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Opening Address

by Venerable Lama Lobzang

It is my great privilege and pleasure to be invited to this “International Conference on Tradition and Innovation in Vajrayāna Buddhism: A Mandala of 21st Century Perspectives”, organized by the Central Monastic Body and the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH.

Today, as we discuss tradition and innovation in Vajrayāna Buddhism, it would not be out of place to outline, briefly, the history of Buddha Dhamma itself. 2,600 years ago, Lumbini in Nepal witnessed a historic event – the birth of Siddhartha Gautam. 35 years later, another defining moment of history occurred under the sacred Mahabodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, in the present day Indian state of Bihar. This was the moment that transformed Siddhartha Gautam, a prince to Buddha, the Enlightened One. Thereafter, for four-and-a-half decades beginning with the Dhammachakkapavattana at Sarnath, Buddha preached his undying message of peace, love, compassion and harmony, bestowing upon humanity the blessings of the Triple Gem, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Three months after Buddha’s mahaparinirvana at Kushinagar, the First Council met in Rajgir to discuss both, the Dhamma and the Vinaya. This was followed by the Second and the Third Councils in Vaishali and Pataliputra respectively. It was only after this that the Emperor Ashoka, having renounced warfare and adopted the Dhamma, started to send emissaries to spread the Dhamma, beginning with Sri Lanka, and thereafter to Myanmar and Thailand, and across the Hellenistic empire, through Afghanistan, the Middle East and Northeast Africa, possibly up to Greece itself. Thus, originating in the Gangetic plains of

northern India, Buddha Dhamma spread and became a way of life for millions of people around the globe. This is a universally acknowledged fact of history.

While more and more people in different parts of the world took to Buddhism, the Dhamma itself was evolving. The Theravāda, Mahayāna and Vajrayāna traditions, while fully accepting the teachings of Buddha, chose to interpret them differently. Thus, even though there may be only a slight difference in their respective philosophies, their practices are different. In effect, they are nothing but different expressions of the same teachings of Buddha.

Over the centuries that followed, these three major traditions took root in other parts of Asia as well, and developed, absorbing in the course local traditions and influences. Meanwhile, Guru Rinpoche brought Vajrayāna Buddhism to Bhutan. As in the case of the other major traditions, the monasteries that he founded, and those that came up later, became the repositories of the Vajrayāna tradition. As followers of the Buddha Dhamma, we owe our gratitude to the great royal lineage as well as the learned religious leaders of the Kingdom of Bhutan for preserving this great ancient tradition, and ensuring that its wisdom remains available to all humankind.

In fact, at the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC), it is our earnest endeavour to draw upon their age-old wisdom and bring all Buddhist traditions to a common platform, so that followers of the Dhamma can present a united voice in the ongoing global social, political and economic discourse. This is clearly outlined in our motto, “Collective Wisdom United Voice”.

IBC’s commitment to bringing our ancient traditions together under one roof can be gauged from the “Dialogue on Vinaya” organized by us between senior monks of the Nalanda tradition based in India, and those of the Theravāda tradition from Sri Lanka. Besides that, an example of our humble endeavours to ensure that all humankind gains from Buddhist values and principles was “SAMVAD: A Global Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environment Consciousness” held in New Delhi and Bodh Gaya in September 2015. In the same vein, IBC took the lead in procuring endorsements from the leading lights of the Buddhist world for the Buddhist Climate Change Declaration and Statement to World Leaders that were presented at the COP-21 in Paris in November 2015. Now we look forward to partnering with the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH in a project that we hope will help redefine the idea of wealth and remodel the way in which economies around the world are managed.

Indeed, as a global umbrella, Buddhist body with over 300-member organizations spread across 39 countries, this will not be our first interaction or association with Bhutan. We are privileged to have among our Presidents, Her Royal Highness Ashi Kesang Wangmo Wangchuck, on whose guidance and wisdom we have relied, and will continue to rely for taking our organization forward and furthering its mission.

From Monks to Yogis

I would like to end by congratulating and thanking the Central Monastic Body and the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH for organizing this conference on a subject that is extremely pertinent. It is our firm belief that with the progress of time, in order to remain relevant, religions and traditions must adapt and innovate to accommodate the changing needs and demands of societies, without of course compromising on their fundamental value.