

Winter 12-15-2015

# Postmodernism and Buddhism: A Postmodern Woman in a Modernizing Land

Ruthanne Joy Wenger Hughes

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior\\_theses](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses)

 Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Media Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Wenger Hughes, Ruthanne Joy, "Postmodernism and Buddhism: A Postmodern Woman in a Modernizing Land" (2015). *Senior Theses*. 43.

[https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior\\_theses/43](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses/43)

This Thesis is brought to you by the Honors College at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

## Table of Contents

Summary .....	2
Introduction.....	4
Challenges.....	4
Revisions .....	6
Moments.....	6
Back . . . ..	9
Bhutanese Buddhism.....	10
Journal from March 27 .....	12
Lhakhangs.....	13
Triumph of the Human Spirit 1 .....	17
Strengths, Weaknesses, and Other Issues .....	19
Identity Crisis 1.....	20
Identity Crisis 2.....	21
A Note: Mediating Kira.....	24
Chinks in the Wall .....	25
Problems with Problematizing.....	27
Conclusion .....	33

## Summary

Religion and postmodernism are two paradigms that guide my experience of life. Although it is not necessarily intuitive, these two paradigms do intersect and inform each other, shaping the way I engage with the world. With this understanding, I spent the Spring 2015 semester in the Kingdom of Bhutan and examined my time through a postmodern lens, writing a travel blog at [www.bhutanbricolage.weebly.com](http://www.bhutanbricolage.weebly.com) that mediates my experiences there and my thoughts about Buddhism and postmodernism.

While in Bhutan, I studied at Royal Thimphu College, taking three classes, Dzongkha, American Literature, and Government and Politics in Bhutan, alongside Bhutanese students. These courses allowed me to gain a deeper and multifaceted understanding of the issues at play in Bhutanese society and to interact with Bhutanese students as they engaged with the questions facing their country. Every Friday, I also interned at Jigme Losel Primary School, teaching English to Class 4. This experience allowed me to directly engage with a governmental institution and see a few of the ways the tenets of Gross National Happiness (GNH) are being implemented. On weekends, I traveled to sacred sites in Thimphu, Bumthang, Punakha, Paro, and Ha. These opportunities to observe Buddhist holy sites and the ways that people worship and conceive of religion were invaluable. Each site was similar, but also strikingly different, painting a picture of the complexities of the practices of Buddhism.

During these experiences, several questions guided my work. How has Eastern ideology engaged with postmodernism? How does a Westerner engage

Eastern thought with humility, while also applying principles and ideologies she believes in? What are the intersections between postmodernism and Buddhism? How does one learn and problematize at the same time? Over the course of the semester, I thought about these questions and observed, read, took notes, and wrote. Through all of this, I considered my blog to be a constantly evolving work in progress.

However, the writing process sometimes needs a break. Internet access in Bhutan was always tenuous, but after the Nepal earthquake, it became all but unusable. This, coupled with some personal emotional turmoil and big life events, put a hiatus on the actual blog posts, although I kept writing and taking notes. Back in America, I revised my journals into blog posts, keeping with the theme of a constant work in progress. This extra time between my experiences and my posts served to benefit my writing, adding more depth to my experiences through reflective space that allowed me to draw connections and conclusions that I had not seen before.

In my original proposal, I suggested that I use a section of my blog to house revisions of my blog posts so that my blog might truly be a work in progress and that the entire journey might be chronicled. This paper includes those revised posts in their final drafts and organization, as well as reflections on the process and what it taught me. While in Bhutan, I navigated the difficult question of how one learns humbly from another culture while still applying and considering ideologies that she believes in. My ideas changed dramatically throughout the semester and, indeed, are still changing. My thoughts are nothing profound, merely a mediation of my unique

experiences and reflections. Nevertheless, my blog is a meaningful assemblage of my subjective experiences in the simultaneously ancient and modern Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan.

## **Introduction**

Everything is a process. None of us holds objective knowledge; what we claim to know of the world is constantly evolving. As such, it would be inexcusably arrogant of me to make any claims about either postmodernism or Buddhism in the course of this project. My goal for the semester was simply to experience something entirely new, meet it with a critical mind that examined it in light of the paradigm I have come to claim as my own, and then to mediate it for readers back in my culture. This mediation involves both photographs and words and a careful attention to details in order to represent ideas that resembled my personal experiences. At the same time that I sought to affect my readers through mediation, though, the mediation itself has acted on me, allowing and pushing me to see my own experiences with different eyes each time I revisit my writing. Out of my own representations, I create and understand new meanings. Now, still and always, incomplete, it is time for the audience to add their interpretations to this Bhutan Bricolage.

## **Challenges**

Several challenges faced me during the creation of this blog. Logistically, maintaining anything requiring internet is difficult in a developing country. Internet

at Royal Thimphu College often did not work well enough to upload a post, especially if it contained photos. To combat this, I purchased an internet data stick that allowed me normal and reliable access. However, after the earthquake in Nepal, internet in general became worse, and my data stick stopped working entirely. However, the lack of internet allowed me to step back from the pressure of writing and more fully absorb and process.

Another problem I encountered was the ethics of problematizing a culture I did not belong to, especially through writing. April was a particularly difficult month as I struggled with culture shock, in addition to personal offense at some of the problems I saw. As I learned about various systemic concerns, I wanted to write and vent about them. However, I was conscious that my writing is one of a very few representations of Bhutan that my Western readers would have. It would not have been a faithful representation to write my thoughts at that point; I did not, and to some extent, never will, understand larger forces at work, nor did I see how Bhutanese society was already engaging these issues.

Another challenge I faced was nutrition. The Bhutanese diet consists largely of rice and curries made with hot chilies. Although it is a Buddhist country, relatively few citizens are vegetarian, and there are not many avenues for non-meat protein. As a vegetarian, I struggled to balance the protein, iron, and other vitamins I needed. At the same time, my digestive system struggled to cope with the large quantity of spicy food I ate. Overall, my health declined; I was often sick, had low energy, and struggled with depressive thoughts. This was by no means life-

threatening, but it did affect my ability to engage in all of the activities and avenues of thought I had intended to.

However, despite these challenges, I synthesized my thoughts into a travel blog that paints a picture of my various experiences. On the blog itself, posts appear in the order they occurred to me. Here, in their final form, they have been reorganized to follow a more logical train of thought, one that carries the reader more accurately through my understanding of Bhutan. Each post is followed by commentary, set off in block formatting.

## **Revisions**

### *1. Moments*

The adventure begins. I haven't slept; I'm in denial that I'm really going. The Land of the Thunder Dragon. The plane thunders for hours. Days. Landing takes my breath away. Mountains, stretching high, on all sides. Now it's real. Are those low hanging clouds? Or is it just high reaching land?

I'm adjusting to life. A myriad of tiny differences. Double deadbolts instead of doorknobs. Cold walks to the bathroom-bring your toilet paper. And spicy in, spicy out; don't forget the toilet paper! Our roommates leave the lights on all night. There aren't any screens on the windows. Wasps buzz my head and spiders prowl my bed. And the altitude hits me more than I thought...dizziness, headache, nausea.

Eat chocolate. Sugar helps altitude sickness. Oh, the altitude. There are unbelievable mountains. Everywhere. The sky sings. I make friends. Life gets easier. I settle into rhythms of life. Bucket laundry isn't actually that hard. There are hikes

and monks and children and colorful kiras and milk tea and momos and books and photos and adventures. I am navigating Thimphu.

Walking through Thimphu, my kira swishes around my ankles. I am not a tourist; I walk confidently. Avoid the mud. Avoid the shit. Step off the knee-high curb. Crap! Look right, not left. Look right, not left. Step up the other curb. Smile at a woman. Trip on a stone. Mm. Smooth.

I pass some other chilips, clearly on holiday, and I feel legit again. Do I look like I belong? Or do I look even more foreign, trying to blend in? My kira isn't tied well. I have become an expert at the sloppy kira. It isn't straight and sometime slips up past my ankle. Scandalous!

The culture is so different and I'm learning so much. I go to class on Government and Politics in Bhutan. They debate monarchy and democracy and Gross National Happiness. I overhear conversations at coffee shops. "Happiness is a place." "Bhutan is already happy." "GNH is stupid." One a Bhutanese, one a chilip, one a government sign. Can you guess which is which?

These things sound good in theory. But maybe the people have different views. Forced democracy...paternal modernizing chilips...See, clean operation rooms are good; telling people what to think is not. But "our king is a light in the darkness" stares at me from the primary school courtyard. Everyone does it. Can it be avoided?

I go to the primary school. The children grin. "Miss, miss, good afternoon, miss!" Everyone bows; do I bow back? I'm teaching! Class 4. No lesson plans, Ma'am just throws me in. The children respond eagerly. Bright kids, fidgety kids, quiet kids.

Forty-nine kids. What can you do with 49 nine year olds? Read a story, ask some questions, fumble through a lesson and talk about similes. Simile—it looks like smile. "Like a smile"—that's a simile! Bonus point, you win!

Similes. Life here is like a smile—joyful, unique, and endearing, and it can change in a moment. It is also like a dragon, living up to it's name. Bhutan is ancient, full of life, colorful, proud. And it mimics the land itself. The land of the thunder dragon is like a glacial river, ancient traditions disseminating and rushing towards the future, hitting some rocks along the way, dividing at times, but still flowing together.

It is like many things at once. And here, I give you fragments. People talk about the tradition of consensus. They say democracy is divisive. They present a cohesive story, but then they counter it, perhaps unconsciously. They say they teach a single reality: Bhutan is sovereign and independent, made of monarchy and religion. But the realities are many and I've only begun to begin to understand.

While writing this post, I debated whether or not to introduce and define terms such as *kira*, *chilip*, and *momo*. The words were defined for me when I learned them, after all; my experiences did not involve inferring the meaning based off of context clues. However, my days brimming with other inferences as I absorbed and tried to understand the culture, customs, language, and paradigms. Ultimately, I decided to leave out the definition in order to allow the post to create an overwhelming sensation of being bombarded by experiences and

unfamiliar words in order to simulate the overwhelming and colorful days I lived through.

