he supports their wish for more happiness for their households.

In the Mahayana tradition, there is a special emphasis placed upon the *Six Paramitas*, or *Six Perfections*. The Perfection of Generosity is one of these. It is important that Buddhists practise the perfection of generosity, moral or ethical discipline, and concentration. In Pali, these are respectively referred to as *dhana*, *shila*, and *samadhi*. According to the Theravada doctrine, it is imperative for every Buddhist to practice this trinity if one is to become liberated from the samsaric world. But it must be noted that this type of liberation is self-liberation from the suffering of samsara. For enlightenment to occur, it is necessary for the practice of this trinity to be motivated by the desire to benefit the countless other sentient beings.

The generosity that is being taught by the gomchen clearly falls into the category of perfecting this quality for the sake of all other sentient beings because he is motivated to lead others to full enlightenment while simultaneously improving their immediate living conditions. By allowing the householders to give donations, he is helping them to secure a better karmic condition for themselves, which may manifest in this lifetime as more wealth or may occur in following lifetimes as more comfortable living circumstances. So the gomchen cares for the comfort of the lay populace, has an empathetic understanding of their living conditions, and knows how to help the lay people transform this concern into something positive. The gomchen is just there, at the doorstep of each household, aiding the lay community to literally open their own doors to a positive transformation of their living circumstances.

### **Service**

What is the most generous act that one being can do for another? Perhaps it is showing them the way to attain a true state of contentment, free from all suffering. This is what Buddha Shakymuni taught and, therefore, is the focus of the gomchen's life purpose, since he is a dharma teacher. His main objective is to help lead the minds of people into a better state of awareness and, ultimately, to enlightenment. Performing this service is his life commitment to all sentient beings, and he knows that the dharma is the only correct means to accomplish this end. All other methods for trying to establish lasting happiness fail due to some basic misperception about reality. So he tries to educate the people of his community about the causes and conditions that lead to happiness and ultimately enlightenment because he is committed to their spiritual health.

The gomchen lama is familiar with the inner nature of the mind and how the mind works. This insight comes as a spiritual realization from

his meditation practice. He knows full well what some people may not be completely aware that self-grasping desires are difficult to eliminate but must be dispelled if peaceful happy states of mind are to prevail. The self-grasping desires are dependent upon ignorance, not only about the impermanence of self but also about the dependently arising causes and conditions. This ignorance must be uprooted through mind training and the development of ultimate bodhicitta if the goal of enlightenment is to be attained.

So the gomchen, by doing pujas and external acts which lead people's minds into a communal contentedness, is really offering people a chance to accumulate merit that will positively direct their own causes and conditions into a manifestation of happiness. By constantly offering chances for the accumulation of merit, the gomchen is helping to habituate the minds of his lay community towards benefiting others, not just persons in their own villages and towns but all other sentient beings; self-grasping is a root cause for suffering and repeated cyclic rebirths. As the minds of people get more and more habituated toward virtuous dharma activities and developing bodhicitta, they naturally feel better because the fetters of self-grasping loosen. The self-grasping cannot stand up to the strength of bodhicitta, because self-grasping is a temporary, ignorant contaminated state while ultimate bodhicitta is pure and boundless. Because they do dharma activities and feel better, the people want to engage in even more dharma practice, since their minds are being habituated towards the spiritual means to happiness.

If the people ask the gomchen for further teachings in mind training and he gives them transmissions, the self-grasping mind may fall away more quickly and they will experience fewer and fewer afflictive emotions over time. It is very good for the community if people feel motivated to do this spiritual work with the gomchen lama because it means that there will be less afflictions in their society. The atmosphere becomes less aggressive and competitive when many members of the community are practicing at least an inspirational bodhicitta. This improves the quality of life for everyone when the majority of persons in a community want to practice bodhicitta. But this is why the gomchen is living in the community in the first place. His purpose is to assist in the happiness of others by teaching them how to develop the bodhicitta which will help liberate the mind.

