

ECHOES OF ANCIENT ETHOS: REFLECTIONS ON SOME POPULAR BHUTANESE SOCIAL THEMES

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A few years ago, a man was interviewed on radio asking why he became a soldier. He replied: "To serve the *Tsawasum* with *tha damtshig*". When asked what the *Tsawasum* are, he enumerated army, bodyguards and police force. Similarly, teacher-trainees at the National Institute of Education were asked in an exam to name the *Tsawasum*. Some wrote the names of their three best friends. These anecdotes amply show (1) that concepts such as *Tsawasum* and *tha damtshig* are very profusely bandied about in Bhutan and (2) that most people take them for granted without any accurate knowledge of their significance. Even among those who grasp their significance, their frequency and ubiquity have rendered the weighty concepts meaningless catchphrases. It is these socio-political concepts – *Tsawasum*, *tha damtshig*, *le judre*, *driglam namzha*, and *Gyalyong gakyi palzom* – their historical origins, significance, usage, implications and underlying assumptions which I shall attempt to explore briefly.

I am a philosopher by training, and particularly a student of Buddhist ontology and epistemology. Therefore, I am fully aware that in undertaking this study I am venturing into a domain beyond my own expertise. Hence, I make no claims to offer original ideas or penetrating insights into these themes. Nevertheless, it is my philosophical inclination and interest in the affairs of home, which give me the impetus to reflect on these topics of great significance and popularity.

I concur with Bertrand Russell in maintaining that philosophers are both effects and causes of their host societies, 'effects of their social circumstances and of the politics and institutions of their time; causes (if they are fortunate) of beliefs which mould the politics and institutions of later ages'. A successful philosopher, in Bertrand Russell's words, 'is a person in whom are crystallized and concentrated thoughts and feelings which, in a vague and diffused form, are common to the community of which he is part'.¹ Unfortunately, I cannot claim to be such a fortunate or successful philosopher but I surely cannot deny being an image cast in the mould of the Bhutanese socio-cultural milieu and political situation insofar as my personality, attitude, outlook and viewpoints have been shaped, *en rapport* or otherwise, by the prevailing socio-cultural and political circumstances.

¹ Russell (2001), p. 7

Thus, it is the highly influential status of these concepts in the traditional Bhutanese society and in particular the recent promotion of these with political overtones, which compel me to engage in the following discussion. My urge is indeed further enhanced by the patriotic impulse of being a conscious and responsible member of the tradition and society concerned. This is however not to suggest that this study, motivated by a patriotic zeal, is going to be an emotional and prescriptive discourse rather than a rational and descriptive analysis. I aim to undertake, using a conglomerate of philosophical, historical, sociological and anthropological approaches, an analytical discussion of the themes, unaffected by any linear or particularistic stance.

By the same token, this is not to be construed as a calculated critique of either the social norms or the state policies and practices in vogue but a systematic scrutiny of the religious, ethical and political dimensions of the themes in question. My main aim is to take the discussion of these themes to a higher philosophical and analytical level and thereby attempt to reveal the underlying assumptions. Should such 'philosophization' and the critical approach universal to academia reveal or reiterate any discontinuity, inconsistency or contradiction either between the original purport and later interpretations, between principle and practice or between reality and rhetoric, such I hope will be seen as findings of constructive value. Much of the time, I shall be only asking questions, the art of which my mentors in academia taught me as the very first lesson. As far as possible, I shall also try to integrate into my reflections the concerns of other like-minded Bhutanese, whose voices this discussion ought to echo.

It is perhaps appropriate at the very outset to state two salient features of the themes to be discussed: (1) they are originally religious or para-religious concepts and (2) they acquired, mostly in recent years, a secular and political dimension to their application. The discussion thus spans from the origination of these concepts as moral principles understood within the parameters of a given religious system, to the process of secularisation at later stages. I shall now turn to discuss the two stages of development for each of these concepts in the order of their probable historical sequence.

