To Jo
and Maile Michiko

for saving me
on Gangla Karchung.


BHUTAN
HIDDEN LANDS OF HAPPINESS
Text and Photography
by John Wehrheim
Serindia Publications, Chicago

## Author's Route

Motor Vehicle

Trekking

Photographers deal in things that are continually vanishing.
When they have vanished there is no contrivance on earth that can make them come back again.

Henri Cartier Bresson

There is no such thing as a little country. The greatness of a people is no more determined by their numbers than the greatness of a man is determined by his height.

Victor Hugo

When the fifteenth-century Master of Truth, Lord of Beings, Drukpa Kinley was staying at Lady Semzangmo's house in Nangkatse, part of the Tibetan province of Yamdrok, he had a dream. He dreamt that a woman dressed in a yellow skirt, and holding a flaming sword, said to him, "Drukpa Kinley, it is time that you fulfilled the prophecy that foretold the conversion of the people of Bhutan and the magical purification of that land... You must shoot an arrow to the south early in the morning as a harbinger of your coming." The Lama recognized her as a divine revelation of the Smokey Goddess. Early the next morning he strung his bow and loosed a wailing arrow into the southern sky. "Fly southwards to benefit all beings and the Tradition," he intoned, "and land at the house of a blessed, heaven-favored girl."

From *The Divine Madman: The Sublime Life and Songs of Drukpa Kinley*, translated by Keith Dowman

Sonam Drugyel lets loose his arrow, Tashi Thongmen Dzong 2004

# Introduction

Himalayan folksongs sometimes sing of *beyul*—magical hidden lands that can only be seen by those of great faith and pure heart. Some believe Bhutan to be such a place—tucked into the towering peaks and forested valleys of the Eastern Himalaya—the final outpost of the rapidly disappearing Tantric Buddhist culture that once guarded the "Roof of the World". From Mongolia and Turkistan to the Himalayan foothills; from the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan to India's Kashmir and Ladakh; this culture thrived for over 1,200 years. Excelling in the study of consciousness, it developed a highly evolved environmental ethic founded on the teachings of the Buddha, the ancient customs of Bon and local traditions.

The value of this culture to the modern world goes far beyond romantic curiosity about a mythic "golden age." While Western religious traditions insisted that the world was flat, Buddhist meditators developed an understanding of reality that parallels modern theories of cosmology and quantum physics. Their incisive consciousness has led to a deep understanding of human psychological pathologies and methods for their treatment, as well as the nature of happiness and the means for its attainment. And finally, their environmental ethic is unparalleled among today's nations.

Tibet, Ladakh, Mustang and Sikkim have all fallen to invasion, conquest, or cultural and economic colonialism, while Bhutan—never conquered, never colonized—remains the last

East wall of the Punakha Dzong, 1994

Tulku Ngawang Jamtsho, Dechen Phodrang 2002

jewel in Buddhism's Himalayan crown, blessed with peace, prosperity and an ancient culture still vibrant and alive. The Bhutanese people, with feet firmly rooted in tradition and eyes on the future, are further blessed with a Philosopher king who leads his people from monarchy to democracy on the principle that "Gross National Happiness" better measures success and guides change than "Gross National Product." This reflects the fact that Bhutan is the only country in the world where Tantric Buddhism is the state religion.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck rejected the conventional model of global development in which more is better, growing consumption is equated with success and technology drives humans to create a world in its own image. The king has given a human face to Bhutan's development by balancing the country's material needs with the preservation of the environment and traditional values—a policy founded on the Buddhist principles that all life is sacred and all living beings are interdependent.

Bhutan's position as one of the least known and lightly populated countries supports its mystique as a "hidden land"—a *beyul*. Isolated between Tibet and India, Druk Yul, Land of the Thunder Dragon, is a small country of 46,500 square kilometers, about the size of Switzerland and with a population of just over 670,000. Bhutan is a fertile and heavily forested land. Abundant water and hydropower resources serve a population of fewer than 15 people per square kilometer. Compared to Nepal's density of 200 per square kilometer and Bangladesh's 1,000, Bhutan's light population and pristine land, rich in diverse plants and animals, make it an island of vibrant natural beauty floating above a teeming and troubled South Asian sea.

