

A DISCUSSION GUIDE

My friends and colleagues say that my eyes light up when I talk about Bhutan, but that my love for the country doesn't come across in the book. I intentionally withheld many personal feelings and interpretations from *Dragon Bones* so readers could form their own opinions. This guide both fills the gap and encourages the reader to consider his or her own attitudes to other cultures.

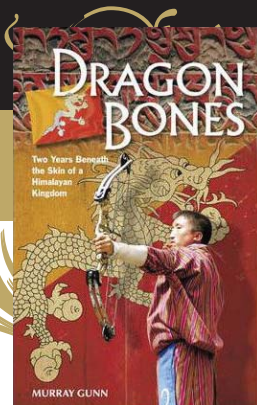
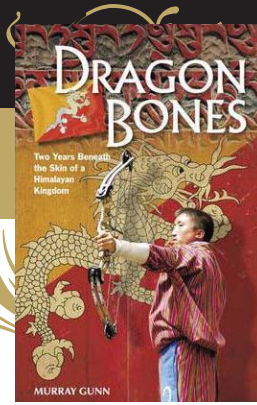


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BIOGRAPHY

I've been fascinated by culture for as long as I can remember. My parents were heavily involved in a home-stay organisation when I was a child, so almost every week we had an international visitor living in our house. I loved listening to the different ways people spoke and observing the different ways they behaved. Most of all, I was intrigued by the Japanese guests, inspired a little by the attention they paid to this small blond-haired boy. From as young as three, I began learning Japanese words and sleeping on the floor.

When the daughter of a Japanese exchange teacher joined my third-grade class, my mother arranged language lessons for me with her father after school. Throughout my years at high school my family hosted one Japanese exchange student each year, and I participated in two exchange programs to Japanese schools – one between years ten and eleven and one for a full year between high school and university.

That year in Japan fuelled my fascination but also taught me that it was my responsibility to fit in with my host culture. I learnt to observe, to participate and not to judge. It's not always easy – I still make mistakes – but it's a lesson I've taken with me around the world. When I went back to Japan to work for a few years after university, I began writing home to share my experiences with friends and family. Those emails were the start of a writing career that I hope will extend throughout my life.

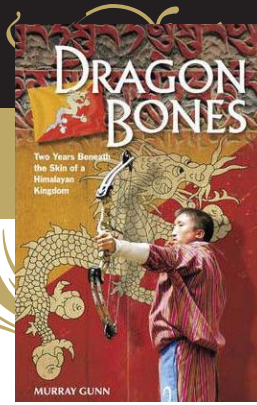
I soon realised that other cultures were just as intriguing as Japan, so I moved to Belgium to experience the European way of life. While I'd learnt Japanese with ease, French was more difficult because I wasn't working with locals on a daily basis, and shopkeepers would switch to English as soon as they realised I wasn't fluent. I also spent too much time documenting my observations. Increasing interest from people outside my circle inspired me to upgrade from emails to a web site and then to a blog.

After a few years in Belgium, my French girlfriend secured an assignment in Bhutan, which was an opportunity neither of us could pass up. Unfortunately, her employer said they wouldn't approve of me joining her unless we were married. Neither of us was ready for such a big step, but we made the decision to do it anyway. I decided to challenge my writing skills by writing a book of my experiences in Bhutan. Life didn't work out the way I had hoped, but at least I could give the world a better understanding of the Bhutanese culture.

I wrote *Dragon Bones* before I began formally studying anthropology, but early in the course, I realised that I had been doing ethnography my whole life. My seniors in the discipline would say that true anthropology requires analysis of the ethnographic experience. I'd rather provide as much context as necessary, and encourage you, as the reader, to make your own interpretation. The following notes and questions should help with that process.



Murray Gunn



BACKGROUND

I had intended to write a book on life in Bhutan as soon as I knew I would move to the capital, Thimphu, but I knew from my failure to find a publisher for an earlier book on life in Japan that I needed an angle. A book 'on Bhutan' wouldn't be enough to interest people unless my name was already well known. Very early in my stay, I realised that the Shangri-La image was an idealistic view of a kingdom that had the same problems as every other country in the world and that I could show the unique ways these problems were manifested in the home of Gross National Happiness.

This contrast of beautiful country, friendly people with the crime, discrimination, harassment and manipulation that occur in Bhutan also fit well with my preference for showing a place warts and all. I developed this idea from reading Orson Scott Card's *Speaker For the Dead*, in which the main character gives a special kind of eulogy. Rather than focusing on positive memories, the impartial Speaker quickly sums up a full life of joy, struggle and decisions both good and bad, thereby helping people who knew the deceased to better understand why he behaved as he did.

