In the late 1960s, during a Taktsang monastery meditation retreat in Bhutan, Naropa’s founder, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, had a vision to bring Buddhism to America. Over the years, the connection between Naropa and Bhutan has strengthened. For more than a decade, Bhutanese monks have studied in Naropa’s Religious Studies programs. In fall 2008, Dasho Pema Thinley, the Honorable Vice Chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB), visited Naropa. A collaboration began between Naropa faculty and RUB, which serves as the umbrella university for Bhutanese public higher education, to design a contemplative psychotherapy program and a teacher training program in mindfulness-awareness practices.

A small country located in southern Asia between China and India, Bhutan has frequently made headlines for its emphasis on Gross National Happiness. Its citizens are reportedly some of the happiest people in the world. In 1999, the Bhutanese government lifted a ban on television and the Internet. After being insulated for centuries from the rest of the world, the Bhutanese have suddenly been inundated with consumer culture. Material desires and addictions to cigarettes, drugs and alcohol have taken hold. Bhutanese leaders are particularly concerned about their country’s youth.

Dasho Pema's vision is to bring the wisdom and methods of the Buddhist tradition into the training of school counselors and to develop a master’s program in contemplative psychotherapy based on Naropa University’s model. Naropa Contemplative Psychotherapy associate professor MacAndrew Jack and Contemplative Psychology professor Jane Carpenter spent their sabbaticals last year working to help achieve that vision. Jack worked in Bhutan for five weeks in collaboration with Bhutanese lecturers to bring contemplative psychotherapy into the design of a Postgraduate Diploma in School Counseling (PGDSC), which will be the first counseling program offered within the country. The vision is for the PGDSC to be the first year of a master’s degree in contemplative psychotherapy.

Jack says he took special care to consider the culture during curriculum development. He first met for two weeks with teachers, the ministry of culture and others on a needs assessment. Then he worked for three weeks with five Bhutanese faculty trained in counseling. “Beginning each day with sitting practice, we would spend eight hours around the table discussing contemplative practice, curriculum and what aspects of contemplative psychotherapy—as it has developed in the Western culture—were appropriate to include,” Jack says.

The curriculum design includes mindfulness, meditation and a contemplative Buddhist approach. One unique aspect is a weeklong meditation retreat for teachers built into the program as an innovation for the Bhutanese. The curriculum will undergo a validation process before implementation.

In the meantime, Jack was appointed as RUB ambassador to Naropa. “It means I have some sense of responsibility and contribution to seeing this collaboration move forward,” Jack says. “This is a service opportunity for Naropa to meet the needs of the world and a great opportunity to demonstrate for the world what Naropa has been doing for the last thirty years.” Carpenter arrived in Bhutan in July 2009 and worked for five months further developing the PGDSC, fleshing out the course content, designing the Contemplative Psychology Retreat Curriculum and practice methods. She visited RENEW, an NGO to address domestic and woman’s issues, the Narcotics Division, Youth Development and a number of schools to...
speak to counselors directly on what the culture is facing in the midst of such rapid societal change. A visiting lecturer at the Paro College of Education and Samste College of Education, she trained teachers and counselors in Naropa’s contemplative psychology and mindfulness theory and practices.

Carpenter has been invited back to launch the PGDSC program with Bhutanese counselors and lead the Mindfulness Retreat in January 2011 upon program validation. She continues to work on course design in mindfulness education and collaboration with RUB faculty in support of the overall vision.

She says that although the people there are Buddhists with tremendous devotion, training in mindfulness was not available to lay people until recently. “Mindfulness is entering the culture through such great teachers as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. His Deer Park Center in Thimphu offers meditation weekly under the guidance of one of Rinpoche’s students, Lama Shenpen Zangpo. Historically, the mindfulness practices themselves have been part of the monastic body,” Carpenter says.

Carpenter was also invited to attend a workshop in Bhutan designed to help overhaul the Bhutanese educational system. Called “Educating for Gross National Happiness,” the conference was held Dec. 7–12, 2009, in the capital city of Thimphu. Participants included twenty-four international delegates and one hundred twenty observers from eighteen countries and twenty-four Bhutanese educational and other leaders from every province. Naropa adjunct faculty member Valerie Lorig also attended. Richard Brown, Contemplative Education associate professor, and Judith Simmer-Brown, Religious Studies professor, were conference delegates. The conference focused on Bhutan’s hopes to implement a new educational policy that will transform the nation and will be responsive to both modern influences and traditional culture.

“Meeting western sensibilities with the teachings of meditation and contemplative education is what we have been doing for more than thirty-five years at Naropa,” says Simmer-Brown, author of *Dakini’s Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism.* “There is an acknowledgment that now this kind of education, this way of training the mind, is extremely valuable to Bhutan. Naropa stands to have its leadership in contemplative education become more recognized on the world stage through this collaboration with Bhutan.”

Simmer-Brown led the assembly in meditation instruction and practice each day. She posted daily conference updates on her blog (educating4gnh.blogspot.com). On the first evening she wrote, “The participants are the really deep thought leaders in education, each of them at the hub of powerful experiments in learning that is in keeping with what we are doing at Naropa, and they represent such diversity of culture and community. It makes me feel that we are part of a movement that can actually affect the world at a time of such hopelessness, fear and alienation from the roots of harmonious human culture.”

Her observations noted much more than what occurred inside the conference walls. Simmer-Brown discussed changes in the culture from the “press of consumerism” and population growth in the capital. She sympathized with educators’ frustrations with the country’s rigorous student examination system. In the equivalent of middle school, students are given a test based on rote memorization that prevents all but the best students from completing high school. And there aren’t many options for jobs or job training for those who fail.

Since the workshop, Simmer-Brown and Carpenter wrote a handbook on mindfulness for the kingdom’s schools. In February, the booklet was used in workshops for principals, and later teachers will use it. The opening section points out that in addition to its health and well-being results, mindfulness meditation has been shown to aid student academic performance, teacher and principal effectiveness and community awareness in the educational process.

Richard Brown says that most of the conference delegates knew of Naropa and recognized the university as the worldwide leader in contemplative education. “Contemplative education is cropping up in more places, but its depth and breadth at Naropa is unequalled,” says Brown.—Brenda Gillen

RUB students performing songs of gratitude to faculty on national “Teacher’s Day.”

National “Traditional Bow” Archery Finals in Thimphu.