

Keynote Address by His Excellency Minjur Dorji, the Home Minister of Bhutan

It is with honour that the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs and the Centre for Bhutan Studies, on behalf of the Royal Government of Bhutan, welcome eminent members of the Buddhist scholarly community to this important international conference. At a time when we are all faced with existential questions concerning our very survival on this earth through many complications brought about in large measures by the degeneration of our time-honoured values, this conference presents an ideal opportunity to sit back and reflect on what is best in our collective wisdom through millennia of our shared Buddhist civilisation. Buddhism has often been likened to a medicine for illness and it is true that the vast range of Buddhist philosophy contains in it solutions to all life situations. Through scientific proposition of knowledge, Buddhism presents a guide to an ideal way of life, which if we all follow, should see us get rid of our predicaments at this moment of time. Buddhism provides guidance both for advance practitioners and lay followers to live their lives along principles of virtue and righteousness. Buddhism encourages, through its precepts, wholesome living which will ultimately lead to peace and harmony within ourselves and among our fellow beings.

I would like to say that the choice of the venue in Bhutan increases the potential benefits of this conference. As you would have seen in your travel through the country, Bhutan has a living heritage of Buddhism that assimilates the wellness of centuries of Buddhist wisdom into the daily lives of the people. People follow the Buddhist way of life with its stress on wholesome existence that must necessarily accommodate the wellbeing of all. In the end, in a cyclical chain of distributing wellbeing, Bhutanese in turn enjoy a sustained supply of the means to peace and harmony.

It must be mentioned here that keeping alive this tradition has been a conscious decision on the part of the Wangchuck Dynasty, the Royal Government and the people of Bhutan. We have been trying to hold onto our Buddhist traditions which have been the source of our wellbeing in the face of the often disorienting pace of modernisation and development. Through such policies as Gross National Happiness, which tries to ensure wholesome wellbeing, the Bhutanese state has long been stressing on maintaining a right balance in life that will guarantee that all those aspects of our life that deserves attention get due care. The result is that we have much of our heritage, natural and built, intact. We also enjoy much the same level of faith in this heritage as any of our preceding generations. It has often been noticed that as the level of development increases, an irreconcilable gulf opens up between people's faith such as Buddhism and their material aspirations. Bhutan has been trying to avoid this pitfall by trying to

balance its national ideals and goals with its spirituality. The Gross National Happiness concept, which enjoys wide acclaim and has been adopted by international bodies such as the United Nations, has helped maintain this harmony.

At this moment, I think there is a need to recall the history of Bhutan which is permeated with Buddhism from time immemorial, and thus created conditions ripe for a continuous and sustained influence of Buddhism on the people. The Bhutanese people's memory of our history stretches as far back as the second century when Indian Buddhist influence reached the country. However, it was the building of two temples by the Tibetan King Songtsem Gampo in the seventh century that is held as a landmark. The two temples of Kichu in Paro and Jampa in Bumthang were built at strategic locations of the then Tibetan empire. Subsequently, the arrival of the Indian saint Guru Padmasambhava brought Vajrayana Buddhism which was to change the religious and cultural landscape of Bhutan. From that time onwards, many renowned Tibetan Buddhist saints, who often came for pilgrimage or to escape political turmoils in their motherland, spread the Dharma and increased the popular acceptance of Buddhism among the people. Some of them like Lam Drukpa Kuenley even attained cult hero status among the people with his widely popular method of transmission. However, it was with the arrival of a seventeenth century Tibetan Prince Hierarch, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel that Buddhism attained state sovereignty in Bhutan. Under a widely popular Buddhist state, Bhutan was unified and came to be in its present form. For the first time in its history, national laws based on Buddhist precepts were promulgated and enforced with wide abidance on the part of the people. Transgression was similarly discouraged. In 1907, the political scene of Bhutan took a turn with the establishment of the Wangchuck Dynasty. However, the faith, patronage and acceptance of Buddhism as the sole guiding light of the country remained the same. Buddhist monasteries retained much of its parallel spiritual rights.

