

ENLIGHTENED STEWARDSHIP

BHUTAN FAITH LONG-TERM ENVIRONMENTAL PLAN



Facilitating an eco-spiritual transformation to mainstream sustainable living in the Bhutanese society

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Universal Value of Faith

Faith in general sense is equated to trust. Having faith in someone promotes trust and mutual understanding. At the community level, faith advances trust, cohesion and community vitality. From religious perspective, faith is understood as the individual belief in the teachings or doctrines associated with a particular religion. Historically, faith has always had a strong influence in shaping human society and culture. While different faiths around the world vary in their beliefs, one common node that connect all faiths is nature. It is perhaps irrefutable to surmise that faith and the natural environment are two separate things and have no connection at all. If there is one common aspect that unites all major faiths of the world, it is the encouragement to care for nature. From Buddhism to Hinduism and Christianity to Islam the central tenet is the recognition of our connection with nature and need for environmental stewardship to ensure harmonious coexistence.

Bhutan and the Buddhist Faith

Bhutan is largely a Buddhist country. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan recognizes Buddhism as the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance. While majority of Bhutanese follow the Buddhist faith, Hinduism is also followed in southern parts of Bhutan. Of the three major schools of Buddhism, Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana, Buddhism in Bhutan belongs to the Vajrayana school. Guru Rinpoche (Guru Padmasambhava) laid the foundation of Buddhism in Bhutan in the 8th century. The advent of Buddhism contributed to the evolution of Bhutan's cultural and religious tradition. Although originating from Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhism in Bhutan differs significantly in its rituals, liturgy and monastic organizations. Buddhism has played an important role in the history and the way of life of the Bhutanese people.



The Monastic Institution

The Central Monastic Body or *Zhung Dratshang* is one of the oldest institutions in Bhutan. It was established by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in 1620. It was initially instituted at Cheri, north of Thimphu, and was later moved to Punakha in 1637. Today Punakha Dzong serves as the winter residence or headquarters of the *Zhung Dratshang*, and Thimphu Tashichho Dzong serves as the summer residence. The *Zhung Dratshang* is an autonomous institution financed by the state.

The *Zhung Dratshang* is headed by His Holiness the Je Khenpo, the crown jewel of the religious hierarchy. He is assisted by five Lopens in specialized religious disciplines. They are the members of the Supreme Sangha Council and are conferred ranks equal to a government minister.

Until the introduction of modern educational system in the 1960s, monasteries were the only available centers of learning and monastic education was the approach to acquire education and scholarship.

Monastic education starts with learning the alphabet, grammar, poetry, and gradually advances to Buddhist philosophical studies. Skill development in ritual performances, arts and crafts, and most importantly codes of conduct are taught. The ultimate purpose of monastic education is to impart human value, enable spiritual progress and become good human beings. The Central Monastic Body preserves and promotes Bhutanese wisdom and traditions and provides spiritual guidance and service to the people.

II. BUDDHISM AND ENVIRONMENT

Bhutan's Spiritual Ecology

The Bhutanese culture and society evolved from the fabric of the natural environment. The inextricable connection with nature is founded on the wisdom of the ancient belief systems. Bhutanese people maintain a strong belief that mountains, rocks, lakes and water bodies are the dwellings of local spirits and deities. According to Bhutanese scholar and historian, Dr. Karma Phuntsho, the evolution of Bhutan's spiritual ecology over time can be perceived in three stages. First, during the pre-Buddhist era, nature was revered out of awe and fear. Natural entities such as forests, mountains, rivers and lakes were considered as the abodes of non-human spirits. People appeased nature by worshipping the non-human spirits believed to be the guardians of nature. The second phase begins with the introduction of Buddhism. This brought about a great change in people's perceptions of nature. The belief system of the pre-Buddhist period was superimposed with a new way of thinking. Buddhism imbued nature with sanctity and gave it a venerable place. Today, modernization has brought in the third phase with a new worldview. The secular understanding of nature through science has reduced the old belief systems. However, nature continues to hold a special place in Buddhism and the bond is inseparable.