Le Judre

Le judre (*las rgyu 'bras*) or the law of karmic cause and effect certainly figures as a concept of great antiquity. Pappu traces the origin of karma to the *ta* (*rta* and in *i aap* (*rta* in the *Rig Veda*, which is the earliest of the

four Vedas.² O'Flaherty conjectures that the concept of karma could have preceded the belief in rebirth.³ Obeyesekere, on the other hand, hypothesises that the theory of karma developed from the theory of rebirth through a process of speculative activity which he labels 'ethicization'.⁴ He argues that the theory of rebirth could have flourished among the tribals of the Gangetic plains just as it is widely spread among different tribals in many parts of the world and that Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thinkers transformed this 'rebirth eschatology into karmic eschatology'. Whatever the origins, the theory of karma forms the ground rule for all major religious systems of Indic origin including Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism. A great number of both classical and secondary literature on karma is available, hence, for the present purpose I shall only draw upon few authoritative Buddhist texts to demonstrate the nature, significance and ramifications of the law of karma in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition from which our concept of *le judre* is derived.

Le judre, it should be noted, is a subject which tradition believes is so vast and abstruse so that only the omniscient Buddha can fully fathom it.⁵ Hence, a few paragraphs of discussion will hardly do it any justice. My intention here is to provide only a synopsis of karma as a moral and ethical principle. A comprehensive treatment of the metaphysical theories of karmic mechanism has been carried out elsewhere.⁶

² Pappu (1987), p. 1: He describes *♦ta* as 'the principle of cosmic order which controls, unifies, and orders all phenomena', and *i•nap(ṛta)* as 'the payment made to the priest for performance of a sacrifice and obtaining merit'.

³ O'Flaherty (1980), p. 3

⁴ Obeyesekere (1980), p. 138

⁵ See, for instance, Vasubandhu and Yaśomitra (1981), vol. ii, p. 1222 for Rāhulabhadra's verse which Vasubandhu quotes:

sarvakara∞ kara)am ekasya may\racandrakasyapi /
nasarvajñair jñeya∞ sarvajñabala∞ hi tajjñanam //

rma bya'i gdongs ni gcig la yang / / rgyu yi rnam pa thams cad ni / /
kun mkhyen min pas shes bya min / / de shes kun mkhyen stobs yin no //

The multiplicity of causes
For [producing] even a single peacock feather
Is not conceivable by [those who are] not omniscient.
Knowing [all about] it is the power of Omniscience [only].

See also | Shantideva's remark in *Bodhicaryavatara*, IV/7
vetti sarvajaa evaitam acintya∞ karma)o gatiṃ /
las tshul bsam gyis mi khyab pa / / thams cad mkhyen pa kho nas mkhyen / /
The Omniscient one alone knows
The inconceivable nature of karma.

⁶ Phuntsho (1998)

The Buddha taught a voluntaristic theory of karma proclaiming karma to be intention. Speaking against the Brahminical and Jain theories of karma as physical and material phenomena, he declared, “O Monks! Karma, I declare, is intention. Having intended, the body, speech and mind perform action”.⁷ According to the Buddha, good and bad karma are not defined by the physical appearance and verbal speech but by intention. It is virtuous, non-virtuous and neutral intentions, which determine actions to be virtuous, non-virtuous and neutral. The three kinds of actions then bring respectively happiness, suffering or no results.

The Buddha rejected the deterministic doctrine of the Brahminical religion, which taught karma as social duty determined by caste and sex. Maintaining karma *qua* intention to be the main moral determinant, he used the moral and spiritual values people adopted in their life as the yardstick to judge their virtue and social status. This ethical voluntarism of the Buddha has been reiterated throughout the ages by subsequent Buddhist savants such as Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu and Candrakīrti.⁸ Corollary to such ethical philosophy, the Buddha and his followers professed a social egalitarianism whereby all persons are equal irrespective of their caste, race and sex.

Crucial to the theory of karma as intention is then the distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous intentions. Like the issue of good and bad, and right and wrong in normative ethics, the question of what constitutes virtuous and non-virtuous intention is a vital and complex issue in Buddhism. Suffice here to cite Nāgārjuna who formulates the distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous intention in the following verse:

'dod chags zhe sdang gti mug gsum // des bskyed las ni mi dge ba // ma chags ma sdang gti mug med // des bskyed las ni dge ba 'o //

Actions motivated by attachment, hatred and ignorance are non-virtuous.

