

An account of a journey across valleys and mountains to provide training to people on collection of medicinal plants

... towards sustainability of traditional medical services in Bhutan

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Ever since the establishment of traditional medicine (TM) services in the country in 1967, most of the high altitude medicinal raw materials have been collected from Lingshi. It is important to rotate the collection sites at certain intervals in order to enable the natural resources to regenerate. A survey on alternate sourcing conducted at Bumthang in 2006 revealed that around 18 medicinal plants could be collected. To provide training on sustainable collection and discuss on the logistics for transportation of medicinal plants, a team visited the high altitude areas of Bumthang.

The last few days before the departure were filled with excitement and nervousness, especially as the journey would involve long walks across high mountain areas where stamina and body fitness would be put on test. Food supplies and logistics were organized. It was 10th of October 2007. I woke up early and checked my luggage for all important things - some medicines, a knife, a sleeping bag, a mat, clothes, a torch, a plate, a mug, etc. I prayed for a safe journey and said goodbye to my family. The other members of the team Drungtsho Gempo Dorji, Ugyen, Jamyang Loday and Tshewang Rinzin joined and the long journey began from Thimphu at 7.30 AM.

As we traveled along the East-West national highway cross Dochula, Pelela and Yotongla passes we were excited thinking about the days ahead. At Nobding we stopped to buy few balls of fresh cheese, pieces of cucumbers and fruits. Further up we had our lunch in a Hotel, supposed to be Jamyang's favorite probably because of the charming lady at the counter and the fairly good food served. Just below Pelela we saw a group of white monkeys resting on a tree and we were happy that our journey would be safe. Coming across a white monkey during travel is considered to be a fortunate sign; wishes and dreams will be fulfilled. We traveled across open landscapes and dense forests with breathtaking views of the snow-clad mountains in the far background.

As we stopped for a while at a point opposite the Trongsa Dzong, an Alto Car passed by and there was an old school friend traveling to the East. Another car arrived and inside was a friend who was going to Trashigang for some work. Bhutan is so small and everyone knows everybody. Sometimes we say that there are no secrets in Bhutan. There was no time to chat of old school days and we moved on crossing Yotongla pass and passing through the beautiful valleys of Getsa and Chumey. When we arrived at Bumthang Hospital, Drungtsho Tshering Peldon was waiting for us with tea and snacks. It is customary to receive friends and authorities with tea, wine and snacks as a gesture of goodwill and welcome. We were invited for dinner by Drungtsho Gampo's brother, a middle-aged, slightly bald modest man in red robes. His humility and hospitality made us feel at home. After dinner we spent our first night together in the Hospital. There was unity from the very first day.

Next morning after last shopping in Chamkhar town our journey to Napsephel began. Just above Kurje we were joined by Ranger Sangay Penjor, our last team member. We traveled towards Thangbi. Just before reaching Thangbi, the Bus slipped from a muddy area and nearly went off the road. Our porters Tshogpa Tashi and Ap Sangay Tenzin were waiting for us with eight horses. Leaving behind Bus Driver Tempa, our journey continued on foot along the feeder road among the pine forests through Goleng, Kharsa, Dathrong, Sangsangma, Zhabjethang and finally reached Nabsephel, Tshogpa's village. At Kharsa we drank mango juice, our lunch for the day. At Napsephel we found *Herpatospermum pedunculatum*, one of the most difficult-to-get medicinal plants, growing along the fence.

We spent that night at Tshogpa's house. We were served with butter tea and corn flakes, followed by *ara*, locally brewed wine. After having dinner beside the warm Bukhari we slept under multiple layers of warm Chinese woolen blankets. Our porter Sangay Tenzin left us after murmuring few unclear goodnight words. He was already under the effect of alcohol which I could judge by the sleepy smile on his face and the efforts he was making to keep himself in upright position. "I hope he will not be like the porter at Lingshi", I thought to myself. Once in one of my trips to Lingshi, we had a porter who was totally drunk and remained far behind us. He arrived at the camp only at 5 o'clock the next morning.

Tshogpa and his wife woke up early next morning to prepare breakfast. Their two children dressed themselves to go to school. Mother packed 2-3 pieces of *puri* each for their lunch while the father churned milk in a long cylindrical wooden container. I remembered my old school days when I used to wake up early unexcitedly and walk to school for more than an hour along the foot path among bushes ridden with morning dew drops. By the time I arrived at school I used to be fully drenched. However, I was lucky as compared to many others of my age as others had to walk more than 3 hours to school and then the same distance back home, with hardly anything in their stomachs.