Interconnectedness of all lifeforms

Buddhism propounds the interdependent nature of all phenomena, and that all life is interconnected, and nothing exists in isolation. This is perhaps the most profound concept of Buddhism that blends with the principles of ecology and eco-systems. Interconnectedness attributes the existence of all phenomena in the world as the result of the fulfillment of different cause and conditions, in which no entity can sustain independently without depending on other factors. An allegory to growing a tree explains this concept vividly. For a seed to grow into a tree and bear fruit it must have the right conditions of suitable climate, adequate sunshine, moisture, and nutrients from the soil. Any condition missing or in insufficient quantity will hamper proper development of the tree.

Bhutan's development philosophy and environment

Bhutan's approach to development is guided by the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) conceptualized by the 4th King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. The concept implies that for a nation to develop sustainably, development should take a holistic approach by giving equal importance to economic development, wellbeing and happiness. In comparison to the four main components of development in economic terms - consumption, investment, government spending, exports and imports, what is known as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the four pillars of GNH are sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, environmental conservation and good governance. It is evident that environmental conservation is perceived as an important component of Bhutan's development approach thereby ensuring a balance between socio-economic progress and environmental conservation.

III. WHY A FAITH PLAN ?

Bhutan's formidable commitment to environmental conservation, which has translated into some of the world's most lauded environmental policies, can be attributed to the guiding philosophy of Buddhism.

Teachings that emphasize on respecting all life forms, practicing simplicity, and the interdependence between the natural environment and sentient beings living within it have influenced generations of the Bhutanese people to live in harmony with nature.

The country's guiding philosophy of GNH, which strives to achieve a balanced development in all the facets of life that are essential for human happiness, is also aligned with Buddhist wisdom.

However, as Bhutan continues to experience rapid modernization, the act of balancing between traditional values and new ideals of progress, economic growth, and sustainable development is challenged.

One such emerging challenge that has risen from this express era of development is the growing influence of western consumerism which is beginning to erode the Buddhist way of life. The desire to consume in variety and own in multiplicity can be observed in recent trends such as increased vehicle congestion in the urban cities, increased construction of commercial buildings, increased generation of household waste, and the surge in retailers selling multifarious imported food and merchandise.



Relatedly, another emerging challenge is that the younger generation of Bhutanese, who are growing up during these changing times, are becoming more and more disconnected from the Buddhist values. Instead, with the indomitable influence of globalization and social media, today's Bhutanese youth have direct and continual exposure to foreign influences and ideals from the variety of media that they consume. This connection to the outside world is what is shaping their attitudes, values, and behaviors and, in an unfortunate effect, detaching them from the unique cultural and spiritual heritage that teach qualities such as compassion, kindness, mindfulness, and resilience.

Furthermore, the degradation of these Buddhist values can be linked with other emerging social issues in the country such as the rise of juvenile delinquency, mental health issues and drug abuse.





High youth unemployment has generated in today's youth extreme demotivation, dejection, and desperation to find work and meaning in their lives. This is also the main reason for the mass exodus of thousands of capable young people leaving the country to move to foreign countries in search for work. If many of these youth do not wish to return to Bhutan, it signals a frightening fate for the future of environmental stewardship in the country.

Both these emerging issues have a strong implication on the longevity of Bhutan's conservation legacy which all depends on how the current generation of Bhutanese people view and value nature.

Over and above the emerging social challenges, there are continuous threats to the environmental conservation. Poaching and illegal wildlife trade are prevalent issues that threaten certain species into extinction. The belief that certain animal parts have medicinal property to cure specific ailments and provide health benefits is a myth that drives illegal wildlife trade.

These beliefs do not have any proven scientific basis to authenticate the claims and yet illegal trade thrives. Man-made forest fires that destroy millions of life forms is another challenge, and the rising issue of human-wildlife conflict have had no permanent solutions. In such circumstances, faith and values could provide an alternative approach to addressing the multiple challenges by awakening human intellect, values and intellection, and the innate goodness in all human beings.