Actions motivated by non-attachment, non-hatred, non-ignorance are virtuous.⁹

Buddhist thinkers such as Nāgārjuna, philosophising in a strictly spiritual and soteriological context, argued that any action motivated by thoughts contaminated with the three poisonous emotions of attachment, hatred and delusion are non-virtuous and negative, whereas actions

⁷ *Aṅguttaranikāya*, iii, 415: “cetanahaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi, cetayitva kammaṃ karoti kayena vacaya manasa /

⁸ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamādhyamīkākārikā*, XVIII/ 2-3; Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa*, IV/1, Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvātāra*, VI/89

⁹ Nāgārjuna, *Ratnavālī*, I/20:

motivated by their three antidotal impulses are positive and virtuous. The latter are considered good because they bring forth happiness, and the former are considered evil as they entail suffering as their result. Thus, Buddhist thinkers propounded an axiological and teleological form of moral philosophy with subjective volition at its heart. This theory of karma as intention/volition and the law of corresponding causation that virtue causes happiness and non-virtuous actions cause suffering form the foundations of the edifice that is the Buddhist soteriological and ethical system.

Now, the law of karma, in spite of its philosophical profundity and practical complexity, is one of the most popular religious concepts. It is not merely an intellectual topic broached by philosophers and scholars but a belief espoused by the masses. In Bhutan, the law of karma often referred to as *le judre* or just *le*, certainly features as a very popular religious concept. People view it as an infallible law of virtuous actions leading to happiness and happy rebirth and non-virtuous actions leading to suffering and unhappy rebirth. When and where such conviction is fickle, several kinds of religious teachings and practices are also adopted to instil constant awareness of and steadfast certainty about the infallibility of the law. Giving it a role akin to that of God in theistic religions, *le judre* is also feared and seen as both the explanation for the past and present state of being and the answer for the future. To be a moral man is to abide by *le judre* through engaging in virtuous actions and eschewing non-virtuous actions. 'To have no [regard for] *le judre*' (*las rgyu 'bras med pa*) is to be morally unconscientious, irresponsible and reckless.

The application of *le judre* in recent years however found new socio-political ramifications, which diverged from the original religious purport. It acquired a new political dimension whereby regard for *le judre* got confounded with political loyalty and submission to the ruling power or *zhung* (*gzhung*). Those lacking loyalty and commitment to the government were often described as not having *le judre* because of their lack of the sense of political obligation and duty. It is this secondary application with a nationalistic interest that I call here secularised *le judre*.

The main shift from the original spiritual purport to this secularised use is in taking mental attitudes such as loyalty and gratitude to the state and the sovereign as intrinsically positive and in not placing virtuous and non-virtuous intention defined by the three positive and poisonous emotions at the centre of *le judre*. From a strictly Buddhist psychological viewpoint, loyalty and gratitude, like regret and zeal, are classified as neutral attitudes and are not virtues *per se*. Regret after doing a bad thing and zeal for a good cause are virtuous while regretting a good deed and

zeal in an evil project are non-virtuous. Likewise, the moral qualities of loyalty and gratitude are determined by their object and purpose; pledging loyalty and gratitude are not inherently virtuous actions and proper observance of *le judre* or the *vice versa*.

Furthermore, certain acts which can be considered admirable and noble deeds in secular and worldly respects can contradict the Buddhist theory of *le judre*. Killing even in defence of the country, for instance, is a non-virtuous act motivated by hatred instigated by attachment and thus against the first Buddhist precept of not taking life. Vasubandhu, an authority on Buddhist ethics, even goes so far as to argue that every member of battalion would incur the negative deed of taking a human life when one soldier from the battalion kills an enemy.¹⁰ These examples suffice to demonstrate that allegiance and loyalty to the state and government is not necessarily consonant with the Buddhist observance of *le judre*, and confounding *le judre* with political loyalty is an aberration from the original concept. Although in actual use, the distinction between the *le judre* which is a pure religious principle and the *le judre* with political connotation is blurred, there is certainly a serious disjunction between the two.

Tha Damtshig

The concept of *tha damtshig*, like *le judre*, has an Indian origin. In its religious application, the Tibetan term *dam tshig* is used to translate the Sanskrit word *samaya* and refers to the precepts of tantric practice. Giving its etymological explanation, scholars describe *damtshig* as a pledge which ought not be transgressed (*'da' bar bya ba ma yin pa'i tshig*). It denotes the many general (*spyi*), special (*khyad par*) and extraordinary (*lhag pa*) do's and don'ts an initiate is required to observe after receiving tantric initiations. Thus, it is mostly used in connection with esoteric tantric Buddhism rather than with philosophical *sūtra* Buddhism, in which equivalent terms such as *sdom pa* and *bslab pa* are commonly used.