As much as possible, I chose not to explain my thoughts and judgements so that readers would have the chance to form their own. Instead, I aimed to show that where my experiences in Bhutan were frustrating, I was to blame – either for my attitude, for unrealistic expectations or simply for my lack of understanding.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

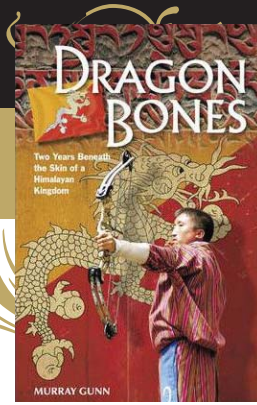
What beliefs/superstitions do you have?

People once believed that Earth was the centre of the universe. Now that idea seems quaint, yet few of us have actually observed the motion of the stars or performed the calculations which show our position as insignificant. Instead, we trust the word of people we consider more knowledgeable than ourselves. A future race may look back on our belief that we are the highest race on this planet as egotistic nonsense.

I believed that explaining mist in the mountains by the temperament of a goddess (p 215-217) was superstition, but I have no proof that the weather is controlled by other means. The local belief that the goddess of the lakes would send in the mist if I disturbed her was borne out when I thoughtlessly skimmed a rock on the surface of one of her ponds. I still think it was coincidence that a thick mist would appear within an hour of my action, but that one occasion was enough to make me question my beliefs. Repeated occurrences or even regular stories of such occurrences would probably be sufficient to make me give the goddess idea credence.

I tried to express my doubts only to locals who I knew well and who had direct experience with other cultures. I think it's important to respect the local beliefs even when they seem harmful (p119-121).

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- What other beliefs were described in *Dragon Bones* that you would call superstition?
 - What harm can beliefs do when ingrained in a culture?
 - What good can beliefs do when shared by a group of people?
 - What good/harm can be done by outsiders pushing different beliefs?
 - Under what circumstances is it okay to share your own beliefs?
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How do you react to someone whose beliefs differ from your own?

I'm no stranger to holding different beliefs. I don't see religion or medicine in the way most people do. Belief both drives and is driven by the lifestyle of each group of people, and the diversity I encounter when travelling inspires me.

The carnivorous, Christian society in which I grew up provides meat, clinically, in polystyrene packets in supermarkets so I have no strong feelings either way on the slaughter of 'lesser creatures.' If anything, I lean towards the Buddhist reluctance to kill. However, I also understood the ecological issues raised by not culling cattle (p119-121).

I don't think that presenting my thoughts was of benefit to cattle or society. People need to recognise their own problems and find their own solutions or they won't buy into them – just as a meat eater is unlikely to become vegetarian without seeing the horror of slaughter or the conditions in which livestock are kept.

When I discussed the livestock issue with Bhutanese locals, I chose people who had more exposure to alternative ideas and I sought to understand rather than to convert. Yet you can't observe without causing change, however slight (Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle) and my thoughts may have taken root and ultimately led to a change in procedures. That is on my conscience.

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- Do you feel threatened by people whose beliefs differ from your own?
 - Can you respect someone who does/does not believe in God?
 - Do you let them know?
 - Do you try to convert or make fun of them?
 - How do you feel about the Bhutanese reluctance to slaughter livestock? Is it admirable or is it folly which breeds weakness? Do you have another opinion entirely?
 - How will you treat people with different beliefs in the future?
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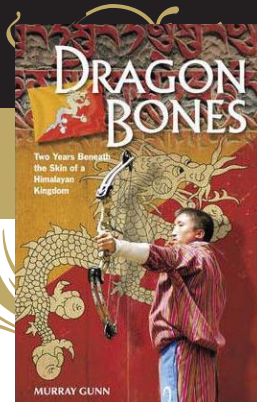
How do you react when the country you visit differs from your expectations?

The second noble truth of Buddhism is that desire is the root of suffering. In *A Concise Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, John Powers explains this as 'we want things to be different from what they are, and as a result we are disappointed' (2008 p24). Expectation is not desire, but the effect is similar. I've found that I struggle most in a new country when I take preconceived ideas with me. I was lucky not to have heard much before I went to Bhutan, and I was careful not to read too much before I arrived, but my early experiences enforced the Shangri-La ideal.

I then enjoyed peeling back the layers to uncover more perspectives on life in Bhutan. However, I became frustrated at interactions which directly impacted me in ways that ran counter to the idealistic state I first experienced. In particular, I was annoyed by my colleagues' lack of accommodation for my inability to speak five languages (p93) and their careless attitude to work that led to endless delays and wasted time (p170, 175-185) – a crime in the commercial, capitalistic world I had previously inhabited.

Before I moved to Bhutan, and more so in hindsight, I realised that the onus was on me to adjust to the local lifestyle, to learn their language and accept that I would frequently miss out on opportunities because of my lack of knowledge. It has always been my way to accept the unexpected when in another culture, but I've always been on my own before. The additional challenge of dealing with a faltering relationship shifted my attention and increased my tendency to frustration. We should appreciate the culture as it is rather than being disappointed because we have false expectations.

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- If you have travelled, did events meet your expectations?
 - If not, how did you react?
 - What could you have done better?
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Do you engage with locals when you travel?

Even when I'm travelling as a tourist, I prefer to pick a neighbourhood and stay for a week. I visit the same few restaurants and pubs, sit in the same place in the square, chat to the locals and mimic their way of life as closely as I can (p39, 51). It's usually appreciated and the more open of the locals will actually approach me to talk. Living in Bhutan, I met many locals through work, while shopping and in restaurants. Some became friends that I hope I'll have for life. I was lucky that my travelling companion had a similar attitude to travel, but our relationship still distracted us from the events and people around.

In the first weeks, we avoided physical contact in public (p14), but began to relax as it became clear that the Bhutanese were not easily offended. After a couple of months, we used to walk hand in hand around town. While no one actually seemed to mind, I wouldn't be surprised if this clear indication of our difference discouraged some locals from approaching us.

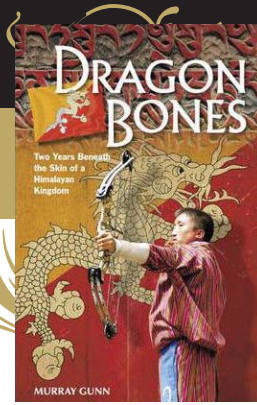
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- Do you travel alone?
 - When with other travellers, do you breeze through looking at sites or do you make an effort to interact with the locals?
 - How do you feel when you make new connections? Do you touch their lives? Do they touch yours?
 - How well can you know a place if you only get off the bus to take photos and eat?
-

When you travel, how do the locals perceive you?

I try very hard to act as the locals do, but it can be difficult at times. In Bhutan I was often preoccupied with my relationship and the need to build my business. It would have taken a while, but the carpenter would have delivered our wardrobes in good condition (p183-184). I didn't realise the extent to which I was rushing until the taxi drivers took the time to help me carry the wardrobes up four floors to our flat. Even worse, in trying to meet my timeline during the rainy season, the carpenter had not allowed the wood to dry properly so our clothes ended up stuck together with sap. I suffered for my haste, but worse, I gave the locals the impression that foreigners are cold, angry people with no time for others.

When we travel, we are ambassadors for our country and should act with respect in every situation. More importantly, we should recognise that visitors to our countries, whether tourists or immigrants, bring their own values and we shouldn't judge them negatively because they don't completely adapt to our culture. We rarely adapt completely to theirs.

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- Have you ever been drunk on a backpacking trip?
 - Have you ever publicly expressed your disapproval of local food or hygiene?
 - Have you ever shouted or sneered at a shopkeeper?
 - What impression would such action give locals of people from your country?
 - How will you treat the next immigrant you see being rude?
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Are you aware of your impact on the local community?

Many of the people in countries we travel to rely on the tourist dollar to survive, but what impact do our money and our actions have after we leave? I believe that Bhutanese children have been encouraged to beg by tourists who throw a few Rupees their way (p81). Begging may have led to stealing, though I'd have more trouble justifying that view.

Just by paying more than locals for goods and services, we skew the economy, raising demand and reducing supply (p80). I'm not saying that we shouldn't spend anything. It seems unfair that we have so much while others have so little, but we do need to be careful how we use our money.

Even as aid workers, we take knowledge and beliefs relevant to a different world with a different culture. Our friend who was helping make the building industry safer (p87) did his best to use his influence wisely. I think he was right to ensure that the highest quality materials went to the most critical projects, but I can understand the concern of the local builders. If policy was changed to require similar standards to the West, many builders would not be able to afford to undertake projects and few locals would be able to afford to use the results.

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- What do you spend your money on when you travel?
 - How does your money change the lives of local people?
 - What impact are your donations to aid agencies actually having?
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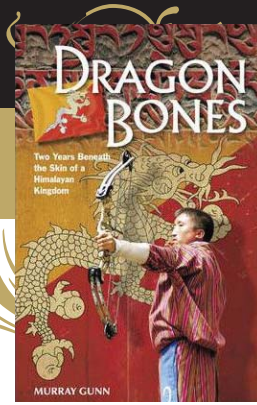
What problems do you have in your own culture?