Never has it been more urgent for Bhutan to develop an intervention that will help resolve the issue of degrading Buddhist values which is driving "environment unconsciousness" in the Bhutanese society. The Central Monastic Body of Bhutan in partnership with WWF-Bhutan looks forward to implementing a long-term project engaging faith organizations and communities to raise environmental consciousness of the Bhutanese society and drive "enlightened stewardship" among the Bhutanese people.



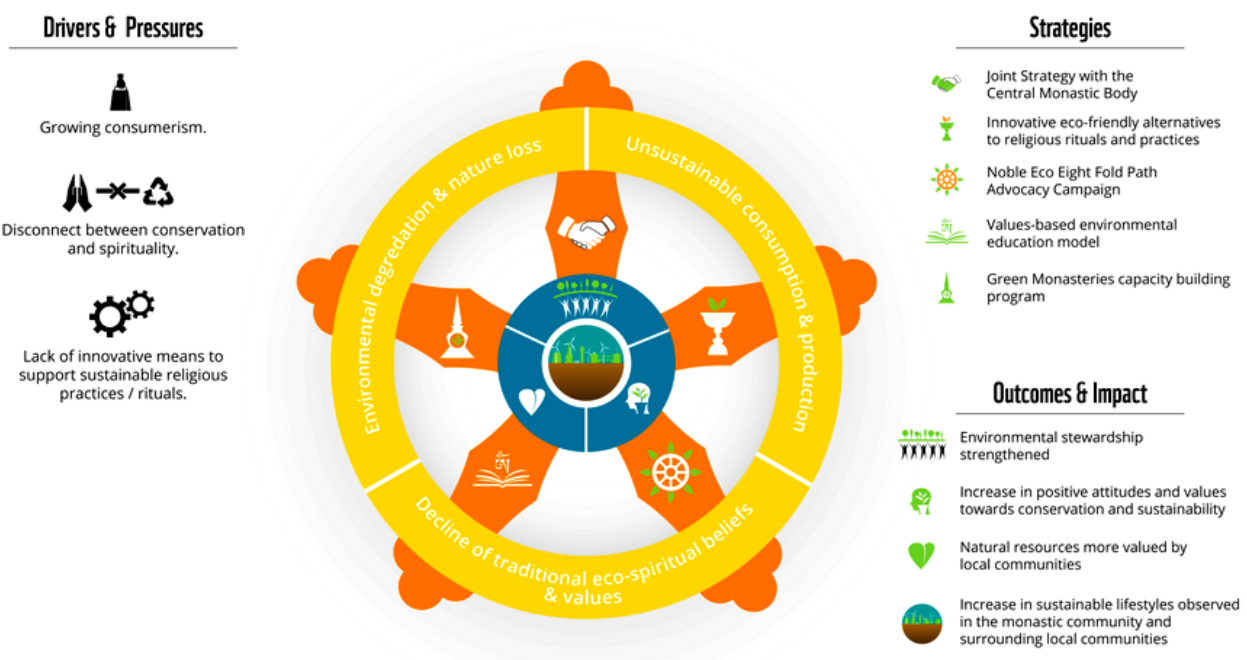
Tshering Dukar (The Six Symbols of Longevity)

Tshering Dukar, also called Tshering Namdru illustrates the philosophical connotation of the six symbols of longevity. The six essence of longevity are represented by the rock, tree, water, crane, deer, and an elderly sage-like man with a long white beard. The image symbolizes natural harmony of the hermit-like old man who lives a long life of contentment, peace, and good health in the charming landscape. From secular or scientific perspective, it represents an ecologically balanced system. It is a perfect depiction of living in harmony with nature.