When flying to Bhutan from Dacca or Calcutta, one looks down on crowded, smoky, overworked lands. At Bhutan's border that vision suddenly gives way to deep blue sky and empty mountains with no roads and no settlements—only steep forests and swiftly flowing streams. Scatterings of terraced farms and villages appear in sheltered valleys; then whitewashed monasteries and tiny hermitages emerge high against the bluegreen mountains.

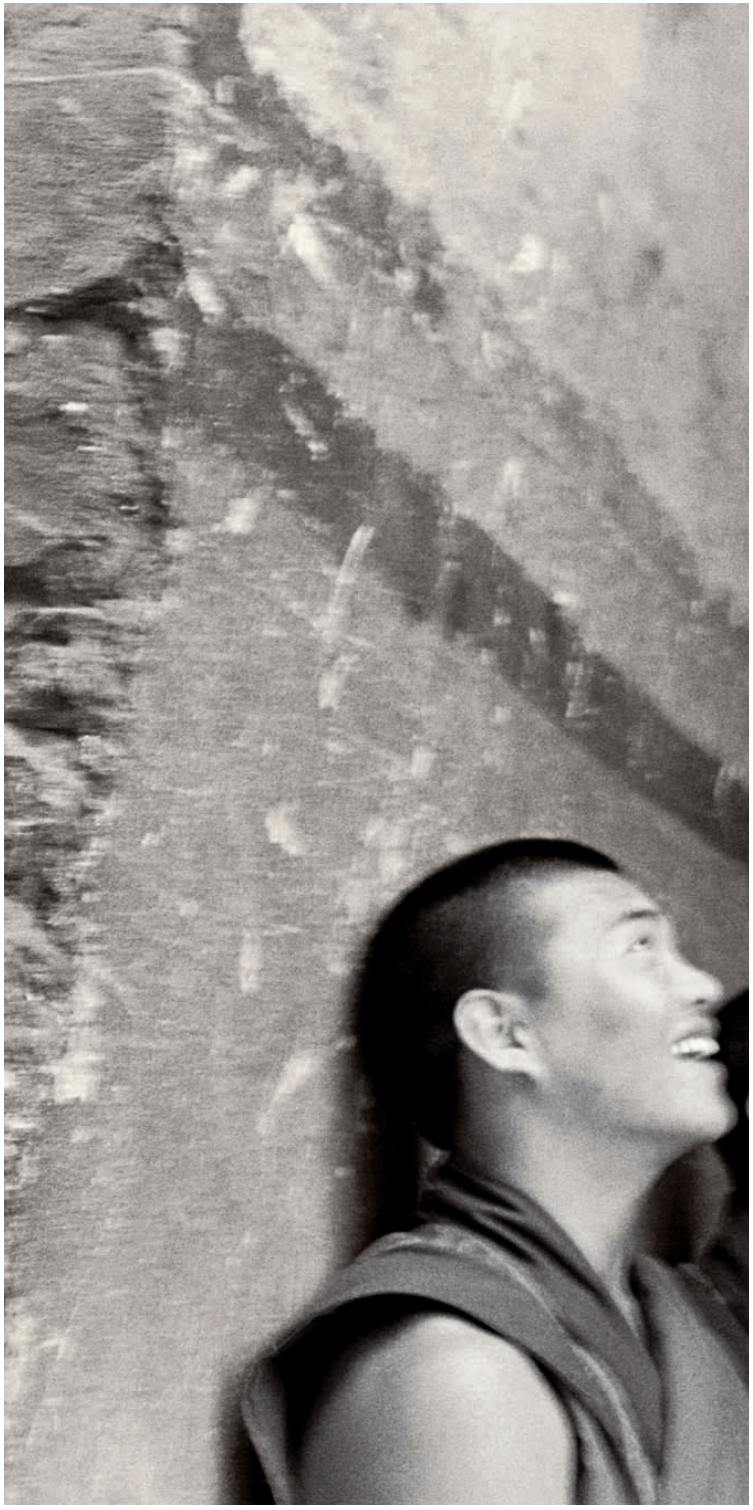
Stone tools found in Bhutan indicate human settlement for 3,500 to 4,000 years; however, these dates most likely will be pushed back with future discoveries. By the 6th century AD the Bon religion—a pre-Buddhist faith originating in Tibet—spread into Bhutan. Later-written Tibetan sources referred to Bhutan as the southern valleys of the Mon or *Lho Mon Jong*—the "Mon" being the Mongoloid, non-Buddhist people of the trans-Himalaya. Those first inhabitants are the believed ancestors of the Sharchopas, the eastern Bhutanese considered one of the country's earliest people.