After greeting us Ap Sangay went to look for his missing horses. As we were about to move Tshogpa's wife offered *ara*. Initially I refused the offer but not being able to resist to her sincere offering, I drank a cup. In the rural areas people drink *ara* starting from the early hours of the day. In particular, in the East, major portion of the family income is spent on *ara*. People say it is a soothing balm to the aching body of a farmer but many have lost their lives to alcohol.

We walked along the river side along the open grasslands. When we arrived at Khagtang we were greeted by the military people with broad smiles. They offered us apples and in return we gave them some chocolates. Our path after Khagtang was along the same river in the bamboo forests till Praktengphok. While Tshewang and Ranger Sangay walked fast the rest four of us walked slowly but steadily. We talked about our youth days. Jamyang shared how successfully he flirted with young girls in the past.

We waited in the Pisa Phok cave for porters. We were all hungry and thirsty. It was our second day without lunch but we were yet to get used to the new way of life. We made fire and waited but the porters never arrived. Without much in our bags we shared some *ara* and corn flakes to energize ourselves. Finally after a long wait porters arrived and we continued our journey. We

camped at Prakteng phok cave. After early dinner we fell fast asleep being tired of the long walk. The quietness of the place was broken only by the gushing sound of the river below us.

The next morning Tshogpa Tashi and Ap Sangay woke up early to serve us breakfast. We slowly got out of our cozy blankets. After breakfast, leaving the porters behind, we walked. As we were crossing the bridge at Ruiphu Phok I saw Drungtsho and Jamyang both taking off their caps. When I asked them out of curiosity they said that it was in respect to the mother goddess of the water, *Aum Tshomen Gyalmo*. In Bhutan, it is a normal practice for people to respect the local deities especially while crossing a pass or a lake. People offer wine, stones, leaves and twigs as they cross to gratify and pray the local deities for a safe journey. From this point the uphill climb started. Step by step we moved up. We talked on various topics. That day it was about Bill Gates and the social works he did through his charity foundations. We discussed as to how the lives of many poor families in Bhutan could be improved if well-to-do people donated money.

The path took us higher and higher up with countless little curves. The higher we looked up, the higher the top of the mountain seemed before us. Far below we could see the light blue river meandering like a snake. The sun was by then out from the clouds. It showed its face off and on and we could feel the heat on our backs each time it showed its face. I was alone occasionally stopping to enjoy the beauty of nature. Ugyen remained intentionally behind; perhaps he was enjoying being alone too. Drungtsho and Jamyang remained little behind. The bells of the horses were yet to be heard. The roaring sound of the river behind us faded slowly as we climbed further up. The desire of reaching the top of the mountain became stronger and stronger. I was thirsty and remembered the soft drink which was distributed at the camp. Soon porters joined us and we quenched our thirst with slices of cucumber and soft drinks.

Finally we arrived at the *laptsa* and screamed loud with joy, “La gyal lo.” Then we moved along the mountain slope and reached Thaga where our friends were waiting with hot tea and noodles. Ap Sangay had gone to inform the people at Khangthang of our arrival. After some rest, being energized by the refreshments, we started again. We discussed on the successes and failures of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAP) Programme. We arrived at Khangdang by early afternoon. We were warmly welcomed by our host, a thin tall young man with rosy cheeks in an *ada mathra* gho. We got into his house and found that there was a *Lochoe* going on. *Lochoe* is a religious ceremony performed annually for the peace, prosperity and wellbeing of the family. We were served with tea and snacks followed by some *sinchang*, a locally brewed beer. The priest informed us that they nearly stopped the ceremony when they were told by Ap Sangay that all men should leave the area to enable us to provide training to women. They were relieved when told that it was a joke. Being little concerned and uneasy of giving burden to the host, Ranger, Tshewang and I decided to sleep outside and pitched our tent. It took three of us nearly half an hour to pitch an oval-shaped tent with distorted ends and missing hooks. We were served dinner, a plate of rice each with nearly half kilogram butter on it along with potato curry and curd. The host lady, mother of the young man who welcomed us, was a middle aged woman with jumbled hairs. Speaking in fluent Bumthapkha, Jamyang led the talk on the medicinal plants. He mentioned the local names while Ranger showed pictures from his collection file. They recognized some of the plants but many were new to them. It was getting colder and we moved into our tent and fell asleep in the darkness.