IV. THEORY OF CHANGE

Adapted from the Buddhist symbol of the Dharmachakra (Wheel of Dharma), representing the Buddha's First Sermon at Sarnath, where he set Buddhist Law (dharma) in motion, the picture below describes the logic of how our strategies (spokes of the wheel), will deliver the desired outcomes (outer hub of the wheel) of "Strengthening Environmental Stewardship", "Natural Resources Being More Valued by Local Communities", and "Increase in Positive Attitudes and Values towards Conservation and Sustainability", which will ultimately lead to the achieving the impact (inner hub of the wheel) of "Increased Sustainable Lifestyles Observed in the Monastic Community and Surrounding Local Communities".

The diagram also describes the main drivers (scarf) that are contributing to the current situation (rim of the wheel) that the plan aims to rectify. It also notes key assumptions that need to be considered for the strategies to work.



V. THE KEY AREAS OF THE FAITH PLAN

5.1 Key Area 1: Capacity building programme for greening monasteries and monastic institutions across the country

Goal: By 2026, 20% of monasteries/monastic institutions in Bhutan are capacitated to maintain clean and green surroundings and are practicing environment friendly lifestyles.				
Plan for achieving the goal	Timeline		Progress indicator	Resources and skills needed
	1 – 2 Yrs.	3 – 5 Yrs.		
1. Develop contents of capacity building programme, which will include training program, training manual/guidelines, and other related materials. The aim is to equip monasteries/monastic institutes with the basic scientific knowledge, skilling, and strategic support to develop practical and sustainable solutions for greening their grounds, managing their environment, and educating local communities, ultimately empowering them as active conservation ambassadors in their communities.	*		Capacity building programme in place.	Financial and subject matter expert.
2. Pilot the training programme in at least two monasteries/monastic institutes.	*		No. of monasteries/monastic institutions where training has been piloted.	Financial and trainer.
3. Finalize the training programme and materials.	*		Training programme and materials.	Financial and subject matter expert.
4. Launch the capacity building programme by organizing the first official training with a select number of monasteries/monastic institutes.	*	*	No. of monasteries/monastic institutions that received training.	Financial and subject matter expert.
4. Start an annual award programme to recognize one monastery/monastic institute that underwent the capacity building program and created visible positive impact in their community.		*	Monastery/monastic institution receives annual award.	Financial and subject matter expert.
Cost estimate for Key Area 1 (USD)				150,000

5.2 Key Area 2: Designing innovative eco-friendly alternatives for religious/cultural practices

Goal: By 2026, 3 eco-friendly alternatives to performing certain rituals and practices are in implementation.				
Plan for achieving the goal	Timeline		Progress indicator	Resources and skills needed
	1-2 Yrs.	3-5 Yrs.		
1. Organize series of consultations with faith bodies and relevant stakeholders to identify at least 3 eco-friendly alternatives to performing certain rituals and practices.	*		3 eco-friendly alternative product or practices identified.	Financial and subject matter expert.
2. Design at least 3 eco-friendly alternatives (either product or practice) through a synergetic approach of combining old traditions with new technologies to transform the way mainstream religious rituals and/or practices are performed to minimize waste and encourage environment friendly practices.	*		3 eco-friendly alternative products or practices designed.	Financial and subject matter expert.
3. Pilot eco-friendly alternatives in select monasteries or monastic institutions.		*	Eco-friendly alternatives piloted in selected monasteries or monastic institutions.	Financial and coordination.
4. The Central Monastic Body releases a public statement on the mainstreaming of the identified eco-friendly alternatives to performing religious rituals and practices.		*	Eco-friendly alternatives mainstreamed to performing religious rituals and practices.	Financial.
Cost estimate for Key Area 2 (USD)				100,000

5.3 Key Area 3: Advocacy campaign

Goal: By 2027, the Nobel Eco-Eight-Fold Path principles and practices handbook is launched, used and enhanced with effective environmental messaging and advocacy.

