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Keynote Address

His Excellency Tshering Tobgay, Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bhutan

It is wonderful to see so many people gathered here in Thimphu from as many as 34 countries for this important conference. First, I wish to welcome all of you to our country.

This is a special year for Bhutan for three reasons. It is a special year, firstly, because it is the birth anniversary of Guru Rinpoche who is the key figure in the spread of Vajrayāna in the Himalayan region, where he has created a lasting spiritual and cultural impact. Close to the middle of the eighth century, Bhutan was blessed to receive repeated visits and stays of Guru Rinpoche. Since he set foot some 1,270 years ago in our country and blessed it, the people in this land have largely enjoyed happiness and peace, and lived in harmony with nature.

Second, this year marks the 400th anniversary year of the arrival of Zhabdrung Rinpoche who started the process of unification of Bhutan into a larger State in 1616.

And thirdly, it is special year because of the birth of His Royal Highness the Gyalsey Jigme Namgyel Wangchuck to His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen.

The celebratory mood of the country is enhanced further by events of this nature, which, over the coming three days, will explore the history and future directions of Vajrayāna Buddhism, a spiritual tradition that has defined the culture and civilization of Bhutan for more than a thousand years.

I have an immense pleasure to welcome you all here on behalf of the Royal Government to participate in this great exchange in this auspicious year in Bhutan. We hope that such exchanges will become a periodic event that will both draw on and enrich the experience of scholars and practitioners from across the world as the Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition continues to grow and expand globally. I believe that greater awareness and applications of the core principles that underlie the diverse expressions of Buddhist doctrine, both historically and in the contemporary world, will be the broad objective of the conference.

In a very familiar story from the Dhammapada, the Buddha advised his followers to test his words to be sure that they follow the Dharma after experiencing its truth themselves. The Buddha said: “O monks and wise men, just as a goldsmith would test his gold by burning, cutting and rubbing it, so must you examine my words and accept them, not merely out of reverence for me.” In this sense, the Buddha advised us to take nothing on faith, but to investigate all things with intelligence and discernment. This is also the essence of the scientific worldview. The bold objective of this conference is thus to discover where the worlds of modern science and the profound philosophical and existential insights of Buddhism may come together in a new synthesis that enriches and expands our collective lives and endeavours.

As you will all surely come across in the days ahead in the conference, this expansive and inclusive view is what characterizes Buddhism in its Tantric, or Vajrayāna form. What will be presented during the conference may challenge some of your cherished assumptions, but expanding your minds and imaginations and taking all these diverse perspectives and points of view into account is what the conference is all about. This objective is clearly stated in the conference’s subtitle: ‘A Mandala of 21st Century Perspectives.’

Almost all of you present here tonight will know what a mandala is. But some of the youth audience might wonder what a Mandala is. As Your Eminences and Venerables would explain more clearly, a mandala is a central concept within Vajrayāna Buddhism that expresses in visual form a unified worldview. It is a space that is unified and permeated by positive values. It takes into account seeming opposites and reveals their complementary natures.

In its simplest sense, a Mandala is a circle that represents both a totality and a focused intention. It is in this sense that the organizers of this conference invoked this image to define the conference’s ultimate purpose of exploring diverse points of view within a sacred space of openness and mutual appreciation.

As you will all come to see during your time in Bhutan, mandalas are recurring images on the walls of our monasteries and temples and on painted scrolls called Thangkas. You will see them in shops and galleries. Mandalas unify all the forces and energies in the universe and the human mind and are thus seen

in all the religious structures. Mandalas are, in this sense, fundamental icons of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Mandalas remind us that everything in life is interconnected. Our habitual division of life into sacred and profane is quite shortsighted. It is this more expansive view of Vajrayāna that the conference, in all its diversity, will help to reveal.

Allow me also to say something about the word Vajrayāna itself. Its deeper meaning is often obscure even to youth who have been brought up within a Vajrayāna world, such as Bhutan. In brief, the word 'vajra' refers to the indestructible element in human nature, while 'yāna' refers to the vehicle by which that indestructible, diamond-like nature, is most readily revealed. Vajrayāna is also known as Tantric Buddhism, Tantrayāna, Mantrayāna, Secret Mantra, Esoteric Buddhism, Diamond Way, Thunderbolt Way, or the Indestructible Way. In essence, all these terms refer to a complex and multifaceted system of Buddhist thought and practice that evolved over many centuries as an accelerated path to freedom from human suffering.

