

Chapter 13. Holistic Education in South America, Bhutan, and The Asia Pacific Network in Holistic Education

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Abstract

This is a chapter from a memoir that describes the journey of John (Jack) Miller. The book explores how his personal journey is related to the work he has done in holistic education, contemplative education, and spirituality in education. In holistic education the personal and professional are connected. Professor Miller's journey includes events, books, teachers, and the many factors in his life that have contributed to his work, which includes more than 20 books and extensive travel around the world. An example of the relationship between the personal and the professional is that Jack began meditating in 1974 and this practice has provided the foundation for much of his teaching and writing.

Keywords: holistic education, contemplative education, spirituality in education, mindfulness, embodied learning

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Mexico and South America

I have had some of the strongest reactions to my talks in South America. When I gave a talk in 2013 on Whole Child Education for the 7th World Conference for Childhood Talent, sponsored by the ELIC Foundation (Free Schools for Scientific Research) held in Bucaramanga, Colombia, I was "swarmed" by about 30 members of the audience. I did not have enough of my cards to give out. I have to thank Ivan Romo who translated that talk into Spanish.

I was asked again by the ELIC Foundation to present on holistic education at a conference in 2015 in Sucre, Bolivia. At both of these conferences, people were so friendly and warm. I had time to walk around Sucre. There was a lovely town square where I was able to sit for a couple of hours and just enjoy seeing the people there.

Two important leaders in holistic education have been Ramon Gallegos Nava and his son, Ram Gallegos. Ramon with the help of his son, organized several international forums on holistic education in Guadalajara, Mexico. Midori and I went to one of the first, held in 2000. Several leading educators were there including Professor Yoshida, Ron

Miller, Jeffrey Kane, and Rachael Kessler. I gave a talk on education and the soul and sang "Smile" at the end. In 2008, I was invited again along with Nel Noddings, Sam Crowell, and Isabella Colaililo Kates. Nel's work on care has been a huge contribution to the field, and I was happy to contribute to the book that honored her, *Dear Nel* published by Teachers' College Press. Besides organizing these conferences, Ramon authored *Holistic Education; A Pedagogy of Love* which presents a powerful synthesis of science, philosophy, and spirituality to build the case for holistic education.

In February of 2018, I was invited to Bogota, Columbia again to speak at a conference sponsored by the National Confederation of Catholic Education. I spoke on education and the soul to over one hundred teachers and educators who were there. Sister Gloria Corredor was the organizer as well as a most gracious host to me and Midori. We were able to visit some of the main sites, including Monserrate, which has a beautiful view of the city.

Bhutan

In July of 2009, I was at the airport checking my email, and there was a message inquiring whether I would be interested in coming to Bhutan to help them orient their education system towards the country's goal of Gross

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National Happiness (GNH). Since I have always wanted to travel to that country, I immediately sent an email expressing my interest. I remember seeing a segment about Bhutan on "Sixty Minutes" several years ago, where I learned about how their goal was GNH rather than GDP. This small country in the Himalayas continues to fascinate me because they have rejected consumerism and unregulated development that has caused so much environmental damage and suffering around the world.

The succeeding months till the workshop were filled with activities to prepare for the trip in December. We were asked to submit articles for two sourcebooks that were prepared for the workshop. A third sourcebook was also developed that included materials from Bhutanese officials. The entire reading material totaled 700 pages (this material was compiled by GPI Atlantic www.gpiatlantic.org which organized the workshop under the dedicated leadership of Ronald Coleman). We were also asked to answer questions about a vision of education for Bhutan and how it might be implemented. There were also applications for visas to Bhutan and India as well as getting the appropriate vaccinations.

We left for Bhutan on December 2nd. I was traveling with my wife, Midori, who was going as a translator for Professor Yoshi Nakagawa. We spent a night in Delhi and then flew into Bhutan the next morning. The two-hour flight passes by the highest mountains in the world (e.g., Everest). To land the plane, the pilot does a sharp right turn, and then touches down on the lone runway between the mountains to arrive at the airport in the town of Paro. The sun was shining brightly as we exited the plane and took in the mountain scenery.