How many other societies in the world have someone whose sole occupation and ambition is to serve the complete happiness and wellbeing of others with the purest intention born of bodhi mind? Maybe there really aren't so many who want to do this type of work, but this is

the gomchen's job, and it is the most fortunate and auspicious endeavour!

### **Gomchens Influence on the Four Pillars of GNH**

In Bhutan, the gomchen is an integral part of every community and serves as a spiritual constant since his dharma service extends to all areas of life within the given community. There are gomchens in every village and town throughout the country and thus their influence is far reaching. This influence of the gomchen as a spiritual guide promotes and helps to maintain the four basic pillars of GNH: economic self-reliance, environmental preservation, cultural promotion, and good governance.

#### *Economic Self-Reliance*

In the area of economic self-reliance, the gomchen, being a dharma teacher, is himself an example of right livelihood and can give training and advice in this direction. Right livelihood is directly related to economic self-reliance, because the causes and conditions stemming from one's choice of work can lead to either happy or miserable circumstances. For example, a prevalence of corrupt occupations will result in turmoil and disturbance for the environment and the society, and this will immediately undermine the spiritual well-being of the entire group because society is an interdependent entity. Its happiness as a whole rests upon the shoulders of all the individuals who form it.

According to the Dhammapada, right livelihood is in line with benefiting others and decreasing that which is harmful. This means that right livelihood is to be directed at improving conditions for others while simultaneously providing for the basic living requirements that support human physical existence. But happiness is related to more than just taking care of the needs of the human body. If this were not true, then happiness would be an empirical state and have little to do with the nature of the mind and the human ability to use effort to transform ignorant states into clearer perceptions of reality.

What can help bring about a positive state of mind in career or economic development? Desire must be examined. It is what drives us to want things, including happiness. It is the desire that must be correctly directed if a positive result is to emerge. If there is too much self-grasping at the root of anything, including economic self-reliance, then a state of suffering will follow from any dharmic action. For example, someone may want to make money because he needs it but is unwilling to put the welfare of others first. He is attached to the idea of making money and this is what is directing his choices at the moment. It is as if the desire for

money has taken over his concern for others and completely obscured his ability to see the preciousness of other sentient beings.

During the moment of obscurity, he might believe that selling drugs would be a fine way to accomplish his wish for more money. Perhaps it could provide him a lot of cash very fast. Maybe he is thinking along these lines, but if he chooses to take this path, the consequences for himself and society will be very negative. Besides being illegal and potentially resulting in his imprisonment, someone may get sick or die as a result of the drug seller's selfish focus on only making money without regard for the well-being of other sentient beings.

If others are harmed in the process of making a living, it is because one is not practicing bodhicitta and putting the well-being of others first. Since right livelihood means much more than just making money and acquiring material possessions, happiness coming from right livelihood implies much more than just providing for the needs of the physical body alone. The truth is that everyone wants a comfortable life and happiness. This is a deep desire, but in order to obtain the opposite of a miserable life, one must engage in the virtuous acts that will positively formulate the correct causes and conditions leading to this happy state. Of course, all of this positive activity can be directed by the mind, and this is the truest form of self-reliance: one must train one's own mind to make virtuous choices regarding one's economic viability in order to obtain an occupation which is in line with the dharma. This type of occupation will at the very least have a positive state of mind as one of its many benefits.

The gomchen lama can advise others about right livelihood and how best use of their own talents and skills to attain this. He can, in fact, use his special insight to give guidance about what area of occupation would yield the best result for an individual. If a person has faith in this advice from the gomchen lama, then he/she can bring a spiritual view into their daily lives, and their attitude toward work will change. If the gomchen lama's students gain spiritual values and an appreciation for right livelihood, they can work in the world in such a way as to put their spiritual values into action in their given vocations. If there is an emphasis on bodhicitta in the workplace, because this is an integral part of the practice of right livelihood, then the workplace also becomes less competitive and aggressive. There are fewer afflictive emotions to disrupt the work in progress and this promotes a more efficient work place. For example, if something goes wrong, the employees may be less likely to fight amongst themselves or with their employers, because this is a self-grasping behaviour not in line with practicing bodhicitta, which is an inseparable part of right livelihood.

