

Learning from the Princess of Bhutan

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Her Royal Highness Princess Sonam Dechan Wangchuck, came to visit Japan from 2017 October 21st to 27th, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the relationship between the Kingdom of Bhutan and Kyoto University. I was to assist Her Royal Highness as a Japanese/English interpreter, and made sure her and her party's demands were met. This was initially a daunting and intimidating task for me. However, this feeling began to dissipate as I got to know the princess, allowing me to get a more detailed picture of how wonderful a person she is, and how I could learn from her. Through the grace and kindness of Her Royal Highness and the positive optimism of her and her party, I began to get a better understanding of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Meeting and being with Her Royal Highness and the rest of the group, they thoroughly embodied the policy of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH).

Key words: Kingdom of Bhutan, happiness, GNH, HRH Princess Sonam Dechan Wangchuck

First impression

While I waited for the arrival, I practiced my line over and over in my head, "It is an honor to meet you Your Royal Highness. I hope that your stay in Japan will be a worthwhile visit." But the moment Her Royal Highness approached me, dressed in a traditional kira outfit, so bright and so colorful, I could no longer remember what to say. Her Royal Highness must have sensed my nervousness, and immediately reached her hand out to give me a handshake. I ended up saying "... Nice to meet you." She smiled warmly and responded, "It is very nice to meet you too."

This was my first impression of the Princess of the Kingdom of Bhutan, Her Royal Highness Princess Sonam Dechan Wangchuck.¹ I was to assist the princess as a Japanese/English interpreter, and made sure her and her party's demands were met.² As the administrative officer for The Leading graduate program in Primatology and Wildlife Science (PWS) Kyoto University, I usually work supporting the graduate students and professors studying wildlife-science, and organizing various events related to the program. Some of these events include organizing a photo exhibition and lectures on Bhutan.³ In this program, the number of foreign students and professors

have been growing over the years, and I have taken the role of assisting them when required, as I am a Japanese-American who is fluent in both Japanese and English. But despite this experience, the role of assisting the princess of Bhutan was initially a daunting and intimidating task for me.

Getting to know Her Royal Highness

However, this feeling began to dissipate as I got to know the princess. She shared many personal stories with me, which made me feel at ease. Every anecdote she told made me feel privileged—these little pieces of her life, it was a great joy for me to hear them, and allowed me to get a more detailed picture of how wonderful a person she is, and how I could learn from her. Always concerned about our well-being, she constantly asked the staff if we were tired, or if we got enough food and sleep, even though the schedule was most demanding of her and she was probably the one who was tired the most. Even though we were supposed to be the one entertaining her, I can tell she wanted to accommodate us as well. She always shared some amusing story to make us all laugh. When it was time for gift exchanges between Kyoto University and Bhutan, a scroll was given from Bhutan to Kyoto

University, a very unique offering (Figure 1). Her Royal Highness explained to me that she picked out the color for the scroll and that she hoped it would be well received. I could tell that she always put her full thought into everything she does, making sure to always be considerate of others. During our farewell dinner the day before her departure, she kindly took the time to take pictures with everyone, including myself (Figure 2). We were informed that in Bhutan, taking pictures with the princess is generally against the rules. However, Her Royal Highness always took the time to pose in pictures with us at every opportunity. It was a meaningful gesture for us and we appreciated her consideration.

Though most of the time was spent with appointed meetings, we also did quite a bit of sightseeing. The Golden Pavilion (Figure 3), Nijo Castle, and Fushimi Inari Shrine were some of the requests for places to visit. As a Japanese-American who was raised in the United States, I never had the chance to experience many of the Japanese cultural events and places growing up, especially in such a historically important place like Kyoto. It was an incredible honor for me to share these experiences with Her Royal Highness.

In addition to historical sites, with the help of my colleagues, we suggested many places for shopping. The princess seemed to like many products of Japan, such as green tea, kimonos, and Japanese cosmetics. During one of the symposiums organized, sparkling sake was served. The princess and her party liked it so much, they requested to bring some back home as souvenir. One of the things I found very charming was her love for stationary and the art of letter writing. As we learned this about her, we decided to take her to one of the largest stationary stores in Tokyo, called Itoya. She jokingly told us to get her out of the store before she purchases the entire store's stock. There were just too many to choose from, and seeing her get so excited made us very content in having taken her there. She told me that the art of letter writing is dying, and it saddens her. She wants to continue hand writing her letters, as she feels it is much more personal that way. I thought this was particularly interesting as I know letter-writing was such an important part of traditional

Japanese court culture.

