

Keynote Address

Responsiveness and Adaptability: Insights into Leadership in Turbulent Times: Some Personal Reflections...

Our world is filled with myriad stimuli – that our senses receive all the time. The universe opens up to us as we open up our faculties – the eyes that see and receive the world; the ears that hear and bring the world to us; the hands that touch and feel the nature of objects around us; the nose that smells and registers the pleasant and the unpleasant smells that surround us, and the tongue that tastes informs us of the quality of what we eat and drink. This is how we register the stimuli generated by the environment around us.

The sharper our senses, the stronger our response or responsiveness to them, and the greater is our ability to deal with our environment.

We can also choose to shut our senses to the stimuli around us – the eyes that see, we often use them to unsee; the ears that hear, we often use them to unhear; the heart that feels, we often use it to unfeel...each to our choice, each to our capacity, each to our outlook...

But sometimes, we have no choice but to respond...

How do the stimuli come to us? They come in accordance with the normal order of the universe; but they often come in discordance with our expectations and knowledge. In the former case, we have the benefit of prior experience to deal with the situation. In the latter case, we are caught unawares; we have no wherewithal to respond immediately to the abnormal predicament.

Our response too is either one of acceptance or of panic. It is normal to expect monsoon rains in summer and cold blasts in winter. But it will be an abnormal occurrence to experience blistering cold in summer and sweltering heat in winter. But in the rapidly changing circumstances, we are required to adapt all the time. Our ability to adapt also determines our chances of survival. This explains why the dinosaurs became extinct long ago.

Human beings have an incredible ability to adapt to different circumstances – we can live in peace as well as in war, in constant conflict with one another or as cooperating neighbours and good friends, as creators and destroyers; we can live in love and in hatred, as caring human beings or as sinister rivals, as jungle-dwellers and hunters and as home-makers and city-lovers, as instruments of harmony and trust or as the cause of misery and mutual destruction.

Responsiveness and adaptability may fall within the domain of the possible and the desirable. Imagine that there is a problem. One can respond to it either by being a part of the problem in which case the problem becomes bigger and often defies solution. Or, one can be a part of the solution and the problem becomes smaller and within the range of solution. We can move on then.

Adaptability too can be examined from at least two perspectives. One can adapt to the situation quickly and move forward confidently. However, one could also adapt oneself with an unhealthy situation or an ignoble act. Being comfortable with an ethically wrong situation reduces the person and degrades him or her.

As a people, we Bhutanese are quite fast to adapt and adjust wherever we are. This ability can be both an asset as well as a liability to ourselves as individuals

as well as to our country collectively. Take, for example, our changing values and lifestyles vis-à-vis our rich cultural heritage and worldview!

Ethical or moral greenery in “My Green School” examines an individual’s capacity to distinguish between categories of values – right from wrong, truth from falsehood or untruth, good from evil or bad. This is a test of leadership.

In turbulent times, our responsiveness and adaptability are guided by the force of unfolding events and pervading circumstances.

We live in one of the most turbulent times in human history. We built the giant superstructure of the United Nations Organisation ‘to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war’. But some of the most unjust and unjustified wars are taking place even as we speak now, even as the world watches on helpless or indifferent, even as millions are killed or displaced or dispossessed for no fault of their own.

The peace of our Mother Earth is so often sabotaged by the sirens of air-strikes and explosions of killer bombs.

And, there is turbulence caused by the actions of human beings against other human beings often by accident but so often through cold calculation and deliberate choice. We threaten the fragile ecosystem of our seas, our lands and our sky inexorably leading to disastrous global warming and climate change with devastating consequences on all forms of life – human, animal, plant, bird, reptile, and other myriad beings that share this planet with us the human of the species.

Political turbulence in many nations continues to deprive their citizens of the benefit of peace and stability, and thereby the opportunities of progress and development.

Economic inequities and material disparities are other contributors to turbulence in many parts of the world where a tiny minority appropriates the lion’s share of the world’s resources leaving the vast majority to fend for themselves with the leftovers.

Collapse of the moral order is perhaps the single most consequential cause of general turbulence in the world today. The breakdown of humanity’s sustaining ethical values and moral foundations fosters the unscrupulous game of might being right and the survival of the fittest in a zero-sum game of destructive competition.