Since the spiritual life occurs here and now in reality and everyone has to make a living, it is reasonable that if more employees try to bring spiritual values to the work place, instead of a competitive "cut throat" attitude, and actually use their occupations as a means for their dharma practice, the result will be a more pleasant atmosphere for work. If someone is competent at his/her work and also has a pleasant cooperative attitude of bodhicitta, he/she is probably more likely to get more job opportunities or promotions because their employers realize that they are easier to get along with, less egotistical, and have better attitudes toward their work than most. The selection of the correct right livelihood and spiritual guidance by the gomchen lama can help lead to this result.

In addition, a senior gomchen can directly train others in right livelihood and economic self-reliance by training them to be gomchens. When senior gomchens are training the novices, they are helping them to obtain literacy skills as well as skills in the arts and in the area of medicine and healing. Later, a high level of skill and competence in any one of these areas alone would be a cause for employment and a means by which one could become economically self-reliant. But in reality, economic self-reliance starts very soon in the life of even a novice gomchen. Some of them can even support themselves after a year in training because they assist the senior gomchen when he goes to various houses to conduct pujas. The householders give a donation to the novice because he has helped conduct the puja. In this way, the young novice can begin providing for his own basic needs while being taught by the senior gomchen. This builds confidence and self-esteem on the part of the young novice, who is able to get training, do virtuous actions to benefit others' happiness and to be in a position to support his own economic needs. Therefore, from very early on gomchen novices are fortunate: they have the benefit of a direct simultaneous economic and spiritual development. This is a reason that some poor parents used to send their children to the gomchen community. They knew their children would be able to do well economically and train in a noble, respected dharmic path.

Thus, the gomchen is not only a living example of right livelihood he is also a shining example of economic self-reliance. This is a good role model because as markets get more competitive and consumerism covers the planet, Bhutan is more exposed to modern influences from outside. Sometimes these influences seem very good on the surface because they offer immediate access to a more luxurious lifestyle with increasing material goods, but if the intention to acquire these goods is linked with a self-grasping attitude and very little bodhicitta, any happiness from them

is temporary and will quickly wear off, leaving the person to want still more. Buddha Shakyamuni spoke at Jetvana grove and pointed this out when he said that, "Even a rain of gold could not satisfy your desires--for the smallest taste of enjoyment leads to the suffering of more desire. A truly wise person understands this." (Dhammapada).

By practicing right livelihood, the correct view is maintained through bodhicitta and leads to greater awareness about wanting happiness for all, not just for oneself. Promoting the happiness of others while maintaining economic self-reliance is the best way to approach one's work. This is why the gomchens are successful and bring happiness to countless others: they are motivated by the pure bodhicitta and wish to share this same key to success with others.

#### *Environmental Preservation*

A gomchen lama has a lifestyle with few needs beyond the basics because he is on this spiritual path of meditation and service to others' needs. Therefore, his demands from the environment are very few. In fact, as a part-time retreatant, he is very much in partnership with the earth and the elements. His spiritual occupation and objectives are in harmony with the natural flow of seasonal changes. For example, in summer the gomchen must do a retreat in order to intensify his spiritual powers to do pujas and prayers that help others while they are working in the fields. He prays for their negativities to be dissolved so that their work in the fields will be successful. Then if the farmers need rain and have a strong faith in the gomchen, the gomchen can help produce rain. The gomchen serves as a spiritual link between them and the environment. When soil in the fields are no longer fertile and seem to have run out of the power to produce crops, the gomchen does rituals and buries a blessing vase under the soil in order to restore the power to grow crops. All of this is being done with the motivation of pure bodhicitta, and so the gomchen is able to accomplish miracles in the environment. When ordinary people witness what the gomchen has been able to accomplish in this way, they have respect for him and also become aware of how sensitive the environment is.