The *damtshig* of tantric practices include a great number of obligatory precepts ranging from obeying one's guru and loving all fellow beings to performing ceremonies at the right time. Tantras also vary in the number and type of *damtshig*. The Kālacakra cycle, for instance, proclaims fourteen primary *damtshig* and numerous minor ones while others such as the *Guhyagarbha* have five primary and many auxiliary ones. *Damtshig*, as a solemn oath and code of practice for the highly revered and esoteric form of Buddhism, is seen with much awe and fear. The proper observance of *damtshig* rewards the practitioner

¹⁰ Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa*, V/72

with swift enlightenment but an infringement of it is said to cause rebirth in the deepest hell. Hence, the tantric path with its solemn *damtshig* is often compared to trapping a snake in a bamboo stem. There are only two polar exits. *Damtshig* is also seen as a binding force, which keeps the community or line of practitioners spiritually pure and soteriologically effective. Persons who have violated *damtshig*, especially by opposing their guru, are considered to be spiritually dysfunctional and corrupt and often excommunicated from the community of practitioners.

The religious understanding of *damtshig* as tantric precepts however got extended to several social and moral notions, attitudes and behaviours in worldly use. Supplied with the prefix *tha* (*mtha'*), taken from *las kyi mtha'* and denoting moral limitation or boundary, *damtshig* acquired a range of social meanings. It may also be noted that *tha damtshig* is used more frequently in Bhutan than in other Himalayan countries and done so mostly in a social context.

Tha damtshig, depending on the context, covers a wide range of referents including honesty, fidelity, moral integrity, moral rectitude, moral coherence, reciprocal affection, gratitude, filial piety, etc. To say a shopkeeper did not have *tha damtshig* when she overcharged or manipulated the scales meant the shopkeeper lacked honesty. A spouse with no *tha damtshig* generally referred to a lack of marital fidelity while *tha damtshig* in connection with teacher-student and master-servant relations usually referred to kindness, respect, gratitude and loyalty. Among family and friends, it denotes affection, a feeling of kinship and sense of obligation. A person generally described as not possessing *tha damtshig* is someone lacking personal integrity and moral rectitude, and an act lacking *tha damtshig* is one which is unethical. An important social concept, *tha damtshig* thus has a wide range of referents and applications. It is however not my intention here to delve into these nuances and connotations. This brief survey will, I hope, provide an adequate backdrop against which to discuss the recent use of *tha damtshig* with a political connotation.

By recent use, I am referring to the application of *tha damtshig* in a socio-political context, in which persons who failed to remain loyal to the state and the government were seen as persons without *tha damtshig*. *Tha damtshig* in this case is confounded with political loyalty and allegiance to the government. Just as there is the *damtshig* bond among a religious group and *tha damtshig* ties within families and friends, a political bond is perceived between the people and the government.

The government plays the role of the senior party and is to be seen as an object of service and gratitude whereas the individual citizens are considered as the recipients of social benefit, who ought to be obedient

and grateful. Partly a relic of the past social stratification, this notion of the government as a superior entity to be respected and served instead of an administrative body to represent and serve the people still dominates the Bhutanese perception of government.

In this context, to breach the political bond by displaying disobedience and revoking one's political allegiance is seen as lacking *tha damtshig*. This interpretation of *tha damtshig* with a political and nationalistic overtone has gained currency especially after the 'anti-national' movements in the southern and eastern districts of the country towards the end of the last century. Persons who went against the government and state, irrespective of their moral stance and observance of *tha damtshig* in all other senses, were branded as lacking *tha damtshig*.

This leads us to the imperative of defining the importance of the various moral obligations and social contracts an individual can have vis-à-vis his/her religious master, family, friends and ruler. Which of the *tha damtshig*: the religious bond with the guru and colleagues, the social ties with family and friends, or political allegiance, should receive priority? The answer perforce is bound to vary from one individual to another depending on variant backgrounds and circumstantial reasons and no unitary and arbitrary answer can prove viable under proper scrutiny.