## *2. Back...*

Well, this project dropped off the face of the earth! Or maybe the Himalayas. The thing is, life in a developing country is tricky. Specifically internet! One day, for example, after multiple failed attempts to get internet up at the college, I walked down the mountain and caught a taxi into Thimphu to camp out at a Western style coffee shop known to have good Wi-Fi. I wrote a couple of posts that I thought were being saved as drafts as I worked. Stupidly, I did not write them in Word first, and I found myself in trouble when I tried to publish. It turns out the internet hadn't been working the whole time—I lost all my work. That was pretty discouraging, especially since I thought I would be safe, and I didn't have the heart to try to recreate my whole day's work. So, those posts are back to simply being notes in my journal. Chalk it up to the adventure in a modernizing land!

However, after the huge earthquake in neighboring Nepal, the internet became all but unusable. I'm not sure if that was causal, but the correlation was at least there. We were able to escape much other damage, but we heard tragic stories of friends and loved ones living or traveling in Nepal who lost so much. The lack of internet strongly affected my posting, but I also began to feel overwhelmed and realized I needed some space to reflect on what I was experiencing before I was able to write about it. My months in Bhutan were an intense experience and took their toll, both physically and mentally.

Still, all excuses aside, the blog part of the project is now back on track! I've got my internet, I've got my notes, I've got my experiences, and I've got my reflective distance, so here I go!

I do not consider this to be a serious post. However, it is included in the final order because the pause has become an essential part of the process and project. To exclude it would be to exclude the lessons learned.

### *3. Bhutanese Buddhism*

In Bhutan, Buddhism is integral to the culture, people, and language, coursing through the veins of daily life. Its focus, however, is not so much on the daily rituals but on the underlying paradigm of life. Many Buddhist Bhutanese, for example, including monks, eat meat without a qualm and enjoy the entertainments of the West and India. Books are placed in hotel rooms, much like Gideon Bibles are in the States, explaining how a person can still be a Buddhist without following any of the Buddhist customs. So what is Buddhism, then? I think it's an understanding of the world that focuses on not focusing on the self, on finding peace and contentment through simplicity and absence of all entanglement. To many Bhutanese, the rituals of religion itself only really become important near the end of life when one is preparing to meet death and the demons that will judge all living actions. Before old age, Bhutanese may go to monks for prayers and blessings, attend tsechus—religious festivals—and offer prayers to make up for bad deeds, but after retirement, older people spend all of their time circumambulating chortens, spinning

prayer wheels, visiting monasteries, and perhaps even becoming lay monks. This role is so pervasive that all governmental employees (including the king) are constitutionally required to retire at 65, and old people who get involved in other activities may be chided by their children to go home and pray.

This spiritual focus is good for the country in many ways. For one thing, it led to the development of Gross National Happiness, which Bhutan measures as a corollary to Gross Domestic Product. GNH comprises nine domains, including psychological wellbeing, standard of living, good governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity and resilience, time use, and ecological diversity and resilience. This makes for a beautiful holistic picture of what human life is, understanding community, nature, and education to be just as important as the mechanics of putting food on the table. It's about keeping body and soul together, literally and figuratively.

This breaks down at times, though, and that's a conversation for another post. It's enough for now to leave it at this: Bhutanese Buddhism is beautifully unique and deeply historical, highly visible and subtly present, set apart and right in the middle of things, intricately manifested and simply understood, a way of living as much as it is a religion.

There is no way to fully express how integral Buddhism is to daily Bhutanese life. Many of the students I lived with do not worship daily or even weekly, but the rituals and stories of their religion permeate all aspects of life, from what clothing to wear to where to walk to what to name children. This paradox fascinates me, but seems familiar. All

belief systems have ramifications beyond simple mental assent to tenants, whether it be Buddhism, Christianity, or postmodernism.

#### *4. Journal from March 27*

So far the only mediation I've engaged in is through photographs on Instagram, reshared on Facebook. But mediating my experiences through photographs—how accurate is that? The pictures show the truth, in a sense, true experiences, true beauty. But, another truth—they don't show everything. They can't show the cold, the tiredness, the stomach cramps, the irritation of having to hold my pee because I forgot toilet paper, all coexisting with an internal, "Look! This is incredible, that mountain is RIGHT THERE."

The mountains are so alive! Life here takes energy. It's beautiful and vibrant and experiencing it makes me need to sleep. The joys and woes of living in a developing country. Eating and bathing and shopping and emailing and laundry washing all take so many more steps. Even breathing can be laborious, as my chest heaves against the mountain and the altitude.

At home, if I need to pee, I just get up and go. In this home, if I'm in my dorm room, I get up and grab my toilet paper and soap. Depending on the time of day, maybe I put on a layer or three. Then I grab my key and lock the padlock on my deadbolt door before walking down the open corridor, sidestepping dogs, to get to my hall's cold, wet, and not necessarily clean toilet. Then I have to come back, juggling my precious TP in my wet hands (no towels, after all) as I unlock the

padlock and draw back the bolt. Really, it almost takes longer to write than it does to do; there's nothing to complain about. It's just life here.

I struggled with this journal. I wanted to show simultaneous and opposite emotions without either one overpowering the reader. These things are indeed irritating. I mentally complained about them a fair amount. However, life was not just a culmination of irritation. Rather, the irritations existed at the same time that wonder and awe and pleasure did. Life had many frustrations, but life was not frustrating. It is not quite that the good outweighed the bad, but rather that life was a more than the sum of many parts, and it turned out, overall, to be positive.