The environment is alive and responds favourably to bodhicitta. This is why an enlightened gomchen lama can direct the weather and restore blessings to the soil. He understands the true state of phenomena and can use his pure bodhicitta to implement a change on the grosser levels of matter in order to benefit others. But this ability to manipulate the weather in the service of sentient beings requires a clear and thorough understanding of the workings of phenomena, spiritual powers coming from realization, and an extremely strong and pure bodhicitta.

Gomchen lamas extend bodhicitta to all other sentient beings because they are devoted to their full, and this is what the gomchen lamas teach their students because this is what the Buddha taught. The gomchen lama's devotion extends to all areas of the environment and the sentient beings who dwell there. Even the tiniest insect has the gomchen's full bodhicitta heart devoted to its liberation from samsara. This tiniest insect is to be cherished and held dear because even it has the Buddha-nature and a wish for happiness. There is awareness even in the mind of an ant. If one observes an ant, one will see that the ant struggles for food and will often try to carry a huge load on his back. He carries this to the home he has made for himself because he must also be protected from the elements. In his home are other ants, and they form a community of beings who all want to be fed and protected. While they are simply trying to survive, they desire to be free from hunger and harsh weather conditions; in short, they are trying to counter their suffering with actions that bring about a desired result. This proves that the ants have an awareness and are also striving for liberation from their karmic condition, even though they are confined to the animal realm and have no conscious realization of the reasons for their present. What is important is that they have Buddha-nature that will be actualized at some point during their rebirths.

This is why gomchen lamas and other dharma practitioners have respect for life in the environment. Wherever there is life, there is Buddha-nature, and the forests and rivers are full of this potential for enlightenment. The gomchen lama imparts this value of respect and care for the environment made up of a myriad of interdependent layers. If one layer of the ecosystem is disturbed, then other dependent layers will suffer. This is a fact that can be seen in the world today in other places where deforestation has taken place and toxic chemicals have been poured into the sky and water. Many sentient beings have died and suffered immensely due to the desire that have been allowed to obscure the precious bodhicitta. It is only through mindfulness, intelligence and kindness, that the environment will be preserved and maintained as clean and beautiful. Bhutan is a hopeful example of such a clean well-preserved place, a "pure land" to all who come to visit, especially to those who are coming from developed countries. They see Bhutan with amazement and are deeply impressed. It seems almost impossible to their minds that the earth could be so unpolluted here, but then again Bhutan is also the only Buddhist country in the world, and the centuries-old spiritual values of Mahayana Buddhism are deeply rooted within the culture and minds of the Bhutanese people.



Another way that the gomchen lamas help promote the preservation of the environment is by doing their retreats in solitary places. For the retreats to occur, the environment must be very pure and undisturbed. Because Bhutan has a strong gomchen tradition, there is a constant influx of gomchen for longer or shorter meditation retreats. This means that the areas where gomchens do their retreats should be regarded as holy places and maintained with this in view. This assures that the gomchen retreat practice will always preserve the land around the retreat location because it must be kept pure and free from the disturbance of modern progress.

If too much land is compromised in the way of modern development, this will also compromise the lifestyle of gomchens, tantric retreats require a specified environment that is far from any urbanized place with an abundance of worldly activities and concerns. If gomchens are not able to do successful retreats, then they will not be able to have the types of spiritual realization that will benefit the happiness of the others who depend upon their services for pujas, prayers and advice. The preservation of the gomchen tradition and the preservation of the environment in Bhutan are, then, inextricably linked due to the constant need for retreats.

#### *Cultural Promotion*

Bhutan has an indisputably unique culture: this is the one and only Buddhist country in the world. High regard for the Buddhist spiritual tradition has been a hallmark of Bhutan, and the country's cultural identity rests upon this as its foundation. The gomchens play an enormous role in enriching the country's cultural promotion due to their training in all the arts, ranging from calligraphy, poetry, astrology, and thangka painting to the ritual arts of puja ceremony, tormas-making, and sacred dance, to name only a few.