Similarly, should *tha damtshig* be defined more by socio-political obligations and considerations than by personal integrity and moral rectitude? Should not social vices such as misappropriation, nepotism and other forms of corruption and poor work discipline, which constantly mar Bhutanese bureaucracy, be reckoned as grave a neglect of *tha damtshig* as disobedience and defiance of authority? In the face of sweeping materialism and the social vices such as corruption, nepotism and power abuse, is it not *tha damtshig qua* moral dignity and ethical conscientiousness which we need most, rather than *tha damtshig* as zealous and sycophantic loyalty? In raising these issues, I am not questioning the moral rectitude of our bureaucrats or proposing the preference of one form of *tha damtshig* over the others. Neither am I being cynical about social contracts, a subject which Uni Wikan and Adam Pain has touched during the conference. My intention is merely to stimulate a thorough going discussion of the wide ranging nuances, interpretations and applications of *tha damtshig* with a hope to unpack the complexities of so popular and important a concept.

Driglam Namzha

Unlike *le judre* and *tha damtshig*, the origin of *driglam namzha* is not bound by a religious context. Neither is the recent promotion of *driglam namzha* a politicised aberration of religious concepts as is the case with

the two earlier concepts, but a formal reinforcement of what was previously a diffused and spontaneous tradition. *Drig* (*sgrigs*) denotes order, conformity and uniformity. Thus *driglam* literally means the way or path (*lam*) having order and uniformity while *namzha* (*rnam gzhas*) refers to concept or system. *Driglam namzha* is thus a system of ordered and cultured behaviour, and by extension, the standards and rules to this effect. Whitecross, following Karma Ura, has rendered *driglam namzha* as “the way of conscious order” or “the way of conscious harmony”.¹¹ They seem to have confounded *namzha* – concept or system – with *rnam shes* – consciousness.

Driglam namzha is not concerned as much with moral and ethical do’s and don’ts, right or wrong and the philosophical theories thereof as is *le judre* or *tha damtshig*. It deals with more mundane issues of physical and verbal comportment determined as crude or courteous by the specific social and cultural contexts. Thus, as a concept of orderly good manners and uniform behaviour, it is a human concept universal to all societies and ages. However, in claiming the universality of good manners, I am not holding manners to be *etic*. Manners, like many socio-cultural things, is *emic* bound by culture and viable in specific social circumstances. Thus, the concept of etiquette is determined by cultural contexts.

Tradition claims the Bhutanese *driglam* to have started with the Buddhist *vinaya* just as *damtshig* originated in the tantras. For instance, comportments such as chuckling while you eat and prancing while you walk, which Bhutanese *driglam* considers unbecoming for a cultured person, are described in the *vinaya* as behavioural flaws to be eschewed by the monks. The highly regulated, disciplined and routinized life of the monks and nuns also sufficiently demonstrates how monastic life epitomises the practice of *drig*, true to the saying: *Grwa pa sdrig gis 'tsho* – Monks survive by rules. Thus, good manners in the Bhutanese context is to a great extent what Buddhist codes of physical, verbal and mental conducts dictate as proper and wholesome. In particular, the codes of practice which Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel introduced in the central monk body and in other monastic and administrative centres are largely based on the code of etiquette known among Tibetan Buddhist clergy and elites.

Although the origin of *driglam* can be attributed to Buddhist ethical practices, it is however difficult to speculate if any form of organized and institutionalised practice of *driglam* existed in Bhutan before the Zhabdrung. The Zhabdrung and his immediate circle perhaps can be

¹¹ Whitecross (2002), p. 88. See Ura (1997), p. 247

rightly credited with the earliest implementation of *driglam* as a formal practice at an institutional level. Nonetheless, it may be an exaggeration to argue that all Bhutanese *driglam* and etiquette originated with the Zhabdrung as some people have ventured to speculate. One certainly cannot deny that *driglam*, in the form of loose and informal adoption of proper behaviour and manners, existed even before the Zhabdrung and his establishment of organised institutions.