### *5. Lhakhangs*

They are sacred spaces. Quiet. Photographs aren't allowed inside. Translated as temples, more or less, lhakhangs are places to pray and offer gifts of food, money, and butter lamps. Worshippers prostrate before the altars and statues, showing respect with the body, speech, and mind, and touching the five main parts of their bodies (forehead, two palms, and two knees) to the floor to symbolize the purification of the five negative emotions (attachment, arrogance, anger, ignorance, and jealousy). Monks bless the worshippers with holy water and relics.

The walls are painted in magnificent murals depicting gods and demons. They show ancient tales and history and represent what will happen after death when souls are judged. In some places, the murals are more than a hundred years

old, faded and damaged by the smoke of countless butter lamps and offerings of incense. In others, they have been restored, painted over by a second or third skillful hand. In still others, they are brand new, made in the ancient tradition by young, living hands.

It's dark and cool inside. The floor under my bare feet is sometimes polished wood, smoothed by the feet and cloths of a thousand monks and visitors. Sometimes it's cold stone, carefully laid in tiles, or else rockier, still perfectly smooth, but uneven like the floor of a cave.

The smell of the incense and lamps mingles. It's peaceful and makes me still. I quietly walk with my hands folded, observing and respecting. Many times I silently pray to my God.

Sometimes we can hear the monks chanting. They pray together in a large room, their voices rising and falling in unison. Some places, we can watch them from above or go into the prayer room. The young ones watch us curiously.

Sometimes there are crowds. Sometimes we are the only ones. The others in my group receive blessings from the monk, taking the holy water to drink and wet their hair. I usually stay back. I smile at the monk and indicate I'd rather not; it's never a problem, nor does anyone look at me strangely. This is a place for worship, not judgment. I do not worship their gods, but they let me in, let me observe, let me participate.

These are sacred spaces.

The lhakhangs made a deep impression on me. We visited dozens over the course of the semester. At times, I wrestled with how to be in

them. I did not want to disrespect their beliefs by participating in traditions I did not believe in. At the same time, I did not want to go against my own beliefs. Of course, in both of those things, I did not want to be rude or judgmental. It was a tricky line to walk, but in the end, I think I did it well. When I could do so without being rude, I abstained from blessings and receiving holy water. It felt wrong, though, to just look elsewhere or pretend I did not notice the blessing in order to get out of a potentially difficult situation, so I made a point to make eye contact with the monk, or at times nun, and smile while I declined. Each time I did so, the monk smiled back at me and seemed to understand perfectly. I felt comfortable with this arrangement and with my decision to not give offerings. However, I made an exception after the earthquake in Nepal. My program director and I were visiting a small lhakhang. She and I, along with our guide, were the only people there besides the monk, and they decided to offer butter lamps and prayers in honor of the victims of the earthquake. As the monk prepared the offering, my director handed me the flaming stick. I had a very brief but intense internal discussion about how to handle this situation. I do believe in a God, but do not believe in the gods of Buddhism, and I do not believe I should make offerings to deity I do not worship. However, the intent of this offering was not to pay homage to a god, but to honor and remember the dead after a tragedy. With little hesitation, I lit three butter lamps, and as I did, I prayed for

the dead and the living in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. No one else heard or knew, and I am unsure what they would think if they did. However, I think they would recognize our common intent to remember the victims and respect each other traditions. In the wake of the tragedy, there are two prayers I prayed: the Anglican one,

“Lord of all compassion

We pray for all of those caught up in the midst of tragedy or disaster.

For those who have lost life and those working to save life

For those who are worried for people they love

For those who will see their loved ones no longer

Lord Have Mercy.

For those in need of the peace that passes all understanding...

Lord Have Mercy.

For those in confusion and those in despair

For those whose tears are yet to dry

For those in need of your unending love

Lord Have Mercy,”

and the Buddhist one,

“May the pain of every living being

Be completely cleared away.

May I be the doctor and the medicine

And may I be the nurse  
For all sick beings in the world  
Until everyone is healed...  
May the frightened cease to be afraid  
And those bound be freed.”

### *6. Triumph of the Human Spirit 1*

Sprezzatura! Practiced ease, the notion that public expression should appear effortless, all the while being arduously crafted behind closed doors. Originating in Italian art and literature, the nonchalant carelessness of...of...It kind of paralyzes me sometimes. My blog, the feeling that I need to be perfectly crafted but look like I didn't try...it's unattainable. It's more perfect than perfect.

It makes me anxious. But, actually, I find a little anxiety to be beneficial, perhaps even necessary. At the very least, good for me. Good for productivity, good for the soul. Without anxiety, there is no questioning the quality of the work, no wondering what if it's not worthy, no good engagement with the issues. Without a little anxiety, there's such temptation to fall into complacency, into easy self-importance and self-estimation. Pride goes before a fall; perhaps fear of my failures prevents a fall.

A college freshman sits down to write an English exam. He didn't make it through the book, he barely made it out of bed and in to class. But SparkNotes has featured prominently. The essay prompt: a careful string of elevated diction about

themes and broader implications, human experience, support your claim with evidence from the text. The freshman answer: The triumph of the human spirit!