After clearing immigration, we began a three-day tour before the workshop began. One is immediately struck not only by the natural beauty of the country, but by the unique architecture of the colorful buildings. Every road seems to wind its way through the hills and mountains and some of those on the tour, including Midori, had to battle motion sickness because of the constant twists and turns. The first major stop was to climb to the Tiger's Nest, which is a Buddhist Monastery located 10,000 ft. above sea level. The climb took over four hours and the last part was the most forbidding. Several of the tourists, including myself, could not make the last leg since there was no railing on the walkway with a drop of several thousand feet below. Some who did make the final walk meditated and chanted in the monastery.

The other major stop was Punakha, which was about a four-hour bus ride from Paro. Punakha was at a lower level and much warmer. Two rivers come together and we saw some boys swimming. The weather in Bhutan at that time

of year is usually clear and sunny with temperature reaching about 16°C during the day and about 2°C at night. Punakha also contains the largest monastery in Bhutan that is home to 500 monks.

Our guide for this trip was Tashi Dorji, a 27-year-old man, who despite his youth impressed us with his calmness and knowledge. Spending three days with Tashi was our first introduction to the Bhutanese people, who seem to embody an inner strength that is in harmony with the natural beauty of the country.

The Workshop

The workshop began on Monday evening, December 7th, and included an address from the Prime Minister. He also gave a closing address and hosted some of us for a dinner. Lyonchhen Jimi Thinley is a charismatic leader who impressed everyone with his intelligence, passion, and vision. He first outlined his government's conception of GNH.

- GNH is not a "feel good" term, but must come "from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds."
- GNH is a "development path, that judiciously balances sustainable and equitable development with environmental conservation, good governance, and the dynamism and wisdom of our profound and ancient culture."
- Bhutan has developed a "GNH index that measures key conditions of wellbeing like physical and mental health, community vitality, work-life balance, living standards, civic engagement, and the ecological integrity on which the whole human endeavor depends." Bhutan protects 72% of its forest from development, which allows Bhutan to absorb three times as much carbon as it produces.
- Finally, he identified education as the glue that holds the whole enterprise together.

The Prime Minister then impressed on the audience the urgency of the situation, as Bhutan is rapidly modernizing, and with that, the possibility that it will be consumed by the negative impact of globalization. We were asked to work with the Bhutanese participants to develop practical strategies that could be implemented in the schools. He also noted that the workshop itself was being run on sustainable principles with food coming from local sources. He asked the local participants to walk or take public transportation to the workshop.

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The next morning, we began our work. There were 24 international participants coming from 16 countries and 28 participants from Bhutan. There were principals from several holistically orientated schools located in Nepal, Canada, USA, Thailand, India, and Italy. Also attending, were academics working in the areas of contemplative education, holistic education, indigenous education, and environmental education. The Bhutanese participants included government officials, teacher educators, writers, monks, and students. UNICEF was also represented, which supported the project with funding. We sat in two concentric circles, with the inner circle sitting on cushions, and the outer circle seated in chairs. The workshop was led by a professional facilitator, Ivy Ang.

I found the first couple of days challenging. We discussed the vision and debated which words were most appropriate; in the end we were able to come up the following vision.

REVISED VISION AND GOALS: 11 December, 2009

Educating for GNH vision:

The principles and values of Gross National Happiness are deeply embedded in the consciousness of Bhutanese youth and citizens. They will see clearly the interconnected nature of reality and understand the full benefits and costs of their actions. They will not be trapped by the lure of materialism and will care deeply for others and for the natural world.

How: Bhutan's entire educational system will effectively cultivate GNH principles and values, including deep critical and creative thinking, ecological literacy, practice of the country's profound ancient wisdom and culture, contemplative learning, a holistic understanding of the world, genuine care for nature and for others, competency to deal effectively with the modern world, preparation for right livelihood, and informed civic engagement.