The first major modern discussion on *driglam* is perhaps the deliberation and the subsequent resolution passed during the 20th session of the National Assembly in 1963 requiring all Bhutanese to wear complete Bhutanese dress during formal occasions.¹² Nonetheless, the first occurrence of the term *driglam namzha* seems to be during the 51st session in 1979.¹³ With the onslaught of modernization and the insidious invasion of western culture, particularly among the youth, in the 1980s, the need to preserve Bhutanese *driglam namzha* became a national imperative and the issue surfaced frequently in the National Assembly. Linked with national identity, *driglam namzha* acquired a new political significance. The growing concern about the decline of Bhutanese customs and the need for strengthening *driglam namzha* culminated in the royal decree of 16 January 1989, a milestone in the history of *driglam namzha*. The late 80s thus marked the beginning of a systematic promotion of *driglam namzha*, particularly with the enforcement of the national dress. This period and subsequent years also saw the rise of both genuine awareness of *driglam namzha* and the ubiquitous and often hypocritical reiteration of it.

The serious concern that His Majesty, the King had regarding the fate of Bhutanese tradition in the face of rapid process of modernization at home and globalizing trend in the world at large, echoed across the upper strata of Bhutanese bureaucracy. However, for some, *driglam namzha* became a political catchphrase. The rhetorical and repetitious use of *driglam namzha* turned the issue into an empty slogan. I still remember an expatriate in 1986 criticising a senior official who visited schools giving lectures on the importance of Bhutanese tradition and language but had his children studying outside Bhutan with no knowledge of either the tradition or the language.

The qualms about declining tradition and lack of *driglam namzha* came simultaneously with the worry about increasing western influence on the Bhutanese people. This decline in the practice of Bhutanese etiquette and the acquisition of modern western influences occurred

¹² National Assembly Secretariat, (1998), vol. i, p. 129

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 13

mostly among the rising bureaucratic class and the affluent section of urban population. Ironically, the criticism regarding the deterioration of *driglam namzha* was also mainly voiced by the same people. The rural population on the whole was outside this arena being neither the critic nor targets of criticism. The call for *driglam namzha* and *dzongkha* and the complaints about modern western influences were criticisms of which the actual targets were mostly the circles of critics themselves. It was thus what Karma Ura calls 'a deflected criticism'.¹⁴

Furthermore, in spite of the constant reiteration of the problem of *driglam*, many professed promulgators of *driglam namzha* failed to address it even among their immediate circles. This consequently gave rise to suspicions and accusations of double standards in the implementation of *driglam namzha* and of using it as window dressing. The problem of the apparent double standard however is embedded in the tradition of *driglam* itself. In a situation where an inferior Bhutanese interacts with a senior one, *driglam* requires the inferior and younger to be refined and restrained in the presence of a senior while the senior person could enjoy the freedom of ease and comfort. It is not generally the case of exemplary manners, in which good manners are shown by superior and older people so as to inspire and impress the lower and younger ones, as it ideally should be and appears to be the case with comparable traditions like gentleman's manners in Britain. This trait of Bhutanese *driglam* seem to negatively affect the upper echelons of society in learning and inculcating *driglam namzha*, leaving them less cultured and experienced than persons from lesser backgrounds.

At about the same time, the perception and understanding of *driglam namzha* also began to change. While on one hand, *driglam namzha* continued to be used as a political rhetoric, on the other, it saw an unprecedented codification and systematisation. The last decade saw the publication of three different books on *driglam namzha* as well as the introduction of new norms such as the *tshoglam* rule. *Driglam namzha* came to be viewed more and more as the formal and structured display of official etiquette rather than as the fluid and spontaneous practice of good manners. Concerted efforts were made to systematise and standardise existent practices as well as to invent new ones. *Driglam namzha* was increasingly perceived as a social skill, which like other professional skills has been learnt through formal lessons from a qualified instructor instead of seeing it as good manners which can be inculcated by one's association with cultured people. In this way, *driglam* became increasingly an official idiom and became distanced from the concept of

¹⁴ Personal communication

good conduct in everyday life. It became associated with court behaviour and a structured set of conduct during official events. This formalisation and reification of what were formerly loose and spontaneous forms of refined comportment in different facets of life elevated *driglam* to the status of a systematic concept. It became a formal system, as the word *namzha* denotes.