Have you heard that joke? A kid's in Sunday School. Every week, the teacher asks these questions, and you know the answer—It's always JESUS! Who died for our sins? JESUS! Whose birth do we celebrate at Christmas? JESUS! Who made bread to feed the five thousand? JESUS! JESUS! JESUS! What has four legs and gives milk? Sounds like a cow, but I'm gonna have to go with JESUS! It's kinda the same thing. No matter what the book was about, it's always about the triumph of the human spirit.

But see, that's kind of the opposite of sprezzatura. While one's a studied carelessness, the other's a careful studylessness. And yet they're still interconnected, entwined in this weird thing that it is to make something in the world, to make yourself in the world. Sometimes it's expertly crafted to look casual and other times it's casually affected to look expert. Two sides of the same coin.

P.S. What does it mean if I post this without editing it? Is my human spirit triumphing? Am I being "real?" Or am I just being silly?

Ironically, the blog post in which I specifically addressed the reader ended up getting no comments. This was disappointing because I actually did hope to get some feedback and maybe even an answer. Of course, I did not post without editing, though. The post went through about two and a half drafts, although I did not give it quite the going over that I normally would. The idea of practiced, careless perfection interests and concerns me, and I gave myself a bit of freedom to just

let the writing loose into the world and see what happened. I am interested in how this particular piece compares to my others in people's perceptions and wish I could have generated discussion about it.

The title includes "1" at the end because I had an idea for a way to write the same post in a different way, or even a few different ways. However, after no comments came through, I abandoned this line of thought. Still, I left the number in the title as a subtle reminder that there is always more, and always more points of view.

### *7. Strengths, Weaknesses, and Other Issues*

1. GNH
2. King-led democracy
3. Preservation of environment
4. National dress
5. Dzongkha

1. Was democracy the right choice for Bhutan?
2. Feminism
3. Disconnect between purported values and daily life
4. Applications of Buddhism

1. Colonial mindsets
2. Patronizing Western overseers (the doctor I heard in Ambient)
3. Capitalistic meanness
4. Arrogance
5. No stake

I toyed with the idea of posting only a list for the entire semester but did not publish one until nearly the end. My journal is full of dozens of lists I made, some for this purpose and some as simple organization

tools. The idea of lists interests me because they provide a unique kind of insight into the mind of the author. A list leaves plenty of room for the reader to interpret and, in fact, requires the reader to take up a greater burden of understanding. Authorial intent can be ignored, or, depending on your fancy, focused on as an interpretation of the author herself. It is possibly a strange way to mediate because there is room for error, but at the same time, it is a liberating medium for interpretation. The reader's thoughts matter here, rather than mine.

### *8. Identity Crisis 1*

What am I doing? And how the heck do I do it? I know nothing, about either topic I'm treating. I don't know what I'm doing, but it's sure not questioning or problematizing. I'm finding myself toning down, scaling back on my questions. When I ask, Deki doesn't know, she laughingly and a bit embarrassedly refers me to a tour guide. My friends don't know; they don't think or talk about all of this on a regular basis. Honor is important in this culture. Not knowing can be embarrassing, so I don't put people in that position. It's not even conscious. (Fortunately, tourism equals tour guides, and tour guides know.) But I'm finding a disconnect. I am working with two concepts that are fundamentally different. How on earth do I compare them? I'm finding places not where the worldviews can speak to each other but where they simply don't match up. They collide and they hang there in the air while we hold our breathe and try to comprehend.

This post is a complete addition to this draft, but it is so closely related to *Identity Crisis 2* that I think they are almost the same post in different forms. This is probably not as apparent to readers, however. I wrote this post to make the crisis of the original *Identity Crisis* more salient, to expand the problems the second post was too quick to patch up. Its chaotic style and lack of organization is intentional in order to give a glimpse into some of the anxieties I was facing but was too self-conscious to post. I went through a period of compounding anxiety where worries like these kept me from writing, which then added to my mental block. This is the version of the post that would have been written before the reflective pause. Fortunately, I found my way out of the anxieties and onto somewhat solid ground again.

### 9. *Identity Crisis 2*

The original project subtitle was *The Relationship between Postmodernism and Buddhism*, but by the time the blog was born, it had morphed into *A Postmodern Woman in a Modernizing Land*. I found the relationship to be less two monoliths interacting than just me coming out of one background and immersing myself in another one, less of an actual conversation and more of learning how to even speak, in that gradual, bottom-up way that children learn to talk. Really, I came in with ethnocentric ideas that the age gripping the West would also have effects or at least parallels here. I expected to find contradictions, but not to find apples and oranges, two things operating on such different planes that it was impossible to

compare them. But how can you reconcile postmodernism's breakage with tradition with Bhutan's intense pride and identity in tradition? How can you reconcile postmodernism's move away from modernism and rationality with a country's painstaking journey into modernity and all of its pitfalls? Postmodernism is the thinkspace of the well educated, but Bhutan is still creating its education system, still developing colleges like RTC that mimic a Western style of education.