3-year goal: Bhutan's school system has GNH-minded teachers and a GNH-infused learning environment, and access to these by all Bhutanese children and youth.

How: All of Bhutan's teachers have received effective education in these areas.

1-year goal: All Bhutan's school principals have received GNH-inspired education.

Although the participants struggled to come up with the right words, I, along with others, were impressed how quickly the government responded to our suggestions. At the end of the day, the facilitator and her assistants would meet with the education minister and other officials. They would go over the input from the workshop, and the next day, we would see several of our suggestions immediately

included in the proceedings. The Prime Minister was also informed of the day's work, and I believe he reviewed all the proposals that went forward. This was much different from most governments that usually take months to respond to input.

After this initial work, we went to work in small groups to develop suggestions for workshops that are to be held for all principals in Bhutan in January and February. There are about 540 schools in Bhutan, and all of the principals were going to attend week-long workshops in January and February to discuss how they can implement GNH in the schools. The small groups focused on several areas including critical thinking/analytical thinking, eco-literacy, community and national service, ambience of the classroom and the school, alternative approaches to assessment, non-formal education, mindfulness, and curriculum in various subject areas. Each of the groups came up with issues and activities to be explored in the principals' workshops.

One of the most impressive features of the workshop was the contribution from the high school students who were there. There were two students in the participant group and other students as observers who contributed in the small groups. These students were articulate and not afraid to voice their concerns about the education system. One of their main concerns was the present emphasis on final exams and they made recommendation that "alternative to exams, students could be graded on class participation, completion of assignments, and independent projects."

At the end of the workshop, the Prime Minister was interviewed by one of the observers, Silver Donald Cameron, who writes for the *Chronicle Herald* in Halifax. The Prime Minister made the following comments:

"I would like to see an educational system quite different from the conventional factory, where children are just turned out to become economic animals, thinking only for themselves," he said. "I would like to see graduates that are more human beings, with human values, that give importance to relationships, that are eco-literate, contemplative, analytical. I would like to see graduates who know that success in life is a state of being when you can come home at the end of the day satisfied with what you have done, realizing that you are a happy individual not only because you have found happiness for yourself, but because you have given happiness, in this one day's work, to your spouse, to your family, to your neighbors — and to the world at large."

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/NovaScotian/1159562.html>

On April 2, 2012 participants in the 2009 workshop were invited to a meeting at the United Nations, where the day was devoted to Bhutan's policy to GNH. Several countries

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spoke in support of GNH and how it could be applied within their own country. Greg Cajete, a leading indigenous educator, attended both events, and I enjoyed the time we had together. This led to further contacts including his contribution to *The International Handbook of Holistic Education* and his foreword to *The Holistic Curriculum*. I was also on a panel with him in October 2019 on the relationship between indigenous education and holistic education at California State University, San Bernardino. Greg's *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* is included on the reading lists of all my courses and is a must read for holistic educators.

The work continues in Bhutan. Jackie Mitchell and Yang Gyeltshen (2019) wrote about current education initiatives in their chapter, "Lhomon Education: Teaching for Well-Being in Bhutan" in *The International Handbook of Holistic Education*. Lhomon Education (LME) seeks to create education alternatives that reinforce ancient Bhutanese wisdom traditions, while introducing the best of progressive sustainable development practices.

The long-term view of the LME program aspires to shift the paradigm in education from one that implicitly supports materialism, individualism, and human and environmental chaos to one that acts on behalf of community, ecological sustainability, and wisdom in whatever form it appears. Although LME is specific to the Bhutanese context, the principles on which it is founded—contemplative practice, ecological perspectives, and compassionate action—are universally applicable. When applied with sensitivity to the culture and ecology of place, education can be relevant, joyful, and effective in addressing the problems of modernization in both East and West. (p. 84)

Asia Pacific Network in Holistic Education

Thakur Singh Powdyel, the minister of education in Bhutan at the time of the workshop and the UN meeting, continues his interest in holistic education. He participated in the Asia Pacific Network in Holistic Education and keynoted at the Thailand conference in 2017. Professor Yoshi Nakagawa was instrumental in initiating this network which began in May 2013, with a conference at Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand from May 23-24. Conferences have been held at:

Inchon University. Incheon, Korea. November 2013.

