Project on the Study of Harmonious Multicultural Coexistence in Bhutan

Miyamoto Hisayoshi

Bhutan, an Asian country located between India and China, is well known to us in Japan because of the King and the Queen of Bhutan’s visit last year, and because of the famous phrase ‘Gross National Happiness’ (GNH). However, as can be imagined from Bhutan’s sobriquet, ‘the last unexplored region’, much of the country’s actual condition still remains unknown. This is partly because Bhutan once restricted foreign visitors and partly because only recently has public transportation been developed. Some even argue that the famous phrase GNH does not reflect the reality of Bhutanese life.

Taking this into consideration, we at the 3rd Unit of the International Research Center for Philosophy (IRCP) at Toyo University, which assists in the study of the idea of a harmonious coexistence in a multicultural society, decided to hold a study meeting in order to investigate the nature of religion in Bhutan and as well as the actual state of this multiracial, multi-religious society. There were seven participants: Miyamoto Hisayoshi, IRCP Researcher; Nagai Shin, IRCP Researcher; Hashimoto Taigen, IRCP Researcher; Saito Akira, IRCP Visiting Researcher (Professor at the Graduate School of the University of Tokyo); Inoue Tadao, IRCP Visiting Researcher (Professor at the Japanese Red Cross Akita College of Nursing); Horiuchi Toshio, IRCP Research Associate; and Misawa Yuji, IRCP Project Research Assistant. Most of the participants specialize in Indian thought, Buddhism, or the philosophy of coexistence.

In advance of our field work, we organized two sessions with the aim of learning something of Bhutan from specialists in the cultural anthropology of the country. We were hoping to hear about Bhutan from a perspective different from that of Buddhist Studies or Religious Studies.

The first study group session was held on February 20, 2012, with a presentation by Ms. Wakita Michiko (Keio University), entitled “Outland Tourism – Modernization of Bhutan and the Prospects for the Identity of the Semi-Nomadic Brokpas.” In Sakteng and Merak, two valleys located in the mountainous border region between eastern Bhutan and India, there lives a minority ethnic group called Brokpa. Visits by foreigners to the region had been restricted for a long time; however, those restrictions were removed and tourism to the area started in September 2010. By focusing on the rapid development of tourism in the region, Wakita pointed out that while the increase in tourists is expected because of the opening of domestic air routes to eastern Bhutan scheduled for this year and the improvement in the infrastructure, the inevitable tension between tradition and modernity is growing in this region as well. In the conclusion to this presentation, Ms. Wakita Michiko said that the future of the Brokpas deserves attention, especially with regard to whether the people move to reawaken their culture or to assimilate into the general population of Bhutan and whether the ethnic elite of the Brokpas that have acquired an education would open new avenues.

For the second study group session, we invited Dr. Miyamoto Mari, Research Fellow at Minpaku Contemporary India Area Studies, National Museum of Ethnology, to give a research presentation entitled “Bhutan, Making a
Nation as a Happy Society: the Process of Making the National Attribution and Demarcating the National Boundary.” Dr. Miyamoto examined how the administrators of Bhutan, who have the difficult job of governing a nation lying between the two large countries of China and India, have built up the image of Bhutan so that it might survive as a sovereign entity. To explain this, she divided the process into three periods of time. The first period in developing the national image was from the 1950’s to 60’s, during which a nationality law was promulgated for the first time to subsume farmers and ranchers settled in the territory almost without distinction. The second period was the 1970’s, during which domestic intermarriage was encouraged and the sharing of national language and history was intended to homogenize people through blood and culture. From the 1980’s to 1990’s, which was the third period, it was attempted to substantiate such an “ideal figure of Bhutanese” and, at the same time, to identify clearly and exclude “others.” It turned out to be the period of excluding others: “Nepalese inhabitants” were then forced to become refugees in the early 1990’s. This entailed an international criticism of the Bhutanese government.

Bhutan, however, started to show its commitment to the protection of the natural environment from this period. The government constructed the image of the Bhutanese who protect and nurture the “nature” on the basis of the Buddhist idea that calls for “compassion on all living creatures.” They presented this image externally while responding to the global trend of environmentalism at the time and announced to slow down the speed of development. Such a self-representation was widely accepted by Western countries; the Bhutan’s nature reserves kept expanding with diverse support by them. Under a variety of information control and the policy to restrain development, Bhutanese people came to be represented as obedient people with a high sense of happiness who control their desire and “know they have enough.” However such a self-portrait of Bhutanese people, of course, does not necessarily represent all citizens. In the latter half of the talk, on the basis of specific instances observed in field work, the speaker described how a variety of attributes and values that constitute the image of “Bhutanese” as a “good Buddhist” who is “environment friendly” and “abstemious” sometimes contradict and conflict with each other. She thus contemplated on the multilayered nature of the portrait of the nation in their everyday life and plurality of the process through which the image is translated.

Based on the above two study sessions, the 3rd Unit of the IRCP held a “Study Meeting on Harmonious Multicultural Coexistence in Bhutan” from August 23 to 30, including “Bhutanese Buddhism in Modern Society,” “The Contribution of Buddhism to Gross National Happiness,” and “The Role of Buddhism in Asia” as subjects of research. Participants on the Japanese side also gave talks.

At the study meeting conducted in English for two days, we had the Reverends Lopen Gembo Dorji and Lopen Sonam Bomden from Trashichhoe Dzong (a temple which is the king’s office and head temple of Bhutanese Buddhism led by the Drukpa Kagyu school.) The Reverend Lopen Gembo Dorji, the Secretary General of the Central Monk Body of Bhutan, gave a talk on the historical background of Bhutan Buddhism. He explained first that, under the tradition of mahamudra or great seal, to which he belongs, samatha and vipassana were emphasized, and then everyone at the meeting practiced susokukan, which is a meditation method focused on breathing.

Prof. Miyamoto first explained the concept of multicultural coexistence, which was the focus of this study meeting. Prof. Saito then made a presentation entitled “Religion and Peace: Focusing on Buddhism.” Dr. Horiuchi then presented a paper entitled “Mind–only in Asanga’s Mahayana-samgraha.” Prof. Hashimoto, Nagai, and Inoue gave talks and took questions concerning the topics of harmonious coexistence in a multiethnic society, Buddhism and phenomenology, and humanity and harmonious coexistence, respectively. Project Research Assistant Misawa also gave a talk describing the high interest concerning Bhutan in Japan.

Another major objective of this study project in Bhutan was a field survey for examining the actual state of Bhutan, which has recently drawn attention as “a country of happiness,” and obtaining knowledge for “harmonious coexistence” of multiple cultures and religions. The visit and survey were limited to three places in western Bhutan and conducted in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, Punakha, the old capital, and Paro, the only place in Bhutan that
has an airport. Considerable results were obtained by visiting many lhakhang (temples), dzong (literally means "fortress" but which are now used as governmental offices and temples), nunneries, and national monk schools during the period of survey. Descriptions of field work conducted in Bhutan, where the national religion is Tibetan Buddhism, also inspired considerations of various subjects, such as the "coexistence of the nation and religion" and "religion and happiness."