If I'd written this when the thoughts had first overwhelmed me, this post would have stopped somewhere right around here. By waiting to write, though, I maybe found my way through. There are ways to compare, chinks in the walls. Bhutan is steeped in tradition, it's true. But postmodernism doesn't entirely abandon tradition, instead taking the past, recreating it and blending it with the present. Bhutanese do this too, and it hit me as I thought about what to wear to my thesis defense.

My kira isn't a genuine kira, you see. Bhutan has a national dress policy that requires all governmental employees (who comprise almost all of the white collar jobs) as well as all students to wear the traditional clothing: kira for women and gho for men. Traditionally, kira is a long piece of cloth that covers the entire body, from shoulders to below the ankle. It wraps underneath the armpits and is secured over the shoulder by jeweled clasps and around the waist by a belt. Then, a wonju (inner blouse) and taego (outer jacket) are worn on top, with the wonju's sleeves and collar folding over the taego and showing from the outside. These days, though, many women wear half kiras, which cover only from the waist down. Instead of shoulder clasps, the waist belt does all the work. My kira is especially cheating,

because in addition to only wearing a half kira, I have a combined wonju and taego, where my taego has another fabric sewn around the sleeves and collar to mimic a wonju.

Thinking about my kira, I mentally derided myself for having such an inauthentic outfit, but in reality, it's not just for foreigners. These compromised kiras were developed by Bhutanese and are worn by Bhutanese, a beautiful modification and integration of tradition into the present. Bhutanese wear these kiras, and wear clothing made from Indian printed fabrics rather than Bhutanese woven fabrics, but at the same time, they are also fiercely proud of the old ways. Young people, especially, take great pride in the national dress. The students at RTC, particularly the women, wear beautifully elaborate kiras, showing off a wide variety of patterns and color patterns. They put the full outfit on slowly and with reverence. My roommate, for instance, took about three times longer than my hasty kira donning. High fashion also reflects traditional roots, with intricate and elaborate, handwoven kiras being worth hundreds of thousands of ngultrums and models sporting artistic reinterpretations of the historical styles.

It's not impossible, then, to work with both these concepts. The reality is, I'm dealing with people, not brick walls. Bhutan and the West have had different development paths, but people are the same and they work with the simulacra of their culture in similar ways.

The mental image I held as I thought about this post was two large, unyielding brick walls being held up to each other and asked to converse. At first, this baffled me and I could not make them speak.

However, with time I began to see the chinks in the walls that let the light, the words through. This post was originally an attempt to show my crisis and the way through that I found. However, it ended up being far too composed to be an accurate representation. As the title indicates, these anxieties made me feel that the bottom had dropped out of my project and made me feel like a fraud. With the new post inserted before it, this post now works as a representation of the understandings and answers I began to find, even if I am still a bit of a fraud.

#### *10. A Note: Mediating Kira*

While writing the last post, I had a small inner debate about how to represent the word *kira*. In Dzongkha (Bhutan's national language), there are no morphemes to show plural or singular. Where English adds an -s to the end of the word, Dzongkha keeps the words exactly the same, instead using another word, *tsu*, to indicate plurality when necessary. (Necessary also is relative—times I would find a plural imperative, my Bhutanese friends would not.) Hence, my quandary. There is no English equivalent to *kira*, so I have to use the Dzongkha word. If I were Anglicizing the word, I would write plural *kira* as *kiras*. But when Bhutanese speak in English about multiple of the clothing, they simply say *kira*. My initial instinct was to stay as true to the original as possible, writing *kira* and letting the readers sort out the count discrepancy for themselves. But in mediating one reality, sometimes it is more accurate to use a lie to tell the truth—to relate something not exactly how it

is so that the understanding the reader gets is closer to what I actually perceived. Ultimately, then, I decided to use *kiras* to make the plural/singular distinction clear. It's a tiny thing, but also an interesting example of a larger theme.

I encountered this dilemma near the very beginning of my journaling. Only after working around it for a while did I realize that it was another example of mediation. Figuring out how to recreate my experiences for my readers has been challenging and intriguing and something I could probably continue working on forever.

On another note, I have a bit of an argument with myself about using the idea of truth. When I say *truth*, I do not mean to refer to an objective True way that things are. Rather, I mean to indicate an experience that appears to others the same way it appeared to me. My perception is by definition subjective, but I want to faithfully represent my subjective experience. For this reason, it is sometimes necessary to relate something in a way that seems “untrue” to me, in that when I perceive it, it differs from my original experience, but that would, in my best estimation, seem more “true” to my readers by giving them an experience that more closely resembles my own.

### *11. Chinks in the Wall: Postmodern applications in Bhutanese life*

#### Football Fragmentation

At the World Cup qualifying match against Sri Lanka, Bhutan won against all odds and expectations. Bhutanese people rallied around the team and reveled in

their no-longer-worst-in-the-world status. Bright jerseys displaying the orange and yellow of the flag were everywhere. National pride ran high, so much so that my Bhutanese Government and Politics professor gave frequent admonitions and reminders to the class to make sure to conduct themselves with decorum, and particularly to not throw bottles onto the field, at the next match against China. Apparently, this has been a serious problem in the past, and China is perhaps a nation it's not very good for a small neighbor to anger. It was with great surprise, then, that I attended the match in my Bhutanese colors only to find hundreds of my fellow watchers waving and wearing the colors of both countries! One man even had a large Chinese flag on a pole. He wore a Chinese jersey to wave the Chinese flag, then flipped the shirt over his head to reveal his Bhutanese jersey and wave his orange and yellow streamers! Fans cheered for both sides indiscriminately, causing the other exchange students and me to comment on what would happen if this went on at a game in America. The crowd simply didn't care if it operated as one, if some members in Bhutan's section cheered for China, or even cheered for both. What I had interpreted to be nationalistic fervor in the weeks leading up to the game turned out to simply be excitement for an entertaining spectacle that people could experience differently, not as Bhutanese or Chinese fans, but simply as individuals, fragmenting even their own support.