As you are aware, one of the deeply distinguishing features of Vajrayāna Buddhism is that it developed as a means for reaching enlightenment without having to renounce the world or even life's ephemeral pleasures. At the heart of the Vajrayāna world view is the idea that all aspects of our experience can be fundamentally transformed, so long as we approach them with insight and compassion.

The actual methods by which this transformation can be most readily achieved are what we have all gathered here to discuss. Bhutan offers an ideal context for this discussion, as it is the last remaining Himalayan Buddhist Kingdom where the Vajrayāna teachings have continued unbroken since the 8th century. For this, we are grateful for the blessings of Guru Rinpoche, the legacy of Zhabdrung Rinpoche, the Revered Founder of Bhutan, and the enlightened leadership of His Majesty the Fifth and the Fourth Kings.

According to Bhutanese history, Vajrayāna, or Tantric Buddhism, was established in Bhutan in the 8th century by Guru Rinpoche, the 'precious teacher'. He is also known as Padmasambhava, the 'Lotus Born'. He is revered in eight different manifestations that reveal the multidimensionality of human consciousness.

Padmasambhava's diverse manifestations offer us a way of understanding that, as the Buddhist saying goes, there are as many ways to achieving enlightenment as there are human beings. In other words, Vajrayāna is not a 'one form fits all' approach. As you will see in temples and on wall paintings throughout Bhutan, Guru Rinpoche, the 'Precious Teacher', manifested as a monk, an ascetic, a scholar, a lover, a spiritual warrior, and as a king to show that our innermost Buddha Nature, or Vajra Nature, can ultimately be discovered in any existential circumstances.

This was the essence of the Vajrayāna Buddhist teachings revealed by Tantric Buddhist masters such as Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal, Bhutanese consort of Guru Khando Monmo Tashi Chidren, Mahasiddha Saraha, Tilopa, and Naropa, as well as by later Vajrayāna masters in Bhutan such as the spiritual treasure revealer, Tertön Pema Lingpa, who you will also be hearing about in the coming days.

However, this conference is not only about what we Bhutanese can share with all of you who have come from across the world to experience Vajrayāna Buddhism in its living context. We ourselves will benefit greatly by learning more about the forms that Vajrayāna Buddhism has adopted in Mongolia, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Russia, Australia, Brazil, Japan, China, European countries, and the United States.

This creative adaptability is, of course, the very essence of the Tantric tradition, with the root meaning of the word ‘Tantra’ being to stretch and expand. But those of us who have been exposed to Tantric Buddhism only in Bhutan may sometimes fall into a narrow view and think that only here in our country is Vajrayāna being preserved in a ‘pure’ form.

To be honest, we will also see that we have adapted Vajrayāna to suit our own unique social, political, environmental, and historical circumstances. As we will no doubt be hearing, the same is true for the Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions in Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, India, Japan, Australia, Europe and America. This mutability is not a fault, but rather Vajrayāna’s greatest strength. But unless we discern the core principles of Vajrayāna, its innermost essence could be misrepresented.

Ladies and Gentlemen, what do we mean when we speak of ‘Tradition and Innovation in Vajrayāna Buddhism’?

Tradition, as we know, gives structure, meaning, and continuity to human life. But without innovation and creative change we may find ourselves perpetuating outmoded forms that no longer serve our highest intentions.

The contemporary world of technology offers a dramatic example of this principle when we discover that the I-Phone or personal computer that we thought was state-of-the art has suddenly become obsolete. Unless we regularly upgrade our technologies, both on a personal and cultural level, we may find ourselves quite literally left behind in a world in which the Internet reigns supreme as an extension of human consciousness. Although we often find fault with it, modern technology is quite a wonderful thing, and there are few of us who, however deep our spiritual yearnings, would be willing to forgo our mobile phones and email accounts.

But just as outer technologies are continuously being upgraded through constant creative innovation, is there no scope for our traditional technologies

of inner transformation to also be upgraded? This is one of the challenging questions that the conference will address.

If we really examine the Buddhist traditions of the Himalayan region, we may discover that they are based on radical transformations of earlier Buddhist doctrine. The celestial Buddhas that we see in Vajrayāna, for example, have no precedent in early Buddhism, yet they are entirely compatible with the Vajrayāna Buddhist view of using all aspects of human experience and imagination as a means of freeing ourselves from unnecessary suffering and discovering a transcendent state of happiness that can be shared with others.