The first record of Tibetan Buddhist influence in Bhutan was the construction of the Paro Kyichu Temple and the Bumthang

Jampa Temple by Tibet's King Srongtsan Gampo in 627 AD. In 747 Padma Sambhava introduced Tantric Buddhism to Bhutan. Born in the Swat Valley of present-day Pakistan, "Guru Rinpoche" (as he is known to the Bhutanese) left his homeland during the Islamic invasion of Buddhist Gandahara and became a master at Nalanda University in India. In the 9th century, when the Bon King Langdarma drove the Buddhists from Tibet, Tibetans began migrating to Bhutan in search of religious freedom. They continued to spread into Bhutan as Buddhism slowly recovered in Tibet.

During this early period Bhutan was not politically unified; it was a land of chieftains, petty fiefdoms and tribal leaders. Tibetans continued to migrate south into Bhutan, seeking new land, safe havens and religious converts. Predominantly settled in western Bhutan, these early converts to Buddhism and descendants of Tibetan immigrants are called the Ngalops. Their language, Dzongkha, is a dialect of Tibetan and the national language of Bhutan.

This gradual migration and conversion culminated in the arrival of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in 1616. Hereditary leader and reincarnation of a great Drukpa Kagyu master Pema Karpo, Ngawang Namgyel fled to Bhutan at the age of 23 when the Regent of Tsang (Central Tibet) threatened his life in a dispute over succession at Ralung monastery, the seat of the Drukpas in Tibet. Through the power of his personality, military skill and administrative ability, the Shabdrung unit-



Debate at Semtoka, 2005

ed all of the leading Ngalop families of western Bhutan into Druk Yul, Land of the Thunder Dragon. Establishing a system of Dzongs, Bhutan's monastic, military and administrative strongholds, the Shabdrung subdued local rebellions and repelled wave after wave of Tibetan and Mongol invaders while codifying traditional Buddhist teachings into a legal system to promote the "happiness of all sentient beings."

Soon after his death in 1651, the Shabdrung's successors annexed the central and eastern valleys into the state that is now Bhutan. For the next 250 years Bhutan's history was filled with intrigue, discord and civil war as various strongmen fought for control while the Tibetans continued their attacks. These conflicts were medieval in nature, involving elites and their retainers vying for prestige and power, and had little lasting effect on the common people or culture. There was no war of attrition, persecution of civilians, scorched earth or genocide, and the most common weapons were swords, bows, assassination and sorcery.

One tale of Bhutanese victory, and a shining example of a Buddhist war story, tells of an overwhelming Tibetan horde pouring down the mountain to attack Druk Gyal Dzong in Paro. The Bhutanese troops welcomed the Tibetans as conquering heroes and guests of honor, inviting them to wine and dine in a field of white tents extravagantly decorated with fragrant blossoms and beautiful foliage. The foliage was *namey shing*, a wicked skin poison known only to the Bhutanese; soon the Tibetans were scratching and swelling, tearing off their armor and discarding their weapons as they fled back to Tibet.