While in Bhutan, I encountered problems such as sexual harassment, racial discrimination and religious intolerance. While they may have seemed greater because of the contrast with the Shangri-La image, all of these issues exist in my own culture, often in more drastic ways. Such problems are so familiar in the West that we barely notice them against the backdrop of other concerns.

No one likes to be judged. Usually, if called on local issues, people either apologise profusely or become defensive, depending on the nature of the culture and individual in question. In Australia, a common response is to tell the critic to go back where he came from. Only one Bhutanese person ever suggested I go home and his peers immediately told him that wasn't appropriate (p202). Most people were more interested in helping me settle than in pushing me out.

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- How do you feel when a foreigner makes judgements on your society?
 - Have you encountered problems in the local society while travelling?
 - How did you react?
 - What resulted from your response?
 - How would you feel if your hosts told you to go home when you judged their country?
 - Did you stop to think about whether the same problem existed in your home country?
 - If you had, what would you have done differently?
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Who is to blame for Bhutan's problems?

At various times during my stay, I became frustrated by racial and sexual discrimination, religious manipulation and crime marring this otherwise idyllic country. The more I experienced of Bhutan and the more I thought about the issues, however, the more I came to believe that these issues were inevitable.

Bhutan's position between India and China put enormous stress on the country to maintain a unique cultural identity, which drove racial and religious discrimination. Similarly, the unique geography of the country, and its resulting inability to sustain its people agriculturally, required that Bhutan strengthen ties with the modern world, which increased the crime rate and to some extent the visibility of crime.

Using religion to guide people (as it seemed to me) through the transition to technology, city life and internationalisation now seems sensible.

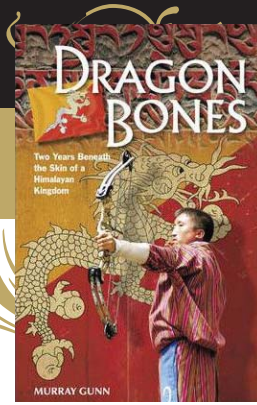
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- Why do you believe that Bhutan has the problems I experienced?
 - How do you think the problems should be addressed?
 - Would applying Western solutions be effective?
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Do you want to know more about Bhutan?

My hope is that readers will find the unique manifestation of issues in Bhutan and the way its people deal with them inspiring. I've tried to complement the issues with some of the peace and beauty to give a balanced view, but life in Bhutan is more of both joy and struggle than I've described. To follow up, I recommend reading *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* and *Treasures of the Thunder Dragon*, described in the Further Reading section, but reading can't compare to actually visiting a country and experiencing the culture for yourself. Find out more at <http://www.tourism.gov.bt/bhutan/tour-operators>.

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- Do the stories in *Dragon Bones* inspire you to learn more?
 - Which aspects interest you most?
 - How can you ensure you experience more of the culture if you go?
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FURTHER READING

Beyond the Sky and the Earth

Jamie Zeppa was in Bhutan in 1990 when many people were exiled and became refugees. This book provides an interesting view of events at ground level as seen by an impartial foreigner. Jamie also writes of her experiences with night hunting – both good and bad.

Treasures of the Thunder Dragon

At the time she wrote the book, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck was one of four queens. She loved to trek through the mountains and write of her tours and visits to remote villages. This is a great book for seeing Bhutan through the eyes of a local.

Speaker for the Dead

Orson Scott Card inspired my desire to show cultures as they are, warts and all. We all have good and bad points. In this science fiction, the *Speaker for the Dead* gives eulogies that help even people close to the deceased understand them. He pulls the different facets of the person's life and experiences into a coherent whole that explain each other. Culture is rarely so simple, but I hope that I can show people how various aspects of a culture reinforce each other – that you can't expect to change a part without disrupting the whole.

FOLLOW THE AUTHOR

Through 2012, I am working on a new book about the experience of being an exchange student. The changes I experienced and the challenges I encountered during my year in Japan were the most formative of my life. In dealing with a new family, a new school, a new language (in some cases) and a new culture without the direct support of biological family, every exchange student undergoes a wondrous roller coaster of emotions and learning. They come to know themselves better, they gain lifelong friends and they become more comfortable dealing with the unexpected events life throws at them. Just as *Dragon Bones* is about Bhutan with my relationship as context, *Not Right, Not Wrong* (working title) will be about the experience of being an exchange student with Japan as context. The book will be set in Japan, but the experience is similar wherever the student may end up.

Until *Not Right, Not Wrong* is released, please follow my travels on my website *One People, Many Cultures* at <http://murraygunn.id.au>.