Next morning I was woken up by the noise of a young Yak. I thought that there was pig around but later realized that it was a Yak. It was 5.45 AM and I could hear other friends washing their faces. But I continued to sleep taking advantage of being inside a tent. Our porters had prepared the tea and breakfast. After dressing ourselves in neat *ghos* we looked for the training materials and walked around to familiarize ourselves with the surroundings as well as enjoy the beautiful scenery of snow-clad mountains around.

By 9.30 AM our training participants were seated on the wooden planks laid on the ground in front of the house. Tea was served and training started with an introduction. The training covered lectures and discussions on various topics such as policy of TM, future plans, constraints and challenges faced in collection, sustainability of natural resources, identification and collection, etc. Participants comprising of all age groups were excited to listen to our lectures. At noon rice with pork and beef was served to the participants. We then discussed on the logistics and drying unit construction at Tshampa. In the evening we made a bonfire and enjoyed partying till late night.

The following day we thanked our host lady for her generosity and warm hospitality. We walked across the gentle slope of grasslands between the sparsely populated stout juniper trees. Then we climbed step by step to reach Luktshe Goenpa pass. Three friends remained behind as Jamyang could not walk. I waited for them while the porters continued the journey. As the friends arrived wine was offered to the local deities. Few *ladar*, mountain prayer flags were hung horizontally on the prayer flags. We descended and arrived at Khrinser and decided to camp there as porters said that our next camp was quite far. We had early dinner and slept in the small stone walled temporary shed.

The next day we crossed hills after hills across open grasslands dotted with patches of dwarf rhododendron bushes but never reached our next camp. All along the open grasslands there were yaks grazing peacefully, least bothered of happenings around them. Burnt rhododendron plants were lying scattered along the slopes like broken bones of animals left by scavengers. It was told that the yak herders had a practice of burning forests at some intervals in order to promote growth of grass. I felt sorry to see wide areas of forest destroyed by such practices but it was also comforting to see some fresh plants growing. However, it would take decades for plants to reach a certain level of height and maturity due to the harsh climatic conditions. From a point called Jago we descended and arrived at our camp at around by afternoon. Our camp was a square shaped stone shed which belonged to our Tshogpa. It was raining and water was leaking from between the broken planks of the roof. We made some adjustments to stop the leakage. There was no door and we arranged with a carpet. The floor was carpeted with fresh juniper branches. We were tired and slept soon after dinner.

The following day we woke up early. The morning sun was shining bright and the dew drops on the trees were evaporating slowly. It was still cold outside and we sat around fire. Participants who were Yak herders camped at the base of the mountain started to arrive one by one, all greeting us with broad smiles on their rosy cheeks. All 28 participants were excited about the training; perhaps this was the first of its kind organized in such a remote area. I began to break the ice with the introduction of the team. Then Drungtsho started his lecture with the historical background on the existence of life and medicinal plants on earth, from the *gso-ba rig-pa* point

of view. Some were busy talking with their friends but there was one group of elderly men in front of us who listened very attentively, word by word, like devotees listening to a religious speech of a Lama. Many issues ranging from the collection of plants, building drying house, transportation and logistics etc. were discussed. The idea of constructing a drying center in the area was floated. Concerns were expressed that the horses engaged in transportation would consume the grass in the pasture leaving little for their yaks; measures to prevent such problems should be put in place. Many felt that the drying unit would benefit the community. People expressed their interest in collection as the work was for the delivery of essential medical services to the people.

At the end of the lectures, some questions were asked to check if the participants understood. “Please tell from which places you will collect the medicinal plants – clean environment, not too wet, not too dry, not near the road and away from polluted area”? A half drunken middle-aged man murmured in a shaky voice, “I will collect from the places where medicinal plants will be growing”. All of us burst into laughter. The night was passed singing and dancing around fire with the participants and military personnel.

After a day of rest, our journey continued towards Tolela pass, “Hungry Mountain”, aptly named considering the fatiguing climb. We continued to walk gradually and arrived at a camp beside the Tshoichong Dengtsho Lake. Towards evening there was little snow fall and it was chilly cold. We sat around the fire inside the shed and chatted. Dinner was served and we immersed ourselves in our sleeping bags.

We were woken up by porters early next morning. The path took us first along the lake and then uphill towards the mountain. At the pass prayer flags were raised to appease the deities and bring long life and fortune. There were two foot paths, one leading downhill and the other towards the right side along the mountain slope. Both would take us to Dhur Tshachu but the right one was supposedly the shorter one. We followed the shorter one. There was a steep uphill climb along the cliff after which we arrived at the other side. Two blue lakes could be seen at the base of the mountain. Along the slope were dry *Meconopsis species* and *Gentiana urnula* scattered here and there. The area was rocky and dry without any vegetation, truly depicting the harness of nature. We ascended towards the North and arrived at another lake from where we walked further uphill to cross the Chajin La at noon.