It is in such systematisation, standardization and ‘invention of tradition’ that we can see the divergence of the former concept of *driglam* and the latter system of *driglam namzha*. Whitecross shows this distinction by contrasting *driglam namzha* and *beyzha* (*sbe''bad bzhaq*), a word which denotes manners without any connotation of formalization. He correctly highlights the importance of *beyzha* in daily life more than the systematized *driglam namzha*. However, in portraying *beyzha* as a behavioural concept, he also runs the risk of reifying and formalizing *beyzha*.¹⁵

The real spirit and beauty of *driglam qua* etiquette lies in the spontaneous practice and inner appreciation of it as wholesome conduct. Formalization and enforcement of it kills this spirit turning it into mechanical acts of obligation and duty. The arbitrary extension of tradition and customs both temporally and spatially can only yield a superficial impact and not an ingrained tradition. Tradition is an evolving phenomenon. It is not a static entity but a flux and its course of development, like fashion, is decided by what is right at the time. To hold onto to an out-dated custom which time has rendered ineffective and unappealing or to wilfully invent and introduce prematurely a new tradition are both to interfere in the natural course of tradition, and therefore rob tradition of its beauty and purpose.

Moreover, the imposition of one tradition across the board and the standardization of numerous variants destroy the diversity and the spontaneity of traditions. Have we then in the course of formalization on the one hand and through the rhetorical use on the other defeated the very purpose of *driglam namzha qua* good manners?

Tsawasum

Tsawasum (*rtsa ba gsum*), literally means the three roots or foundations. The tantric Buddhist *Tsawasum* refer to the triad of *guru* or *bla ma*, *devatā* or *yi dam* and *āḍikinī* or *mkha'* 'gro. They are roots because they serve as sources of blessings, attainments and activities respectively. Thus, *Tsawasum* in tantric Buddhism form a crucial category similar to the Three Jewels in general Buddhism and the concepts of trinity in other

¹⁵ Whitecross (2002), p. 71

religions. The *Tsawasum* to be discussed here however is an altogether different category although there is no doubt that the terminology has been appropriated from the tantric religious triad.

The first mention of *Tsawasum* with the socio-political referents appears in the *Khrims gzhung chen mo* first written in the 1950s. In the *Khrims gzhung chen mo*, the Country, King and Government are mentioned as *Tsawasum*.¹⁶ Dasho Singkhar Lam however remarks that the third King's intention was to enumerate the Government, Country and People as *Tsawasum*.¹⁷ The third King, he recollects, reasoned that the King, as a part of the government, need not be separated from the government. In addition to these two textual and oral versions of reckoning *Tsawasum*, there is the recent enumeration of *Tsawasum* comprising the King, Country and People.¹⁸

Although the concept of *Tsawasum* started in the 1950s, it did not figure as popular a concept then as it did during its re-emergence in the late 1980s. Probably the first officially documented reoccurrence of *Tsawasum* was in the 65th session of the National Assembly in 1989, when the 'anti-national' conspiracy through distribution of pamphlets and booklets was discussed and officially defined as an act of treason against the *Tsawasum*.¹⁹ Keeping in tune with the act in the *Khrims gzhung chen mo*, all persons who went against the *Tsawasum* were branded as *ngolops* or 'anti-nationals' and *Tsawasum* were hailed as the trinity of Bhutanese nationhood. In the wake of the political crisis and armed conflicts in the southern districts, *Tsawasum* became an iconic political category which people cited so profusely as the cause to fight for. Loyalty and service to *Tsawasum* became the mantra to excite patriotism and nationalism in order to combat the threats posed by the crisis. It served as a buzzword which encapsulated everything that is Bhutanese and that Bhutan stood for.

Tsawasum however soon suffered the same fate as *driglam namzha* in turning into a topic of empty rhetoric. People began to use it too frequently and lightly, often without even knowing what the *Tsawasum* are. As demonstrated by the anecdotes I have told above, most people are not aware of what the *Tsawasum* are and what significance they have. Many used it as an ingratiating slogan in their dealings with the King and the government. The welfare of *Tsawasum* became a new purpose for

¹⁶ IHo tsan ldan bkod pa'i zhing gi khrims gzhung chen mo, p. 136, n.p. n.d

¹⁷ Personal communication

¹⁸ See documents such as National Assembly Secretariat (1991), p. 2

¹⁹ See National Assembly Secretariat (1989), p. 9

community endeavours, giving rise to the concern that *Tsawasum* is being used too excessively and smarmily, depreciating its value.²⁰