Bhutan's monarchy, founded in 1907, ended civil discord, strengthened the state and marked the beginning of an era of peace and isolation. Sheltered from both world wars, Bhutan was a land "hidden" from the violence, strife and change that spread across much of the world. That era of isolation ended in the 1950s when the Chinese invaded Tibet and the Dalai Lama fled to India. The Bhutanese immediately severed all relations with China, began accepting Tibetan refugees and turned to India and beyond to support its independence. Suddenly Bhutan realized that it could no longer afford or maintain its isolation from the rest of the world. The "Hidden Kingdom" had nowhere to hide. The Bhutanese understood that the Tibetans' isolation and refusal to modernize had created their own tragedy.

In 1962 Bhutan completed its first road under the leadership of the third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, Father of Modern Bhutan. The first motor vehicle reached the capital Thimphu and a policy of development began. That year a brief and bloody war between China and India came dangerously close to Bhutan's borders; in the western Himalaya, the former Buddhist Kingdom of Ladakh lost much of its territory to the Chinese invasion.

At the end of the 19th century, Nepalis began to flee their country. Driven from Nepal by overpopulation, deforestation and oppressive taxes, they first flocked to Sikkim, then Darjeeling and the hills of West Bengal; they filled the good land and continued to migrate north and east into Bhutan. By 1975 the Nepalis made up over 75 percent of Sikkim's population, vastly outnumbering the kingdom's original Lepcha and Tibetan people. When Sikkim's Nepali majority began violent demonstrations for democracy, India used this as an excuse to stage a brief, ruthless invasion, forcing the abdication of Sikkim's Buddhist king. India then passed an act of Parliament that annexed Sikkim, making it an Indian state. Bhutan was now the last Buddhist kingdom, the final bastion of a culture in a state of siege; the shocked Bhutanese government became painfully aware of its vulnerability.

By the 1980s millions of Nepalis lived in north and east India. A strong separatist movement called the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front began using violence and terror to press its demands against India, which had just used the presence of Nepalis to stage its takeover of Sikkim. In southern Bhutan, the predominantly Hindu Nepalese community grew rapidly, comprising approximately 25 percent of the kingdom's population (there is no exact figure). In addition to the availability of virgin land, the Royal government's free health care, free education and minimal taxes attracted the Nepalis, also called the Lhotshampas or southern Bhutanese.

The violence of the Hindu Gorkhaland movement panicked Bhutan's dominant Drukpa Buddhist government. The regime overreacted by conducting a census aimed to flush out illegal immigrants. The government also instituted national policies of dress, architecture, language and culture, meant to mold a single Bhutanese identity and bring rapprochement between Hindu and Buddhist citizens. Called the "One Nation, One People" policy, the effort backfired and by 1990 some of the southerners rebelled, accusing the government of cultural discrimination, repression and the illegal eviction of bona fide citizens.

Both sides were guilty of bloodshed and abuse. Nepali radicals based in India provoked communal violence and hatred inside Bhutan. They organized demonstrations and assaulted people and property. Schools and health facilities closed and all development programs halted as the mobs targeted government buildings. Feeding the fire of fear and hatred, some Bhutanese officials reacted with brutality and greed, attacking the innocent, revoking the citizenship of some legitimate Lhotshampas and grabbing their land.

Many southern Bhutanese fell victim to both sides. Most were simple farmers wanting nothing more than to live in peace. Terrorized and confused, approximately eighty thousand fled for refugee camps in Nepal (there are no official figures), some voluntarily, others through forced exile. They left de-

Kinley on the stairs, Thimphu 2004

spite King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's grants of special favor for the Lhotshampas and his repeated journeys to the south to plead personally with his people not to leave their country. The majority of the Lhotshampa population remained in Bhutan but the south has yet to recover from the conflict.

The king pledged his throne and promised to abdicate if Bhutan could not come to a humane and compassionate solution to the problems in the south. The situation there escalated when militants from Assam and West Bengal, fighting to separate from India, began building armed camps inside Bhutan, launching terrorist attacks across the border and then escaping the Indian Army by retreating back into Bhutan. Soon the militants had thirty well-fortified camps, hidden in the dense forests of the country's southern belt. The Indian government offered the king military assistance, calling the Bhutanese forces a "token army" and predicting a protracted bloodbath if the Bhutanese independently tried to flush out these well-armed, well-trained and hardened terrorists.