What distinguishes gomchens the most, however, is the constant conduct of pujas. A type of puja that gomchen lamas do quite often is called *Ka-go*. This is a specialized type of puja for driving evil spirits away from the places where they are causing a disturbance. The reason that gomchens are busy with this is because they have the correct tantric background for providing this service, and most of the regular monks do not. High lamas have the ability but are not always so accessible if they are in monasteries, while almost every gomchen knows how to do *Ka-go* and are easier to access.

To perform this subduing type of puja, the gomchen lama will do prayers and communicate with the spirit. The gomchen tells the evil spirit to quit harming the persons in that environment, to be

compassionate and use bodhicitta and that the spirit could have a better rebirth if he stops doing evil; he may even become enlightened in his next lifetime. This is a reasonable way to speak with the spirit because it is also a sentient being endowed with Buddha nature but still suffering within samsara. Even this evil spirit craves happiness, just like any other sentient being, and is probably acting in very destructive ways due to the intensity of its suffering.

If the spirit does not respond to reasoning because it is suffering from too many obscurations, the gomchen lama will resort to a tantric practice to expel it. This method uses *chag-jah*, *ngag-dah*, and *lha-gom* which are hand mudras, mantras, and deity meditation, respectively. The third element of the method, *lha-gom*, is very powerful and highly effective because it is the transformation of the gomchen lama into a wrathful deity form. This wrathful form maybe Yamantaka, Vajrapani, or whichever specific yidam the gomchen wants to use for this purpose. The wrathful deity is used in this case because the evil spirit needs a form it can perceive. When the gomchen transforms himself into the yidam, this is seen by the spirit. For example, if Yamantaka appears, the evil spirit sees the wrathful deity with all his weapons of compassion. At this point, the evil spirit is sent into the dharmakaya by the gomchen lama. This is how the gomchen lama can handle two cases at once: he can relieve the suffering of those who have been disturbed by the evil spirit and also relieve the suffering of the evil spirit as well. This is a satisfying outcome, because the gomchen lama respected both parties equally and treated them both with bodhicitta.

In addition to providing puja services, the gomchen lama promotes culture by being a dharma teacher and giving mind training and empowerments to several lay people. By doing this, he is helping to keep the Buddhist spiritual values flourishing in Bhutan. This is essential to Bhutanese identity because Buddhist spiritual values are woven into every aspect of life. The gomchen lama is a cultural symbol of these values because he is on the path of enlightenment and this is what motivates him to continue with his immeasurable service to all sentient beings. Wherever there is a gomchen lama, bodhicitta abounds, and the potential for enlightenment can be actualized if the student is ready for the transformation of mind.

#### *Good Governance*

For Bhutan, good governance is possible due to the fact that Bhutan is a country whose cultural foundation rests upon a solid base of Mahayana Buddhism. The basis of the Mahayana vehicle is ethical conduct fuelled by bodhicitta, and the moral virtues are attended to by a mindfulness

stemming from a motivation to help all other sentient beings. This same quality of mindfulness is integral to good governance as seen in the qualities of honesty, accountability, efficiency, and reliability. These four qualities are in line with the teachings of the Buddha, who gave a code of moral discipline for all those seeking at least liberation from suffering. In the Mahayana vehicle, it is imperative that moral discipline be accompanied by the practice of bodhicitta, because liberation from suffering is not just for oneself but for all the other sentient beings. In this way, bodhicitta keeps the moral discipline glued in place because the desire for virtuous conduct and a positive outcome for all, come straight from the indestructible heart's drop. Good governance should come from the heart because this is where the wisdom mind rests.