Plan for achieving the goal	Timeline		Progress indicator	Resources and skills needed
	1-2 Yrs.	3-5 Yrs.		
1. Develop and launch the handbook, “ <i>Noble Eco-Eight-Fold Path: Spiritual Environmental Principles and Practices for Ending Planetary Suffering</i> ” in partnership with the Central Monastic Body. The initiative is inspired by the “Noble Eight-fold Path”, one of the principal teachings in Buddhism. The handbook will adapt these eight guiding principles to provide eight guiding eco-spiritual principles to rid planet earth of “suffering” and drive “enlightened stewardship”.	*	*	Number of people who participated in the advocacy and teaching programmes on noble eco-eight-fold path, disaggregated by gender.	Financial and subject matter expert.
2. Develop and launch a webisode series and podcast, targeted towards youth, that explains each of the guiding principles of the “Noble Eco-Eight-Fold Path” in an engaging way.		*	Webisode series and podcast launched.	Financial and subject matter expert.
3. Develop and launch a webinar series where renowned Buddhist teachers, practitioners, and academics discuss on each of the guiding principles of the “Noble Eco-Eight-Fold Path”.		*	Webinar series launched.	Financial and subject matter expert.
4. Teachings on Noble Eco-Eight-Fold Path” is provided by renowned Buddhist masters.		*	Number of teachings conducted.	Financial and subject matter expert.
5. Advocacy on the benefits of environment friendly offerings during religious functions, and proper waste management by eminent Buddhist masters.	*	*	Number of people who participated in the advocacy on environment friendly offerings and proper waste management.	Proper messaging and advocacy materials.
Cost estimate for Key Area 3 (USD)				100,000

5.4 Key Area 4: Developing values based environmental education model for monastic and secular schools.

Goal: By 2027, at least 10 monastic institutes/schools practicing the values-based environmental education model developed by the project.

Plan for achieving the goal	Timeline		Progress indicator	Resources and skills needed
	1-2 Yrs.	3-5 Yrs.		
1. Develop the content of the values-based environmental education model, which will include the framework, teacher training program, teaching/learning resources, and other related materials. The aim is to design a secular action-oriented environmental education model that integrates scientific principles and traditional wisdom to empower schools, teachers, and learners to take enlightened environmental action.	*	*	Values-based environmental education materials and programme.	Financial and subject matter expert.



2. Pilot the values-based environmental education model with at least 5 monastic institutes/schools.		*	Number of institutions where values-based environmental education model is piloted.	Financial and subject matter expert.
3. Finalize the teacher training program, resources, and other materials.	*	*	Teacher training program and necessary resources and materials in place.	Financial and subject matter expert.
4. Launch the values-based environmental education model by organizing the first official teacher training with a select number of schools/monastic institutes.		*	Completion of training in select number of schools/monastic institutes.	Financial and trainer.
5. Organize bi-annual conference to promote knowledge-sharing among the schools who are implementing the values-based environmental education model.		*	Conduction of bi-annual conference.	Financial.
Cost estimate for Key Area 4 (USD)				150,000
Total Cost for the Plan				USD 500,000

VI. THE WAY AHEAD

The state of the global environment is worrying. The rate of biodiversity loss reported by WWF's Living Planet Report 2022 (average decline of 69% in species population since 1970), air and water pollution, rising global temperatures and escalation of non-degradable wastes are alarming trends that weaken the health of our planet and threaten our own existence.

Ironically, at the centre of it all are human beings; our actions drive the change. Behavioral change is therefore vital. One good practice by an individual can ramify positive impact for the environment. The faith plan is geared towards bringing behavioral change in the Bhutanese society.

The Central Monastic Body of Bhutan is envisaged as the change advocate to drive environment-friendly and sustainable actions in monasteries and surrounding local communities which will gradually trigger behavioral change.

The idea is to start small and gradually expand from the capital city to districts, from districts to villages and from villages to communities. The end goal in the long run is transformation of Bhutanese society into practicing environment friendly lifestyles and help promote sustainable living and environmental wellbeing. The goal may seem impossible, but we have taken the first step!



PREPARED BY
The Zhung Dratshang and WWF-Bhutan