All of this works with postmodernism. Nationalism is a modern concept, one relying on absolutes and metanarrative. Under postmodernism, individualism and fragmentation are more in focus as decentralization and uncertainty come into play. Even though Bhutan has strong pride in the cultural things that make it unique,

nationalism steps down and fragmentation shows up in the physical makeup of fans at a football game.

This post was originally intended to be one of a series. My journal contains a page of jotted phrases like “transformation of the self,” “multiple cultural ways of being,” “progress questionable,” and “personal expression of religion.” Quite honestly, each of these topics should have been turned into a blog post. However, time pressures interfered and they remain only ideas. All of these ideas, though, are ways that I began to see the chinks in the wall, ways to talk about Buddhism and postmodernism. By this point of the project, however, when I thought about Buddhism and postmodernism, I really was thinking about Bhutan and Buddhism. The two are by no means synonymous, but “to be Bhutanese is to be Buddhist,” as one student expressed it, is not far from the truth. My chinks in the wall are the ways that Bhutanese people express their Buddhism, acting in ways that make sense under a postmodern conception of the world.

### *12. Problems with Problematizing*

While I was in Bhutan, I saw many things that needed to be changed. I saw problems that outraged me, problems that made me appreciate home, problems that reminded me of home, and problems that came to me from home over the internet news. Humans are problematic. For the purposes of this blog, I wrestled with what to do with these problems as I wondered how one problematizes something outside

of her own culture. I almost feel I do not have a right to speak into any problems I saw in Bhutan. I understand them so little, and I don't have social currency. Will my speaking effect change, or will it cause harm by reinforcing a colonial idea of Western saviors or civilizers? Ultimately, I don't think it's my job to criticize. If I problematize in Bhutan, oughtn't I to turn it inward, to where I personally can affect change, in my perceptions and my culture? In this culture, I am transient, I am a visitor. Besides that, the people in Bhutan have a pretty good handle on things anyway.

Bhutan has no problem being on their own. They intentionally kept themselves unengaged with the rest of the world for much of their history, a strategic move that has positively shaped both the past and present of the country by preserving their culture and values. They've defined those values clearly, enumerating them under GNH. They've observed the accomplishments of the West, as well as its pitfalls. From that, they've made a plan to join the West in what it's accomplished and avoid joining in what it's destroyed, all while preserving their own culture, values, and unique offerings to the world. Despite any problems, I'm quite honestly impressed.

Case in point. Government and Politics in Bhutan was an absolutely fascinating class. Hearing the words that are proclaimed on brochures being discussed in class took me right to the heart of the issues, in all their imperfect glory. GNH is attractive to the rest of the world, standing out like a beacon for all of us frustrated with the West's wanton destruction of our natural resources, slowness to care about climate change, and carelessness about the welfare of the people. And

GNH is attractive to Bhutanese, too...but it's got layers. GNH is attractive. Bhutanese are proud of GNH. GNH was the king's idea, and Bhutanese love the king. GNH is great on paper. Off of paper, it sometimes isn't implemented well. Some of the students in my class view GNH as detracting from GDP. They have solid points. In class, the Canadian student and I were frequently called on to represent our respective countries, and we made sure to emphasize the pillars of GNH that spoke to us and to the mistakes our cultures had made. We tried to offer that outside opinion that the Western educated king saw and that might offer balance to these students who saw chiefly their own country's lack. Altogether, I think this was a beautiful thing. Our being in this class and speaking into it offered a diversity of perspectives that enhanced Bhutan's culture and autonomy, rather than overriding it.

But another issue arose out of my classes. Although I talked about it plenty when it was happening, I was hesitant to write about it, for many of the reasons listed above. I didn't want to condemn, or paint the picture too negatively, or come in with all the answers. I'm not sure I'm not doing those things still, but I'm making an genuine attempt to deal with it honestly.

The problem here was that one of my professors, although being extremely well-intentioned, repeatedly made comments and encouraged discussion that disparaged women. This highlighted a disturbing underbelly of the culture, a patriarchal culture that doesn't truly value women as equals or offer them equal opportunities and rights. I began to see it in other places, too, in female classmates who didn't speak up, in the student government run entirely by males, in the

abhorrent practice, thankfully dying out, of night hunting, in the preference for monks over nuns, in the law that only males may inherit the throne. This all came and culminated in a rough period of culture shock, and for a while, everything was colored by it.

