Keynote Address: Mindfulness without Meditation

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It is said the Lord Buddha's teachings are categorized into eighty-four thousand bhumis. Each of them teaches sentient beings the path to awakening based on their individual disposition and karmic situation. The diversity and profundity of the teachings are indeed overwhelming for ordinary people. Only a few adepts or gifted persons may have the merit to study and master all of these teachings. Yet all the complexity and profundity of the teachings can be narrowed down, it is said, to three fundamental essences crystallized in the following saying, "commit no evil, persevere in good deeds and control your mind; that is the teaching of the Awakened One!" The first two lead to the third one, which indeed is the most important path, and also the result!

All schools of Buddhism teach various methods of controlling the mind or mindfulness practice. The signature practice is meditation, which ultimately leads to wisdom (*ye shes*) by gaining insight into the nature of reality. In the Nyingma school, the two-stage path is called *khregs chod* and *thod rgal,* whereas, in Kagyu, it is *gzhi gnas* and *lhag mthong*. Again, each of these paths has different stages through which a qualified and realised masters guide their students. But for ordinary people without immersion in the sutras and tantras as well as cross-legged meditation sessions, mindfulness practice may sound unrealistic. Of course, we can engage in virtuous activities and avoid non-virtuous ones to accumulate merit. But for enlightenment, merit accumulation alone does not suffice. We need to accumulate wisdom as well. And that is possible only through the third essence, controlling our mind. So, for ordinary people, is this really possible? The answer we hear is a big Yes. And the path that must be pursued is in no way smaller or lower than those whose pursuits are more esoteric and tantric. When built into the bustling and cacophonic routines of their everyday lives, this mindfulness practice is as potent for liberation as an ascetic in a solitary, serene cave. Stories of some of the eighty-four great mahasiddhas of India come to mind. Some of them were carpenters, tailors, wood-gatherers, farmers, prostitutes, etc. Yet they did it!

How is this even possible? Today, we hear great masters telling us to eat, talk, walk, watch TV, wash dishes and brush our teeth mindfully. That may sound like a joke, but it is not! That's building mindfulness into every mundane activity in life. Focus and non-distraction in every small thing we do, even momentarily,

ultimately go into the accumulation of wisdom. Our judgmental mind, however, immediately throws up these questions: Where is the spirituality in being mindful while washing dishes? Where is this sense of the sacred and holy in mindful eating or drinking? After all, shouldn't some prayers be said, mantras recited, and prostrations done before a mindfulness practice session? Thus, our conception of mindfulness is deeply entrenched with a perceived sense of the sacral, which we associate with prayers, prostrations, circumambulations, offerings and blessings. Without these elements or accoutrements for holy packaging, our mindfulness practice in daily activities might appear barren or bereft of the spiritual dimension. On the other extreme is mindfulness entrepreneurship. These days, people who are stressed out with work or relationships are administered courses on mindfulness to detox, de-stress and detach. The therapeutic approach to mindfulness practice does not even care an ounce about any spiritual content.

Driglam Namzha (*sgrig lam rnam bzhag*), in my view, is indeed the path of mindfulness practice integrated into everyday conduct and activities that even ordinary and illiterate people can pursue. Through such an integrated practice, what otherwise are routine and mundane activities get transformed into spiritual and artistic expressions. It is about being mindful and also graceful. Mindfulness blends with elegance. Driglam Namzha elevates everyday actions of body, speech and mind into high art and expresses the essence of Bhutanese culture, which is deeply influenced by Buddhist values. One can compare it with the simple act of drinking green tea in Japan, which has been perfected to such high art in the tea ceremony. There is something very zen-like when we talk or walk mindfully. Yet Driglam Namzha has been represented simply as a code of conduct or social etiquette, which completely misses the point! It is perceived as a behavioral modus operandi for people when they meet or are in attendance with senior government officials.