What is interesting in all these developments is the position of Bumthang. Bumthang is held as the spiritual heartland of the country. It is literally an epoch making place. Guru Rinpoche turned the wheel of the Dharma predominantly from this place. Places like Kurjey, which means where the print of the master's body remain, is a testimony to this period of history. Bumthang also saw many other Buddhist luminaries leave their mark. Foremost among them is Kuenkhen Longchen Rabjam, a Tibetan Buddhist master who wrote a glowing eulogy of the place in which he describes in flowing verses the sanctity and greatness of this ancient land. Bumthang is also the birthplace of Bhutan's own Buddhist master Terton Pema Lingpa in the sixteenth century. He revealed many Buddhist treasures supposedly kept to be revealed at appropriate moments in time for the wellbeing of all beings. Today, his tradition of Buddhism flourishes in this sacred

valley and beyond.

Thus, Bhutan is a place that has received many great Buddhist masters who have left an indelible mark on the people that continues to endure to this day. Supportive state policies in this new millennium have ensured that Buddhism continues to be the single most dominant influence on the life of the Bhutanese people.

Buddhism in the 21st century has become increasingly globalised, and there is at present a growing international interest in furthering the discussion on the creative and innovative applications of the Buddhist philosophy and ideology across the spectrum of creative and academic fields including, but not limited to, liberal arts, humanities, social, environmental and economic studies, conflict resolution and mediation methods, medical and cognitive sciences, as well as the ever expanding field of technological advancements.

Therefore, a discussion that at once transcends nations and cultures, while at the same time drawing upon the rich tapestry of Buddhist diversity inbuilt in them, will offer a unique opportunity to exchange perspectives on the changes and challenges that we as Buddhists face in today's world by affording an assortment of analysis and interpretations of the main Buddhist philosophy and the various schools of thought emanating from it. The opportunity for creative discussions and shared explorations of Buddhist insights, interpersonal social exchanges and their application in today's world amongst a cross section of Buddhist nations and cultural set-ups will pave the way for key future collaborations in shaping and propagating the timeless Buddhist values as a shared global interest for the wellbeing of all beings. Building a trans-national and cross-cultural network of Buddhist community is therefore considered a vital link in this process.

The Conference will hold discussions on a wide range of traditional Buddhist motifs and emerging developments in the global Buddhist scenario which increasingly encompass all aspects of the modern life. The Conference is thus categorized into the following seven themes.

1. Buddhist Scholarship: Ideals, History and Ethnography
2. Business, Polity, Leadership and the Buddhist Values
3. The Art of Buddhist Living
4. Buddhist Ethics and Environmentalism
5. Cyber Buddhism and the New-Age Buddhist Expression
6. Buddhist Welfare
7. Buddhist Multiculturalism and Reconciliatory Dialogues

As a leader in the field of cultural and religious studies in Bhutan and the region, the Centre for Bhutan studies and the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs will

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organize the Conference in its continuing effort to promote research, scholarship, dialogue and a greater understanding of the Buddha Dharma as a measure to bolster the critical position of Bhutan as the Mecca of the Buddhist world which feeds the emerging Buddhist vision of the world in bringing about world peace, harmony and wholesome wellbeing. We hope that in the process, Bhutan's proud Buddhist traditions and heritages will stand to gain from an input of diverse and new leads from the evolution of global Buddhism.

As exposure increases, critical examinations of Buddhism and its components, including traditional Buddhist leaders and their sects, are inevitable. Indeed, they are even necessary. Afterall, Buddhism has always promoted critical dialogues. Our Buddhist sutras stand testimony to this fact. From the pre-conference materials, I can see that there will be constructive critique of Buddhism as it forays into previously unknown territories. However, I am excited to see Buddhist scholars counter, through their diligent academic expositions, any negative opinions and misconceptions that might be in the making.

At the end of the conference, the papers presented during the conference will be published as a book in an effort to sustain the interest in cooperation generated from this conference.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank and congratulate all the participants who constitute eminent members of the global scholarly Buddhist community for participating in this important conference. We hope that you will gain immensely from this experience in a land where Buddhism is a way of life. With the arrangements for pilgrimage that the organizers have made, I hope you have an enriching time in our country.

Thank you and Tashi Delek