The king decided to go it alone. He began long and fruitless negotiations to persuade the militants to quit Bhutan, while secretly building his military force and gathering intelligence. After twelve years all efforts at a peaceful solution failed; the government gave the militants 48 hours' notice to remove their camps. The militants thought it was a bluff and made no effort to leave or prepare for an attack. Masterminding

Lheki and blankets, Lungo 2003

the campaign, the king led from the front, joined by his second son who stayed back from Oxford University in England to train with the militia. His Majesty's strategy was simple: the Bhutanese must win suddenly, decisively and completely; and no matter what happened, the militants were to be treated with compassion. At 9am on 15 December 2003, the king gave the command that launched simultaneous attacks on all camps. Three days later every camp had been taken and hundreds of militants captured, and the rest fled the country. Few fighters on either side lost their lives.

In 2001, concerned about the inherent weaknesses of monarchy, the king ordered the drafting of a democratic constitution. Seeing the failure of Nepal and the corruption of India, most Bhutanese feared democracy, so King Jigme gradually prepared the country for parliamentary government. In 1982 he established elected district development committees. In 1991 block development committees were voted into office; then, in 1998, the king turned over all executive power to the Council of Ministers, which was elected by the National Assembly. In 2005 King Jigme Singye Wangchuck shocked the country by announcing that he would abdicate in favor of his eldest son in 2008, and the Bhutanese would elect their first government under a parliamentary democracy.

For centuries Bhutan has overcome waves of invasion and internal conflict. The culture of this little country has survived to give the world a very big idea: happiness, though elusive

and difficult to measure, is more important than money. In 1999, however, Bhutan was invaded again. Television, previously banned, came quickly with every product, every crime and every desire on forty channels. The king held back TV for years, but in an age of satellite dishes, he was wise enough to know that he could no longer protect Bhutan from this pervasive technology. If the culture were to survive television, responsibility would have to come from within each Bhutanese.

Because the country has come so late to development, Bhutan could learn from the mistakes of the world and evolve from a medieval to a post-modern existence without sacrificing its traditional wisdom. To romanticize Bhutan as an otherworldly kingdom in the clouds would do the Bhutanese a disservice, trivializing the very real challenges—internal and external—that threaten their future. But only a cynic could overlook the practical gifts of Bhutan—a focus on happiness and sustainability in a world swamped with over-consumption and environmental collapse. Bhutan is not a primitive society but an ancient civilization that has survived by living lightly on the earth, and now faces the modern world with its culture and environment intact—a delicate balancing act that the Bhutanese themselves may not be able to manage: the Buddhist tradition of the Middle Path, balancing the wants of mankind with the needs of all life.

The photographs in this book were taken between 1991 and 2006 in western and central Bhutan. This is the Drukpa heartland, home to the people and culture that first established Bhutan as a state in the 17th century and led it into the 21st century. From the snow peaks of Lunana and the rice paddies of Punakha to the nightclubs of Thimphu, this area represents Bhutan's greatest diversity of culture, climate, terrain and people. The Bhutanese are a mixed people speaking 24 languages and more than 100 dialects of Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan. Ngalop, Sharchop, Kheng, Mangdep, Kurtep, Bumtap, Tibetan, and Lhotshampa, people from every part of Bhutan, appear in these images—living, working and playing together, seeking happiness in their hidden lands.

I have tried to present a vision of a people consciously living in the realms of both the spiritual and the material worlds. Bhutan exists in the eye, in the mind and in the heart—a land like no other, yet a part of our world. These images are of everyday life. No one "dressed up" for his or her picture. None of these scenes was commercially created for the benefit of tourists; though, like people everywhere, mothers would wipe their children's faces and sweep out the kitchen while I was setting up the camera. There is a saying among expatriates working in Thimphu: "Bhutan could become just like any other country, but no other country could be like Bhutan."

Dema and Tshering Dorji, Gesa 2003