Driglam really means the path of harmony or unity. Namzha is a system, order or category. Hence, we can define Driglam Namzha as a category of the path of harmonious or unified pursuit or practice. To many of us who learnt Driglam Namzha as the correct ways of wearing *bkab ne* and *ra chu*, sitting down and standing up properly, bowing down to officials of different ranks, carrying files to our bosses, etc., it appears very mechanical. What most of us are yet to understand is that the basis of Driglam Namzha is the Vinaya rules (*'dul wa*), which Lord Buddha prescribed for the Sangha. One of the first compositions of Zhabdrung Rinpoche after his arrival in Bhutan was a set of rules known as *bCa' yig chen mo* for the monastic body founded at Chari around 1622. The main

responsibility of the monk official called *Chos khrims pa* was to enforce these rules, which were based on the Vinaya.

As monk rulers and officials with monastic backgrounds increasingly took positions for secular administrations after the founding of the Bhutanese state around 1627, Driglam Namzha expanded from the spiritual realm to that of the secular order. The twenty-four Druk Desis out of the fifty-nine who ruled the country between 1651 and 1906 were ordinary people who were neither monks nor had a strong monastic background. However, their principal qualification for the highest office was mastery and perfection of Driglam Namzha, which was achieved by being involved early on in their lives with services associated with the monastic state's administration – so much so that the state of Palden Druk Zhung was also defined by and associated with Driglam Namzha in many ways.

In Buddhism, whatever practices devotees engage in, we generally do so in front of representations of the body, speech and mind of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. We refer to them as *sku gsung thugs rten*. The word *rten* can be translated as practice support and is key to understanding what the other three means for our practice. Whether we offer seven bowls of water daily, light butter lamps or incense, make prostrations, etc., we tend to do so in front of a statue, stupa or holy scripture. Some faiths misunderstood this as idol worship. On the contrary, Buddhists use them as principal practice support. Where such practice supports are not available when at home, herding cows, going for a walk or travelling in a bus, the devotees first bring to their mind Lord Buddha, Guru Padmasambhava, Zhabdrung Rinpoche or their own gurus before reciting prayers or mantras. Vajrayana Buddhism teaches us that one's guru is the real Buddha, the best among Buddhas! To think of him, pray to him, and yearn for him as much as possible is regarded as the principal practice. Thinking of one's guru is mindfulness practice at its best. To help us think of him, we take support of the representations, which may be a statue, a painting, a scripture or anything associated with him. When we make offerings to these representations, we are not engaging in idol worship but offering it to our guru, the Buddha, which they represent. Of course, these representations are generally consecrated and are not mere physical matter.

Vajrayana Buddhism teaches us that our guru is not external to us but is an external projection of our own enlightened mind. That quality known by various names, such as Buddha nature, primordial mind, tathagatha garbha, wisdom essence, etc., is said to be inherent in all sentient beings. This thought and belief are a fundamental characteristic of Buddhism. We are taught that although each

of us has that Buddha nature, we have not seen it, felt it, or experienced it since it lies hidden beneath layers of delusions accumulated over countless lifetimes. We continue to accumulate them driven by various causes called the three poisons (*dug gsum*) of attachment (*'dod chags*), anger (*zhe sdang*) and delusion (*gti mug*). Thus, we wander in samsara for aeons, although samsara is a creation of our own minds. To liberate us from the very samsara we created for ourselves, no god in heaven can lend a helping hand. We cannot rely on an external god to dispel those heavy layers of delusion so that our Buddha nature is revealed. We are on our own. We have to rely on ourselves. We are our own masters. It is up to each one of us to either thicken those layers further or gradually remove them. What the Buddha taught in the eighty-four thousand bhumis are ways to remove them. To do so, we rely on a teacher, a master, a guru or a lama. Through his guidance, we practice to see our own mind, that Buddha nature. To see the mind, we begin by controlling it. To control it, we need his guidance and blessings. When we see that enlightened mind, we see the naked face of the guru. A popular supplication prayer to one's guru thus ends with these lines, "The one who points out my own mind as the dharmakaya, I supplicate at the foot of my precious guru!"