Doshisha University. Kyoto, Japan. 2015.

Taylor's University. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. 2016.

Bangkok, Thailand. 2017.

Doshisha University. Kyoto, Japan. March 2018.

Gyeongin National University of Education. Anyang, Korea. October 25, 2019.

The APNHE conferences have been attended by educators from Bhutan, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The number of participants has grown, with over 100 attending the most recent conferences. Participants have an opportunity to share their work in holistic education which includes activities in research and curriculum development.

I have met so many interesting people in these conferences including Shu-Mei Chang from Taiwan who translated *The Holistic Curriculum* and *The Holistic Teacher* into Chinese. She signed one of her books with this note, "It's my honor to have the chance to translate your books and learn from your spirit."

Professor Wong Ping Ho has attended most of the conferences. Before he retired, Professor Wong was the Director of the Centre for Religious and Spirituality Education at The Education University of Hong Kong (previously the Hong Kong Institute of Education). I have the highest regard for his work. I have seen him present several times and I am always impressed by his knowledge about Chinese culture. His talks come from his whole being. Professor Wong contributed "Holistic Features of Traditional Chinese Spiritual Practices for Personal Cultivation" to *The International Handbook of Holistic Education*.

I met Prapapat Niyom from Thailand in Bhutan. She has attended most the network meetings, and at the meeting in her home country in 2017, it was clear how much she is loved and respected in Thailand. She founded the Roong Aroon School in 1997. It is a K-12 school sitting on beautiful grounds with the students involved in a variety of interesting projects. Prapapat has a wonderful sense of humor and my wife, Midori, and she have become friends. She contributed "Holistic Education in Thai Buddhist Schools" to *The International Handbook of Holistic Education*. In Bhutan, at the end of the workshop, we were in a circle when she said that we may have worked together in other incarnations.

At the most recent meeting of the APNHE, I gave a keynote on "The Tao of Teaching and Learning" and this has led me to writing a book on the same subject. I am writing it with the help of two Chinese students who were in my summer class of 2019, Xiang Li and Tian Ruan. Here is the preface to that book:

As we were working on the last part of this book the COVID19 pandemic occurred. Like most places Toronto was shut down so the virus would not spread. Some people have suggested that this period is an opportunity to look at our society and ourselves and to chart a new course. More

specifically, the climate crisis should now be addressed more seriously. I believe that education also needs to “reset” so that it can be central to addressing this crisis. Education needs to start from a place where the cosmos, the earth, and our lives, are seen as interconnected and sacred. One Chinese scholar has written, “We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred.” (Tu, 2004, p. 497)

*Taoism can help us see our world in this way and can also help develop a new vision for the education. Together with indigenous wisdom and the type of love and nonviolence that Martin Luther King and Gandhi articulated, there can be multi-faceted, inclusive vision that can guide us toward an education that can help heal ourselves and the planet. This vision can be a starting point in trying to find a way of teaching and learning that inspires young people in what Thomas Berry called *The Great Work* (1999). Xiang, Tian and I hope that this book can assist in some small way in this work.*

Personally, I have found Taoist texts very nourishing with their emphasis on tranquility, humility, sincerity, and their deep connection to nature. These qualities are a powerful antidote to the celebration of ego and celebrity that now pervade so many cultures, and prevent humankind from addressing the crucial issues that face us.

Acknowledgements

Professor Miller’s book, *The Holistic Curriculum*, first published in 1988 along with the publication of the *Holistic Education Review* have been seen as the beginning of holistic education as a field of study. Since his journey has been connected with so many other holistic educators, this book can serve as one perspective on how the field has unfolded over the past 35 years. Besides this historical perspective the book includes a chapter on his meditation practice as well his beliefs. There is also a chapter on his teaching and how he attempts to embody holistic education in his classroom.

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