Honesty is necessary for good governance and should be at the base. It is the direct opposite of lying, cheating, and stealing. If these negative actions are occurring, then society is harmed along with the perpetrator of such misconduct. It is a situation where everyone loses ultimately. Society loses something material in various forms, such as embezzlement, misuse of funds, fraudulent contracts, deliberate misinformation, or withholding information. But society is also damaged in an immaterial way due to loss of trust and peace of mind. This results in scepticism or the state of mind where there is always doubt. This is most damaging. While the material loss may be restored, stolen money returned, or lies confessed and apologies made, it is much harder, almost impossible, for doubt to be erased from people's minds. Their peace of mind has been destroyed, and this is the opposite of promoting happiness.

The perpetrator, of course, suffers several negative consequences. If he is caught, he could be punished by the law, even imprisoned and fined. If not indicted by the law, at the least his name and face become a public disgrace and an object of embarrassment to those whom he represents. The name of his region and the title of his government position will then be associated with misconduct. In short, there will be a stain on his name, his region, and his post.

The stain also extends further. Each action forms an imprint - a type of karmic identifier in the mental continuum. This will yield a negative result if the imprint stems from a non-virtuous action, and the doer of the misdeed will experience suffering as a result. So whether or not the perpetrator of the non-virtuous action ever gets "caught" and his misdeeds become publicly known, he will still suffer from the negative impact of his own misdeed. The karma may ripen in the next life in the form of far less favourable circumstances than the ones in which he found himself when he chose to perpetrate the negative acts. So he can go "out of the frying pan and into the fire" quickly, without consciously

realizing what has just happened. In this way, his self-grasping desire towards whatever the attractive temporary gain was, not only failed to serve others but failed to serve himself as well. This is why it is so important to practice bodhicitta as a support for ethical conduct. It is the precious bodhicitta which puts other sentient beings' happiness before one's own misguided self-grasping desires. Bodhicitta is a means by which the selfish desires can be restrained, reduced, and even dissolved. Only by habituating one's mind to feeling very close to others and recognizing their innate Buddha nature can mindfulness be maintained regarding the best service toward others' happiness.

The quality of being accountable is also a key to good governance, which is actually a part of accountability. Honesty is inseparable from accountability because in order to be responsible, one must be able to clearly distinguish between "right" and "wrong", to think rationally, and be willing to be answerable. Being answerable means that decisions are being made which will have a result, and that there are factors involved which must be carefully examined so as not to have some undesirable, or negative, outcome. Maintaining mindfulness and constant bodhicitta is important for policy-makers because they are the ones who are making decisions on behalf of others, and their choices have an impact on the tangible and intangible well-being of the public.

Efficiency is another desirable quality, also linked to accountability. When decisions are being made, and the factors are being examined, there should be a careful consideration of what resources are being consumed during this process. The desire, of course, is for a maximum result with a minimum waste. Time and money are two resources that will be subject to this scrutiny. If too much time or money is being wasted, then this is a misuse of those resources, and it is similar to stealing because the loss cannot be recouped. If one were to approach efficiency with mindfulness, however, one would be careful about resources not being abused or stolen because it means that somewhere, someone is being negatively affected. If the funding for policy projects comes from taxing the public sector, then the public will suffer due to delay in the policies that are supposed to benefit them. Also, if a policy plan is not properly structured and correctly executed, then this is not equitable. The public deserves to get a fair return for its efforts to comply with government rules. If this does not happen, then there is some gain at the expense of others whose happiness is supposed to be served by the policies. But a mindful, efficient policy-maker would not want this type of loss to occur because it indicates a lack of concern for others within the very system that is established to promote a good standard of living for others. A policy-maker motivated by bodhicitta would want to use great

care with public resources and be a guardian for the well-being of the people.

If the people know that their policy-makers have a concern for the use of their resources and are motivated to serve them unselfishly, then this is what allows the public to have faith in those who would govern them. So reliability, or trustworthiness, is a quality of good governance that embodies the other three good qualities and further connotes that there is steadfastness and integrity involved. If people feel that their government has a stable system which efficiently executes beneficial policies, and that the policy-makers structuring these policies are honest, wise and accountable, and have their best interests at heart, then the populace will feel very content and proud of their government.