The other Western student and I couldn't keep quiet. We talked about it with each other constantly after class. We talked with other students. And then we accidentally started talking about it with administration. I say *accidentally* because we meant to simply have a conversation with an administrator who had done her dissertation on gender discrimination in Bhutan. However, the administration as a whole took our complaint seriously and passed it up the chain until the proper authority talked to the professor. At the time, this was rather encouraging. We wanted there to be change, particularly for the other women in this professor's classes, women who could go on to be the political leaders of the country if they weren't squashed down during college. I hope that the issue being talked about helped that happen. But, the professor, although he talked to us respectfully afterwards and tempered his classroom conversations, didn't learn the lesson, I'm afraid. He did change, a little bit, but I don't think he understood why we were offended or how he was being unjust. He continued to buy into the paradigm of patriarchy, like much of the rest of the country. And so the discouragement lingers.

But please, don't stop here. I'm afraid that you won't see the whole picture, that I'll tell you what frustrated me and you'll get stuck there, you won't come with me to the end where there's hope and where there's perspective. This is a problem and it's ugly, but don't only see this ugliness and not see the beauty of the culture as

a whole, or the beauty of the country in its details. I'm afraid you will judge them while you let yourself off the hook. There is much to be on the hook for in our culture.

Indeed, the people—the women—of Bhutan are dealing with their problems. I attended a lecture given by Dr. Tashi Zangmo, the founder of the Bhutan Nun's Foundation. After being educated in the West, she returned to Bhutan, determined to make a difference in her country. Her dream was education reform, particularly in regards to girls' access to education. She took her plans to the higher ups and determinedly pursued them. Along the way, though, the education minister showed her the progress that was already being made and suggested that there may be another avenue where she could better use her zeal. From this, she turned to Bhutanese nuns. Nuns are unfortunately less often called upon than monks and therefore receive less funding and donations. Young nuns struggle, as they are often from poor families, and nunneries do not have enough to properly feed, clothe, and educate them. The Bhutan Nuns Foundation works to rectify this. However, not only do they work with nuns, but, according to their mission statement, "The Bhutan Nuns Foundation (BNF) provides a high leverage means of empowering and educating Bhutanese women. It aims to improve living conditions and economic vitality of rural villages, and preserving Bhutan's strong, sustainable culture and spiritual heritage, as it faces rapid economic development." The foundation is a beautiful inspiration of how gender equality should be fought for, reaching out to girls, women, and the societies that they live in, all while working in a deeply cultural medium. It is something no Westerner could ever have done. Under the

patronage of the queen mother, it is effecting real change, gaining honor and respect, practically meeting needs, and gradually changing paradigms.

It's a beautifully Bhutanese solution to a problem. At the same time, it's also something I could help with. During my program's service project day, I joined in one of their projects, a Training Centre being built for nuns. Alongside many other women and a contingent of school kids, I helped pound mud to make traditional houses for nuns at the center to stay in. It was hard physical labor, but precisely the sort of thing I wanted to do and that was appropriate for me to do: helping and not hurting, playing a supporting role, and a minor one, at that, recognizing problems, speaking to and about them, getting out of the way of the problem-solvers, and then pitching in in whatever ways they need.

Every country has its flaws, and any modernizing country has a few typical challenges. I look and see much that can change at the same time that I am afraid of being too close to colonial interference or a white-savior complex. And that's healthy. Bhutan does not need me. Women in Bhutan, young as well as old, are taking up the mantle and wearing it beautifully.

Appearing last in the revision, this was also the last post I wrote. It turned out to be long, as I processed more issues than I set out to. The feminist struggle with the professor was draining and caused a lot of discouragement at the time. I did not expect to write about it because I was afraid of representing it unfairly or of the professor or students at RTC reading it and being offended. As I wrote this first draft, though, it all came tumbling out, turning out to be the hinge other

thoughts revolved around. I think I have dealt with it well, giving it both the right weight of outrage and hope. The post turned out to be a fitting farewell to the project, as I affirmed that despite my struggles with representing this culture, its assets, and drawbacks, Bhutan continues to create itself and carry itself into whatever modern or postmodern future it cares to create.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, as I look at my understanding of Bhutan's role in what might be called a postmodern world, I am encouraged. As I sought to find the overlap between Buddhism and postmodernism, I went through stages of thinking they had none, then seeing places of interaction, and finally recognizing both paradigms at work concurrently in the world. On a theoretical level, there are many areas of overlap between the two: a challenge to and problematization of rationality, the appearance of reality as an illusion, the performative nature of thoughts, and liberation from representational thinking. However, in the practice of Buddhism in Bhutan, none of these were the interactions I noticed. Rather than the high-minded and theoretical sides of both Buddhism and postmodernism, I saw the effects of those paradigms at play in daily life. People often do not know the reasons they do what they do, which is part of why problematizing is crucial. However, even without an intentional awareness, the ideas that define a generation or age shape our collective consciousness and the ways we define ourselves. In Bhutan, I saw Buddhism being defined and redefined, understood and reunderstood according to

many of the tenets of postmodernism—the decenteredness of self, the fragmentation of identity, the recreation of the past in the present, the problematization of constructs. At the same time, I saw a distinct absence of these things. Identity and reality are both multifaceted; the Bhutans I saw and Buddhisms I saw, and even the postmodernisms I see, are many.