Vajrayana Buddhism teaches us that devotion to one's guru is the best path to accelerated liberation. By relying on him, it is said that liberation is possible in a single lifetime. Instantly, this is dismissed as blind faith, cultist, hero-worship or evidence of Buddhist fundamentalism. To reiterate the earlier point, the guru may appear as a person who guides and teaches us to see the nature of our own mind. However, he is us, our own enlightened quality and not someone who is different and dissociated from us. That is why the Guru-Yoga practice, which is deemed the highest practice in Vajrayana Buddhism, begins with the visualization of our guru as the Buddha, followed by recitation of his name or mantras, making supplications to him, and ending with him dissolving into our own mind. That process of dissolution symbolizes the undivided nature of one's mind with that of one's guru, the so-called end of dual perception! Now, in all these, how do we locate and understand Driglam Namzha as a means to control our minds?

It is important to highlight that the Vinaya rules and conduct inform and define Driglam Namzha. What has been labelled as the Bhutanese social code of conduct are those derived and appropriated from the spiritual code of conduct taught by the Enlightened One and certainly nativized by the Bhutanese with a strong local flavour. Hopefully this factor can lay to rest anyone who doubts the

absence of a sanctified base for seemingly mechanical body movements, actions and gestures associated with Driglam Namzha.

Most of the Driglam Namzha courses and sessions are taught in reference to an authority. For example, how should we sit, stand or eat in the presence of a superior? How should we bow to a minister or a secretary? How should we serve dishes first and then collect plates and cups after a meal? How should we even sweep the floors using a broomstick in a large gathering with senior people? Using the figure of authority as a point of reference has created the notion that Driglam Namzha is about discipline and proper conduct in the presence of someone superior in rank, position and authority.

The figure of the authority was initially the authority of dharma. He may be a great mahasiddha, a *rin po che*, a yogi, a dharmaraja or one's own guru. This figure of spiritual authority has extended to the secular realm even as lay officials and civilians increasingly assumed authority of governance during the time of the monastic regime (1627-1906). Secular administration gained more prominence following the founding of a Buddhist monarchy in 1907, and yet, its ethos and values have not been detached from the monastic moorings. Whether in its spiritual or temporal form, the figure of authority has to be seen as an important support for the practice of Driglam Namzha. As Buddhist leaders, their temporal authority is not devoid of the spiritual qualities. In their presence, elements of mindfulness, style, and grace are introduced into whatever we do. When we are alone, we could least care about how we eat or sit. It could be very mindless or careless.

The first point of Driglam Namzha is that the figure of an authority induces a form of mindful behaviour. This practice, on a daily basis, eventually becomes habitual, that at some point of time in our lives, we do things at our homes or when we are alone just as we would do in the presence of an authority. This is indeed the primary goal of the practice of Driglam Namzha. This is like a Buddhist practitioner who starts his or her practice by using the representations of body, mind and speech of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as support. Eventually, he or she can practice anywhere without such material or physical support. In other words, the dedicated, daily practice of Driglam Namzha conditions our body and speech to align with the presence of the mind, leading to mindful behaviour and conduct. That is the path of harmony or unity, of the body and speech with that of the mind!

The second point is that the figure of authority induces or rather requires a behaviour that is humble and respectful. Yes, Driglam Namzha is about doing things mindfully but also humbly and respectfully. Even if that figure of authority is someone we may have reservations about, the environment in which we find ourselves with him or her or the socio-political relationship we may be engaged in prescribes the need to be respectful and humble. What is prioritized in this case is not about personal likes and dislikes but the values of humility and respect that underpin Driglam Namzha.

The third point is its artistic quality. How we usually sit, eat, drink, talk and walk acquires an element of grace and elegance. Since the practice of Driglam Namzha is about being mindful and humble, habitual activities are transformed into artistic performativity. Take for example, the style and process of serving beverages, fruits and other edibles during a traditional ceremony called *zhugdrel* (*bzhugs gral*) which precedes some important official or state functions. In this ceremony, a pair of servers must synchronize their gestures and movements in perfect harmony. This is not possible without being mindful. Guests and participants are served beverages and fruits in very small portions. The ceremony begins by serving three types of beverages, one after the another. The manner in which teapots are first held at shoulder-level and then lowered, the gesture of pouring the tea on the palm, mimicry of tasting the tea and that of wiping the palm, raising the tea-pot back to shoulder-level and simultaneously walking towards guests or officials to start serving requires practice, precision and perfection. The persons who serve the guests in a prescribed sequence following a customary tradition is classic example of how the otherwise normal act of serving tea and snacks gets elevated and transformed into high art.