Bhutan is a country that already has good governance in many ways, and there is a true concern for the tangible and intangible happiness of the people. So far, it is the only country in the world that has developed a government programme, Gross National Happiness (GNH) that considers human happiness to be a relevant factor in governance. But this is not so surprising given the fact that Bhutan is strong in Mahayana Buddhism, and that this vehicle of Buddhism expounds an ethical concern for all other sentient beings.

The gomchen lama's role in promoting good governance is very basic: he gives the dharma teachings that lay down the spiritual values for a predominantly Mahayana Buddhist culture. By giving teachings on bodhicitta to the lay persons in his community, he is helping to foster an aspiration to perform virtuous acts and accumulate merit, which can then be dedicated to the well-being of all other sentient beings. The gomchen lama promotes kindness and compassion for others every time he gives a teaching and transmission. If his students have faith and are devoted to doing their dharma practices, they will develop an increase in wisdom and have special insights into the true nature of reality. The more spiritual the realization that the students achieve, the more they are able to understand that there is no possibility of enlightenment without the boundless quality of precious bodhicitta. So bodhicitta becomes a spiritual value integrated into the cultural mind of a community wherever a gomchen lama is living and serving others' needs for happiness.

Since many gomchen lamas live with lay communities across Bhutan, there is likelihood that some of the gomchen's students will become leaders and policy-makers. If this happens, they will carry their dharma practice into politics. They may regard their political positions as wonderful opportunities to benefit others' well-being on a large scale and regard themselves as instruments for others' happiness.

The political life, if properly motivated by bodhicitta for others, can almost manifest miracles. This is due to the pure boundless quality of an awakened heart. Money and power, however, are limited and subject to impermanence. They cannot be relied upon to solve all the problems of a society, and they do little to provide the causes and conditions for any true lasting happiness. If money and power alone could do this and solve the many problems of a society, then the more developed countries would have very few problems. But the opposite appears to be the case. In fact, nowadays, some of the western countries want to study Bhutan's programme of GNH in order to understand why there is a lack of satisfaction in their own societies. They want to find out what is "missing" and why a less developed country such as Bhutan enjoys a greater happiness than more economically advanced countries do.

Maybe what is missing is the awakened heart. Under the dynamic leadership of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the GNH programme grew out of a concern for the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of the Bhutanese people. The programme is an example of mindfulness in action and embodies the Buddhist principle of bodhicitta. Where there is a lama, there is a teaching on bodhicitta. Fortunately for Bhutan, there are still several lamas across the country and their teachings can be felt in the fabric of the culture.

### **Conclusion**

Because the numbers of gomchen lamas are strong in the lay communities of the present day, the influence of their dharma teachings and spiritual services are still tightly woven into the texture of Bhutan's Buddhist culture. The gomchen lamas still impart the teachings of the Buddha today exactly as they have done for centuries. Their awakened hearts have been reliable and have withstood the test of time. Some may wonder just how a gomchen lama can fit into a modern sophisticated world with all its progress. Some may look at him and think that the gomchen lama is like an antique, something to be associated with Bhutan's cultural past more than with its future. But this is not the case.

Nowadays, samsara may look different because it involves more technological advances, more modern progress, and more sophisticated advertisements that pull on the desires of human beings, but this is still just the same old samsara, and the gomchen lama still has the same job. He will continue on the path of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings and try to turn them all toward freedom from suffering. This is his purpose in life and what he has vowed to do with his true awakened heart. Such a pure devotion to the happiness of all other sentient beings must have an influence on the GNH of Bhutan because the programme

and the gomchen lama meet on a common ground of bodhicitta, the source of both relative and ultimate happiness.

May bodhicitta, precious and sublime,  
Arise where it has not yet come to be;  
And where it has arisen may it never fail  
But grow and flourish more and more.

--- Nagarjuna

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