The devaluation of *Tsawasum* at the hands of rhetoricians and sycophants is further compounded by the dearth of serious scholarship on the topic. Despite being a topic of national importance, *Tsawasum* remained a neglected topic with no proper study or analysis undertaken so as to build a firm philosophical grounding. The viability of *Tsawasum* as the trinity of Bhutanese nationhood was taken for granted and loyalty and service to *Tsawasum* were inculcated without adequate moral reasoning and justifications. This is perhaps acceptable in the current situation and fine to be left untouched out of benign neglect. Nevertheless, imagine, for instance, a scenario where the *Tsawasum* are in a conflict of interest and where simultaneous loyalty to all three become inconsistent and therefore cannot be sustained. Which of the three should take precedence? Should such a scenario arise, can the iconic triad even survive? Asking such questions are crucial to ensuring the credibility of our system, its plans, policies and visions, as most of them revolve round the theme of *Tsawasum*.

A primary thrust of promoting *Tsawasum* and of slogans such as 'One Nation, One People' appears to be the arousal of a fervent sense of nationalism. Yet, the very purpose and value of nationalism itself is ambiguous and a double-edged sword. Looking from a Buddhist perspective, sentient beings have the inborn inclination to love oneself and what is one's own. This attachment, of all negative impulses, is the main cause of problems in the world and the root of the cycle of existence. To further inculcate this in people is a superfluous effort and is only adding fuel to the fire.

Moreover, nationalism can lead to ethnic and regional particularism, religious sectarianism and ultimately individualism. Promoting nationalism in order to counteract an external threat can backfire in the form of internal segregation based on minor differences. The fanatical Hindu nationalism that wrecks our big neighbour India is a stark example of how nationalism that was nurtured and taught in order to oppose an external enemy has outlived the enemy, bringing so much discord and violence in the country.

A similar sense of misgiving can also be felt with regard to our tendency for homogeneity that dictums like 'One Nation, One people' encourage. Homogenisation through the implementation of uniform values and customs, and standardization of localised variations, I have

²⁰ I heard a senior citizen remark during the recess of last National Assembly session: "Even reciting the *mDo mangs* or performing a *lha bsang* is proclaimed to have been done in service to the *Tsawasum* nowadays."

mentioned earlier, kills the spirit of tradition and subverts the policy of cultural preservation. Although it may serve some national interests temporarily, it will in the long run destroy the diverse spectrum of our priceless heritage. Thus, it is not a homogeneous and monotonous system that should form our future vision but unity in diversity and harmony within multiplicity.

Now, to turn to some concluding words, it may perhaps be quite fitting to conclude my discussion of the themes with a story of Drukpa Kunley that I heard as a young boy from my father sitting by the family hearth. Drukpa Kunley was once circumambulating the Jokhang in Lhasa when he found a man meditating legs crossed and eyes shut. Upon enquiring, the man told Drukpa Kunley that he was practicing patience. Drukpa Kunley, as mischievous as always, repeated the same question every time he went round the Jokhang. The more he asked, the more agitated and angry the man became and at about the fifth round, the man chased Drukpa Kunley with vehement anger, while Drukpa Kunley ran about shouting "The practitioner of patience is coming to beat me". Drukpa Kunley was a social and religious critic *par excellence*. With zest for humour and wit, he showed that the practice of patience is not about meditating crossed legged with eyes closed but about tolerating irritation, annoyance and hardship in every walk of life. This anecdote thus captures a vivid picture of how disparate verbal claims and applied practices can be and how the fruits of real purpose can be often obscured by the foliage of rhetorical speech.

A major problem concerning the Bhutanese social themes also appears to be the disparity between word and deed. Mention is made of all the themes but mostly as insincere and rhetorical remarks to embellish orations and speeches. In spite of the repetitious use made almost to the extent of obfuscating other concrete issues, no proper measures have been taken either to give these issues a philosophical and moral layout and grounding or to systematically relate them to the frugal life of the villages. What moral and social purposes do the promotion of these as national themes serve? What pragmatic relevance do they have with respect to an individual, a family, a village and the nation as a whole? For themes of great value and national importance, there are too many assumptions unaccounted for and questions unanswered. Questions are indeed eternal; they are forever. Answers are only for now.²¹

²¹ I owe this piece of wisdom to Prof. Richard Gombrich.

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