The fourth point concerns the flexibility and convenience of the practice of Driglam Namzha. Without reciting sutras or mantras, making prostrations in a temple or altar room, or going on retreats, mindfulness can be practiced at home or work anytime, anywhere. In this case, everything we do in life can be used as a means for mindfulness practice. This does not demean the great value of sitting cross-legged on a cushion, focusing on the inhalation and exhalation of one's breath, watching the rise and dissolution of thoughts and trying not to get caught in what arises or does not arise. For ordinary folks or otherwise, Driglam Namzha provides the next best alternative for going about the routines of our daily lives but being mindful occasionally about how we go about by integrating elements of humility and respectfulness.

The fifth point is about the nature of reciprocity between the figure of authority and the other person or persons. The general perception is that Driglam Namzha is a one-way traffic seemingly applicable to ordinary people during their encounters, personal or official, with those in positions of authority. This is a distorted understanding of what Driglam Namzha prescribes. In the first place, even those in the highest positions of secular or spiritual authority practice Driglam Namzha. The figure of authority whom they use as support for practice may be their masters, parents, national symbols, etc. Thus, it is not true that Driglam Namzha is a prescription of how ordinary people should behave in front of superiors. Then again, Driglam Namzha requires those in positions of authority to reciprocate the gesture of respect shown to them by others. They cannot be dismissive or distanced! Whether through bodily gestures, speech or otherwise, they are expected to reciprocate that humility and respect shown to them. Hence, rather than being a one-way traffic or top-down relationship, Driglam Namzha calls for an equal relationship enacted by mutual respect and reciprocity, whatever one's position may be in society.

The final and most crucial point is that the dedicated practice of Driglam Namzha can bring about liberation and awakening. There is this story of an old farmer who joined the monastic body in Punakha Dzong at an advanced age. He had no monastic education or background. All he knew was the supplication prayer to Zhabdrung Rinpoche. But he took Driglam Namzha as his principal practice. Whatever he did: eating, sitting, standing, walking, sleeping, etc., he did them mindfully. To help him in this mindfulness practice, he just recited the supplication prayer. At his death, it is said that a rainbow covered his corpse for seven days as a mark of the realization that he had attained. Similarly, a local chief in Punakha is also said to have attained what is called a rainbow-body (*'ja lus*) by taking Driglam Namzha as his lifelong practice. Such is the power of its blessings!

Driglam Namzha undoubtedly has its Buddhist origins but found its expressions and applications in the personal lives of ordinary people as well as those engaged in public services. However, it has not been taken out of its Buddhist moorings. The monastic communities of different schools and, indeed, the Central Monastic Body or Zhung Dratshang (*gZhung graw tshang*) are the custodians of the form and essence of Driglam Namzha. Many of us think that Driglam Namzha is only in the secular domain. That is not true. While members of the sangha pursue the studies of sutras and tantras, rituals and meditations, they have not abandoned Driglam Namzha. In fact, whatever other practices they do, they integrate it with the routine practice of Driglam Namzha. This does not

mean that the practice of Driglam Namzha is only for Buddhist monks or laity. Over the centuries, it has become part of the larger Bhutanese culture and identity. Mindfulness practice is not a monopoly of any particular faith or social class. The attraction and appeal of Driglam Namzha is that even ordinary people without any education, monastic or modern, can practice it with ease and convenience in all life situations and be confident of the liberation one can provide for oneself! Driglam Namzha connects our thoughts and actions with our mind, the enlightened essence of our being. It provides that space and mode of practice to control one's own mind, which is the essence of the eighty-four thousand teachings of the Buddha! It is practicing meditation in motion or mindfulness without meditation!