Similarly, the Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition of Terma, or ‘revealed treasure’, that is so central to the Nyingma, or early translation school of Himalayan Buddhism, continues to be a way in which new technologies, or skilful means, can enlarge upon earlier models.

In truth, human history is a continual process of preserving through tradition and advancing through innovation. Both processes are fundamental not only to human life, but to all of nature. It is this dialectic of continuity and change within one of the most sophisticated systems of human thought and practice ever devised that we are all here to explore.

Buddhism has always been about enlarging the scope of our vision and overcoming our conditioning rather than unconsciously perpetuating outmoded forms. This was of course the example shown by Buddha Sakyamuni himself when he rejected the social structures and religious institutions of his time and outlined a comprehensive path to psychological and spiritual emancipation.

Buddha Sakyamuni also recognized how quickly we tend to grasp on to what we take to be the most precious, even Dharma, and perpetuate forms that may no longer serve. One of the most famous teachings the Buddha gave on this point was in the parable of the raft when he asked his disciples whether it would be sensible for them to carry on their back a raft that they had made to cross a river once they had reached the other side.

The Buddha counselled them that once they had crossed over they should lay down the raft gratefully and continue with their way unencumbered. He concluded the parable by saying in the Dhammapa:

And so it is with my teachings, O monks. My teachings, too, are like a raft, they are for crossing over; they are not for seizing hold of.

The opportunity of this conference is to explore, open-mindedly, the nature of the multi-faceted and fascinating raft that is Vajrayāna, the diamond vehicle that points out that the far shore and the one on which we are standing are ultimately one and the same. There is a bold and wonderful statement in

Vajrayāna that Samsara and Nirvana are of the same essence. Making it true within our own experience and in the experience of others is the essence of the Vajrayāna way.

The days ahead may give us all some valuable tools for working together towards the realization of this exalted goal.

Many of you coming to Bhutan have been introduced to the concept of GNH, or Gross National Happiness, developed by His Majesty the Fourth King. You could almost say that GNH has become Bhutan's brand image in the modern world. Advocating Gross National Happiness is not to denigrate other forms of development in any way. But it clearly emphasises the central importance of psychological wellbeing as a measure of national health and as a foundation for sustainable economic advancement. The Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH, which initiated this conference, is entrusted by the Royal Government of Bhutan to articulate the ways in which Gross National Happiness can be actively promoted through government policies.

This conference is equally the result of the Central Monastic Body's shared commitment to the sustainable wellbeing of the Bhutanese people through the active propagation of Vajrayāna Buddhist teachings and sacred art forms such as masked dance rituals that, like all Vajrayāna Buddhist practices, operate on multiple levels to ensure harmony between humankind and the larger environment and to develop the full range of our human capacities.

It is to this final goal of comprehensive human thriving that the conference is dedicated, drawing on all aspects of Bhutanese society, as well as shared international perspectives.

I would like to conclude by pointing out that the space in which the conference will unfold is itself very auspicious. We are the precinct of the Royal Institute of Tourism and Hospitality, which is an institution for advancing international exchange and education in this field. The Institute's modern, state-of-the-art facilities and serene environment thus offer an ideal venue for the current conference. I express my appreciation to the Royal Institute of Tourism and Hospitality for allowing the conference to be hosted here.

I believe I speak on behalf of all Bhutanese, when I say that I deeply hope that your time in Bhutan and exposure to our living traditions of Vajrayāna Buddhism will deepen your appreciation for the contributions that Vajrayāna can make to the modern world, not only as a spiritual practice devoted to realising the full potential of the human mind, but with practical applications that can help address the current global environmental crisis and transform education, healthcare, and social services in general through the active cultivation of creativity, wisdom, and compassionate action.

I would like to remind you all again that, while you are here, we are all part of a single Mandala. And yet, as Vajrayāna Buddhism teaches, this single Mandala

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is connected to all other spheres of human activity, and the thoughts we express will radiate outward into the world at large.

So think well, enjoy our hospitality, and forgive us for all the inevitable oversights that will have occurred in trying to accommodate so many people for this wonderful event! As we all know too well, life is far from perfect, but we can nonetheless perfect our lives by striving for that impossible ideal. Thank you all again for being here for this historic occasion!