We enjoyed listening to the live telephonic conservation programme of BBS. The guest was a singer of the hit song of 2006 “A-la-la Ngyi-sem”. We could hear people from all parts of the country calling and enjoying the talk with the guest. Moving downwards we arrived at flat grassland where we had tea and refreshments. Then there was a short climb uphill after which we made a sharp move downwards. We had to cross a huge rock hanging on the southern slope of the mountain. Ugyen and I were first to cross the narrow path. My heart beat increased and I walked slowly. One small wrong move would result in a fatal 150 meters fall. Looking back I could see other friends descending the slope. It was a tense moment and I found the same worrying expression on Ugyen’s face. Down below at the bottom of the rock we could see a shelter. I wished I could reach there soon. We made short steps carefully, trying to hold our breaths between each step. Above us there were chains of rocks from where, at any moment, a piece could fall, probably hitting us. Worried of our friends and the safety of the horses we

waited there. Between nervousness and fear I tried to click pictures while our friends were crossing the cliff. Soon Ugyen was busy clicking his camera. Up above, we could see our friends like vultures perched on the cliff. Our porters and friends unloaded the horses one after another and shifted loads across the narrow path along the cliff to the other side. Then horses were led one by one and finally all were at a safer place. Soon horses were loaded and we moved on to reach our camp for the night. We were relieved.

Our camp was a temporary shelter located about 250 meters from the base of the cliff. The stones were staked improperly with many holes here and there. The surrounding area was filled with dry *Aconitum* plants. After unloading the horses, porters went to get some fresh juniper leaves for the carpet. Tshewang and I went to collect some firewood on the other side of the stream while other friends fetched water. Tea was ready within minutes and another night in darkness began to unfold. We felt ourselves completely isolated from the rest of the world. Radio was our only source of news and entertainment.

The next day all around the area it was carpeted with snow. It started to snow from the early hours of the day and was still continuing; small amounts of snow were falling from the sky like pieces of cotton. We had breakfast and we finally walked down to the hot springs located at the base of the mountain. We were excited and immediately changed our dresses to have a glimpse of the hot springs of which we heard and talked a lot.

Dhur *Tshachu* one of the famous hot springs in Bhutan. *Tshachus* are considered holy and believed to be blessed by great saints and lamas. They have many curative benefits for diseases such as arthritis, diabetes, sleep problems, etc. This is true as they contain many dissolved minerals and gases in them.

The Dhur *Tshachu* is comprised of few tubs of hot springs - Guru Tshachu, named after Guru Rinpoche, who is believed to have blessed the area (four tubs located on a raised platform) towards upstream, and four tubs, two on each bank of the river, downstream. About 500m away from this place was the Khandom Tshachu or the "hot spring of the Angels". The temperatures of the hot springs varied between 38 and 52 Degrees Celsius.

We did not conduct the training as there were no participants. We spent another two days relaxing by soaking in the hot springs. As per traditional beliefs anyone bathing in the hot springs should do so for odd number of days. It should be three, five or seven days. We could afford only three days, the minimum, including the arrival day. In a day we bathed three times, one before breakfast, and one before and after lunch. We had heavy fatty food. It is said that one should take nutritious food while soaking in the hot springs. Some sort of lethargy is usually felt, probably due to increased metabolism. In the evening after dinner, we listened to the national news from BBS radio. We enjoyed each and every moment. We discussed on a variety of issues, from political to social and family matters.

On the third day we started our journey to Jakar. It was drizzling. After half an hour climb uphill we reached at a cow herd camp where we bought some *chogo*, dried cheese to take home as gifts. We gradually walked in the rhododendron and juniper forests. We climbed higher and higher. After a final one hour climb we crossed Goktongla. Then we walked downwards and arrived at

flat open place near Julela Lake. There were dried *Meconopsis (upel serpo)* plants along the banks of the lake. I threw a stone trying to make a wild guess of the width of the lake. Tshewang warned me saying that the lake might cause us harm. It is a normal belief in Bhutan that any disturbance to a lake could lead to such consequences. Lakes and mountains are believed to be the home of the local deities and therefore considered sacred. A few years back a group of seven boys who had gone for a picnic near Thimphu lost their way after they reportedly threw stones to a Lake. It was a tragedy; they lost the way and some of the boys never came back. Drungtsho said that many years back someone one drowned while trying to cross the lack. A horse head came out from the centre of the lake and dragged the person into the lake and he never came back. We all nodded in half belief and surprise. There are many stories of this kind narrated from generations to generations but whether such stories are true or not is neither questioned nor researched by any.