Good fortune and the importance of well-being

After spending some more time with her, I got the impression that she was blessed in many ways. Auspicious moments kept happening around her. We were given the honor of attending a tea ceremony at the headquarters of the Ura-senke school (Figure 4), and through a pure stroke of luck, the grand master SEN Gen-shitsu "千玄室" changed his schedule and performed the ceremony for us—a very rare event. At another time, Dr. Shinya Yamanaka, the Nobel laureate for stem cell research also just happened to be available to accompany us on our visit at the Center for iPS Cell Research and Application, Kyoto University (CiRA). It was as if the universe understood her importance, graced her with good fortune, and we were lucky enough to be swept up in this gust of good will.

This seemed evident even in her features. Her face was elegant, beautiful but unimposing, and you immediately understood the intelligence she possessed. She always had an air of professionalism and a graceful demeanor, apparent even in her posture; in pictures, she emanated an aura of well-being. At one point in the trip, she shared with me her philosophy that I feel underlies much of her positive presence: her insistence that our health is the most important thing to protect. Without health, there is nothing, she asserted, and therefore we must take care of ourselves in multiple ways. This was not just physiological; she emphasized it was important to be mentally healthy. We must understand that life has its ups and downs, but we must accept them all. If we only focus on the negatives, how can we ever be happy? Her Royal Highness told me that as the President of the Bhutan National Legal Institute (BNLI)⁴, she feels the constant pressure and responsibility to do a perfect job. Every now and then, this stress gets to her, but she tells herself at the end of the day that she will get through it, and that everything will work out. I can tell that she is not forcing herself to feel this way, that she truly believes it, and this is how she maintains her mental state.

I felt a similar sense of dedication to well-being



Figure 1 A scroll is given as a gift from Bhutan to Kyoto University (2017 October 25)



Figure 2 Her Royal Highness and I (2017 October 26)



Figure 3 A tour at Urasenke (2017 October 22)



Figure 4 Sightseeing at the Golden Pavilion (2017 October 21)

from the Her Royal Highness's group, who each taught me something in this regard. For example, Major General Chencho Dorji, despite my first impression of him with a stern face, shared with me the many pieces of advice on how to be healthy. He told me he starts his morning with yoga and a shot of turmeric, and that is how he kept in good health for all these years. This helps him not only with his physical being, but also allows him to begin his day mentally prepared for any

challenges. I saw that he was able to switch his mind easily, from bodyguard mode to relax mode. When he could take a break from guarding the princess, he would spend his time sharing stories with me, about his hobbies and laughing heartily at funny moments in the stories. In another instance, this time with Mr. Sangay Dorjee, the Dean of Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law, even though their arrival was met with heavy rain, it did not seem to bother him in the least. I said to

him, “I hope that the weather will get better,” but all he said, with the biggest of smiles, was “Don’t worry, be happy!”

Conclusion

As this year marks the 60th anniversary since the relationship between Kyoto University and Bhutan began, I hope that as a result of the princess and her party’s visit, the academic relationship between the two can further deepen, and result in future collaborations.

Through the grace and kindness of Her Royal Highness and the positive optimism of her and her party, I began to get a better understanding of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Meeting and being with Her Royal Highness and the rest of the group, they thoroughly embodied the policy of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH). Now more than ever, I think, the term Gross National Happiness, is truly necessary for all of us around the world, and I felt honored to have learned some first steps towards that goal from such an esteemed guest and her inner circle.

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References

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<https://www.kyoto-bhutan.org/index-e.html>

Kyoto University Institute for Advanced Study (KUIAS)
<https://kuias.kyoto-u.ac.jp/e/>

Notes

- 1) Her Royal Highness was invited to Japan, to commemorate the relationship that began between the Kingdom of Bhutan and Kyoto

University 60 years ago. This invitation project was supported by Kyoto University President’s FY2017 Discretionary Fund for “Bhutan and Kyoto University 60th Anniversary Memorial Events: Symposium on GNH with HRH Princess Sonam Dechan Wangchuck” (member organizations include: Institute for Advanced Study, Unit for Himalayan Studies, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Primate Research Institute, Graduate School of Education, Graduate School of Medicine, Hall of Global Environmental Research, and Kokoro Research Center).

- 2) From Bhutan, Her Royal Highness was accompanied by Major General Chenchu Dorji; Mr. Sangay Dorjee, Dean of Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law; Ms. Rinzi Pem, Lady-in-Waiting to HRH; and Mr. Tenzin, personal secretary to HRH.
- 3) For more info, please refer to the following website: <http://www.wildlife-science.org/yama/2015-11.html>
- 4) Her Royal Highness earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in international relations from Stanford University and a Master’s degree in law from Harvard Law School. Currently, she works at the Judiciary of the Kingdom of Bhutan as President of the Bhutan National Legal Institute (BNLI). During this visit to Japan, Her Royal Highness visited Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA). There, she had a meeting with JFBA President Kazuhiro Nakamoto and his staffs.