Mass media, both mainstream and social media, can cause cravings out of proportion to one’s capacity for fulfilment or by creating an illusionary world that can suck the soul out of unsuspecting individuals, especially children and youth, and carry the potential to create unmanageable turbulence in those who cannot distinguish between the real and the make-believe.

And, then there are obvious and deep-seated mental, emotional, psychological upheavals and turbulences that individuals, families, institutions, societies and nations go through at different times in their lives with varying degrees of gravity and consequences.

Thrown into the maelstrom of unrelenting turbulence that we face today, what kind of leadership do we need or look for?

In moments of uncertainty or crisis, true leaders execute two vital roles, among others. They provide clarity to the challenges of the moment. And, they provide confidence and hope to look to the future.

Let's look at a few examples of leaders who delivered their citizens through crises and saved their nations and their sovereignty – Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Druk Gyal Zhipa, Druk Gyal Ngapa...

When our country was infested by armed militants from across the border, for instance, Druk Gyal Zhipa Jigme Singye Wangchuck, could have simply ordered the army to fight the enemy and chase them out of the country. But, the King took it upon himself to face the foe and liberate our country from a most grave crisis with extraordinary leadership and statesmanship.

That was Bhutan's finest hour as the turbulence of a 10-year old insurgency gave way to peace and security to Druk Yul.

Similarly, when the threat of Covid-19 engulfed the country, His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck could have just directed the Prime Minister and the Health Minister to address the threat of the global pandemic. However, the King rose to the occasion and took charge of the national effort to resolve the unprecedented situation with courage and tenacity unmindful of the risk to His own Royal Person.

Bhutan was at her best as the turbulence caused by an invisible enemy has been contained as the country came together as a family under His Majesty's incredible leadership.

Look at President Zelensky of Ukraine! US President Joe Biden offered to fly him out of the country as soon as the Russian invasion of the peaceful country began on 24th March 2022. "I need ammunition, not a joy-ride", was President Zelenkey's reply. The comedian-turned politician has withstood the onslaught of the biggest army in the world with incredible courage and remained a symbol of hope and strength of the brave Ukrainian people under attack.

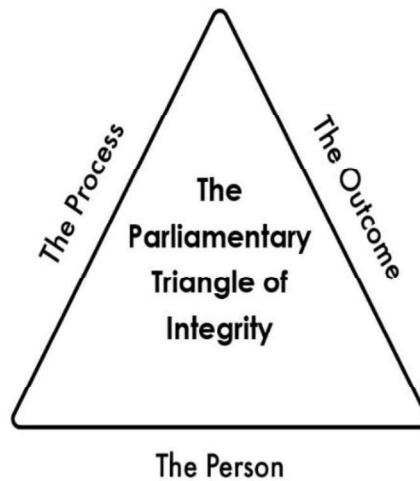
At a more personal and immediate level, the qualities of leadership required in turbulent times include:

- Strength of Character
- Discipline, self-discipline
- Faith
- Integrity
- Resilience
- Perseverance
- Positive Outlook

One of the defining qualities of leaders in turbulent times is that they are with the people, not above them or distant from them. Look at the examples of our 'servant kings' – Druk Gyal Sumpa travelling incognito, Drukgyal Zhipa fighting with the soldiers, Drukgyal Ngapa leading from the front, and countless travels across the risk-prone areas...

The true test of leadership is the leader's ability to discover and live out the soul of their role – calling up leadership in the leader. A moment at Phuentsholing Middle Secondary School Morning Assembly – what does a minister do?

My conception of The Triangle of Parliamentary Integrity may be relevant to all public roles! Integrity is the distinguishing element at all levels across roles and occupations – the person, the process, and the outcome.



Disruptions caused by the virus-pandemic, peer-pressure, cut-throat competition, unemployment, break-down of traditional support networks, mistaken notion of democracy, rising cost of living, mass media could all be contributors to our own share of turbulence in big ways and in ways small.

In these challenging times, it is important to keep faith in ourselves and secure our own centre of self, cultivate resilience and the goodness, honour the preciousness and integrity of life – Milu Rinpoche.

Find your own North Star and steady the ship of your life even in the midst of turbulence. Like all human things, even turbulence does not last forever.

What is more? With all its imperfections, the world is still a good place. And, despite all its aches and agonies, life is still beautiful and precious and worth-preserving and celebrating.

Take charge and forge ahead, ride the storm and celebrate the triumph.

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A few reflections on the conference theme: Thakur S Powdyel, former Minister of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan.