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Welcome Address

By Dasho Karma Ura

Most Bhutanese present this evening would know very well that today is the end of a budget year in Bhutan, and so it must have been a hectic day trying to close all books of accounts. Given this very important preoccupation and continually pressing matters, the organizers are very pleased that the guests from within the country have come to grace this humble occasion and honour the arrival of the participants.

The Central Monastic Body and the Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH are very pleased that this conference has materialized at last. We are pleased that all of you, especially those coming from abroad from around 37 nations, are finally here. We wish to acknowledge the gracious participants by their country in alphabetical order: Australia, Brazil, Bangladesh, Canada, Cambodia, Cameron, China, Czechoslovakia, France, Hungary, India, Italy, Ireland, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, Nepal, Peru, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Taiwan, Thailand, United Kingdom, USA, and Vietnam.

We are very grateful to the Tourism Council of Bhutan and the Royal Institute of Tourism and Hospitality for allowing us to have the conference in their lovely ground. All Buddha's teachings were held in natural formations and micro-niches like caves, panoply of big forests, cliff faces, bamboo groves, river banks, and hill-tops. Perhaps this is true of all great thinkers. Inspired by stories of such stimulating locations, though they are pleasurable appearances of samsara, we are delighted to hold the conference in this super-gir, giant glass tent that has echoes of a much richer Pleasure Dome of Kublai Khan

pitched in open pastures in the 13th century. We are indebted to the thoughtful generosity of His Revered Majesty the King for the gift of the use of this tent under which we are meeting.

Talking of *gir*, the mongol tent, we are particularly pleased that His Eminence Khamba Lam Gabju, the Supreme Head of Mongolian Buddhism who also holds the throne-title of Chief Abbot of Gaden Tegcholing Monastery in Ulan Bataar, could spare his precious time to be present in our humble conference. Mongolia and Bhutan are the last two Vajrayana states out of many that populated extensively Asia at one point of history. It is a pleasure to facilitate a meeting between the two last Mahayana states and I am sure that this is of symbolic and spiritual importance.

We are equally appreciative of the participation of His Excellency Manamperi Bandula S. B. Yalegama, Minister of Health, Indigenous Medicine, Social Welfare, Probation and Child Care Services of Central Province, Sri Lanka.

Time does not allow me to express my gratitude to all distinguished participants. I would like to welcome, most respectfully and warmly, all the distinguished participants to our country. In 1355, the great Nyingma Saint Longchen Rabjampa came to practice at the holy and empowered sites of Guru Rinpoche in Bhutan. He appreciated the glory of Bhutan because of it being inhabited by historic kings and ministers, being populated by wondrous temples; being the place of the descendants of great scholars and yogis; and being captivating and haunting with its physical beauty. From a spiritual point of view, Bhutan has been a place that only the fortunate spiritualists had the chance to inhabit and experience; Bhutan has had peace—both internal and external—continuously in its known and unknown history.

The great saint-phenomenologist and poet Longchen's description about the kings and ministers sound quite contemporary. The description is resonant especially with the lives of Kings of Bhutan who manifests the Bodhisattva qualities of compassion, ceaseless and splendid energy, and strength. Their deep empathy with the lives of ordinary people and other sentient beings has led them to refine Bhutan as a Buddhist welfare and ecological state in the direction of the first welfare state set first in India by Ashoka Devanama Priyadasi (Beloved to Behold, Beloved of Gods) who began his rule in 270 BC.

One of the reasons for the continuity of Buddhist state is that the Central Monastic Body, which was first established in 1623 or so, has endured in a stable, undimmed and uninterrupted way with a long succession so far of 70 Chief Abbots. The Central Monastic Body is the mother of all institutions in Bhutan because of its chronological age and timeless relevance. We are very happy that this conference is a product also of this oldest institution since Bhutan was founded although there are other official institutions that predate it.

It has been noted that the word Vajrayana appears in tantric texts only in the late 7th century. Soon after that, by mid 8th century, Vajrayana came to Bhutan. Sometimes in the middle of the 8th century, for the first time in Bhutan in a place called Nabji, Guru Rinpoche delivered the teachings and empowerment of Kaged Desheg Duspa to entourages of two kings. This is by way of pointing out how far Vajrayana goes back in Bhutan.

What is the responsibility of a Vajrayana state like Bhutan? I would like to propose that it is to hold up the vision, method and techniques for realizing the Vajrayana view of human potential. The responsibility of Vajrayāna state is to preserve and promote various special profound philosophies, vision, method and techniques according to various Vajrayana schools. That is why, the Central Monastic Body, the principal agency of Vajrayana in Bhutan with support of the Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH thought it our responsibility as well as privilege to host this conference.

But it could not have been done without the gracious blessing of His Majesty the King and the decisive financial and logistic support of the government, in particular the Hon'ble Prime Minister who was extraordinarily supportive of the idea of hosting this conference. In his usual quick grasp of larger importance of even small events, Hon'ble Prime Minister in fact, immediately mooted the idea of a regular Vajrayana conferences and activities under a Centre which will be created for this specific purpose. I am truly pleased that Hon'ble Prime Minister could fit into his very very busy time to address all of us tonight. I therefore would like to thank Hon'ble Prime Minister for sharing his time with the conference participants.

For the Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH of which I am the empty and impermanent head, this is the fourth international conference within the last eight months which we had the honour to co-organize. In November 2015, we organised the largest ever international conference on Gross National Happiness attended by over 400 participants from abroad. Then, in April 2015, along with the Tourism Council of Bhutan we hosted a dialogue, 'North East India-Bhutan High-end Tourism'. Just two weeks ago, we co-hosted with the Centre for Escalation of Peace a conference in celebration of the Birth Anniversary of Guru Rinpoche, drawing participants from South Asia. Our humble office has become an efficient engine linking worldwide participants and our researchers have turned into hardened logistic planners. We have also engaged extremely motivated volunteers to create this conducive venue. However, there is bound to be failings, and I seek your pardon for them.