After refreshments we climbed up to cross the Julela pass and then walked downhill alongside another lake to finally arrive at an open place called Domjen. We passed the night in a shelter that was large enough to accommodate us but was filled with horse dung and open on all sides. The roof was so ruined that we could even see the moon light through the holes. We were worried of rain and snow. Juniper leaves were spread on the floor and fire was made. After dinner we chatted. Drungtsho said that he saw the footprint of a *mirgola*, a smaller type of Yeti, at the Julela pass. Later we understood that Tshewang and Ranger had made foot prints in the snow along the way. Someone mentioned of having a piece of finger bone supposedly of a Yeti. Ugyen and I encouraged sending a sample outside country for DNA testing. If found true, it would be like digging a gold mine given that the world is hungry to know more about Yeti. It was cold and we covered ourselves with whatever clothes we had. There was no rain or snow. The night was cold and tranquil except for the sound of stream falling from the mountain above.

I had a couple of interesting dreams about office for the last few nights. That night Drug Regulatory Authority was on an inspection visit to our factory and many negative observations were made. As I was dreaming, I was shouting at Dechog Wangdi, one of the staff, for not cleaning the production areas. I disturbed my friends. Someone coughed at the other corner. Jamyang was snoring as usual like a lion trying to defend a kill. It would be difficult to fall asleep beside him but thanks to the tiredness, usually we fell asleep without problems. Tshogpa woke up early and served bed tea. Soon we all woke up and had the remaining porridge as breakfast. After breakfast Tshewang and Ranger left early to reach Jakar and we followed an hour later. The path took us down along the valley. As we moved along, something caught the attention of my searching eyes; a small dry juniper trunk had a big spherical ball of wood attached to it. Could it be the highly fetched *zaa*, I thought. Ugyen said it was worth carrying home and we did. Driven by the desire to arrive home, we walked faster and arrived in open grassland where a family had camped with their yaks. We were offered tea, milk and fresh cheese. We moved to another camp nearby where we spent our last night together. A grand dinner was served and we slowly closed our eyes in the darkness.

The next day we woke up early and walked mile after mile downwards along the river through the open grasslands, dwarf bamboo and pine forests. At Menchugang our two friends were waiting with tea and snacks. We celebrated our enjoyable and safe journey with few bottles of

beer. When we reached road junction to Thaga we thanked our porters and said goodbye. We rested for a day before our departure to Thimphu to join our beloved families.

I enjoyed every piece of our journey. We enjoyed like a family. Our porters were like our parents; they prepared food and arranged everything for us. Tshogpa Tashi was generous, courteous, disciplined and like a caring brother. Ap Sangay was responsible, respectful, obedient and very active. He drank a lot of alcohol but never failed in his duties. Tshewang and Ranger Sangay called as *Cheches* being the youngest ones of the group were both quiet in nature but active at work. Jamyang, who was nicknamed as Khenpo as he resembled like a monk with a yellow jacket and a red cap, was the elder brother in the family. We learnt a lot about Buddhism from Drungtsho Gempo who shared his vast knowledge. He was like our spiritual guide. He chanted prayers and offered *serkem* to the local deities for our safety. Ugyen, the fastest walker, whether uphill or downhill, was a good company all along the journey. He shared his vast knowledge of other cultures and traditions. All of us shared our knowledge, experiences and views on many topics – of spirituality, myths, political affairs, family lives, romance and girls, childhood days and present lives. We ate all sorts of food prepared in all forms – porridge, noodles, puta, bread, pork, beef, fish, yak meat, yak cheese, butter, etc. We enjoyed meeting people of all backgrounds – young, old, beautiful, ugly, timid, outspoken, rich, poor, etc. We experienced different feelings walking across the most beautiful valleys and mountains of Bhutan – from the flat land of Chamkhar valley to the high mountain peaks and plateaus of Tolela, Chajinla, Goktongla and Julela across various kinds of vegetation. It was a wonderful trip with a wonderful group of people.

We are thankful to the authorities in the ITMS for having trust and confidence in the team and giving this task. Not only did we learn the potential and benefits of medicinal plants collection but we also learned the difficulties faced by our brothers and sisters living in the remote mountains of Bhutan.