

THEMATIC TALK ON

TRANSLATING HIS MAJESTY'S TWELVE LESSONS OF LIFE INTO OUR DAILY WORK

In the history of mankind, it is rare to have a leader larger than life, a luminous being brighter than the North Star, a colossus imbued with wisdom, compassion and fortitude. It is our beloved King who is the true embodiment of such a glorious being.

And it was on 11th November 2025, at the celebration of the 70th Birth Anniversary of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, that the Fifth King shared with the people of Bhutan the twelve nuggets of wisdom that the Great Fourth imparted to him in his early formative years. These twelve gems are pithy in form, but vast in depth.

I would like to reflect on how we can and should translate them into our daily thoughts and actions.

1. *Serve the Nation and the People with Loyalty and Dedication.* It is service to the nation and the people that is uppermost on His Majesty's mind. It is touching and sometimes even poignant to see our beloved King wielding a sickle or a spade alongside his subjects, totally oblivious to the heat or the insects that buzz around, as His Majesty strives towards a larger goal, a goal of a prosperous Bhutan. It is this selfless service to the nation and to the people that we must emulate. As doctors, nurses, technicians – we followed a calling to serve humanity and that too the suffering and the ones in pain. Therefore, no matter how tired, how unrewarding it may seem- we must follow the noble footsteps of our Kings and serve our country, our people, and our King. That is our calling; that is our mission, and we must keep the example of His Majesty as we dedicate ourselves to the service of our nation with loyalty and with utmost dedication.

#2. *Safeguard and strengthen our sovereignty and Security.* The rule-based world order that emerged after 2nd World War with commitment to conform to rights-based international law by all nations is now suddenly under attack from neo-imperialistic forces. As put forth pithily by Mark Carney, the Prime Minister of Canada, in Davos last January that "if you are not at the table, you are on the menu." That sounded dire, but unfortunately true.

Look around and you'll see how misery fills many countries. Sudan, Yemen, Ecuador... just to mention a few.

Freedom is most acutely missed when we lose it. Loss of sovereignty does not necessarily have to be an external threat only, but also internal divisions and strife that can deprive a state the ability to govern itself.

We must never forget that for more than a century, our generations of wise Kings kept Bhutan safe and stable through political adroitness and people centred-leadership despite being small and squeezed between two giant neighbours. Let us not only remember that, but do everything to keep our country safe and stable and peaceful.

#3. Uphold the Dharma. It is now more than 3000 years since Gautama Budha taught a way of life which later came to be labelled as Buddhism. His teachings reached Bhutan in the 7th Century when Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo built Paro Kichu and Bumthang Jampel Lhakhangs, and Buddhism took root when Ogyen Guru came to Bhutan on the invitation of Chakhar Gyalpo of Bumthang. It was Zhabdrung Rimpoche that finally gave Buddhism the institutional basis for it to flourish. Today, it is only in Bhutan that we see Buddhism in all its glory, built on the solid foundation of unshakable faith and unquestionable devotion to the Budha, the Dharma, and the Sangha by our Kings and by our people.

We must remember what His Majesty said, *“Our spiritual heritage forms the fabric of who we are. It is what holds us together and gives us the identity we value. It makes up the soul of our nation.”*

For us as health workers, our work in itself is dharma. We need not isolate ourselves in some distant caves or light thousands of butter lamps. Our daily work to assuage pain, save lives and battle death and disease is the religion we practice. But we must do it with mindfulness, that is to say with the right motive to heal and to save lives. Of course, we must pray as *“...More things are wrought by prayer; Than this world dreams of...”*¹ but our daily practice of the dharma is to care for every patient with compassion and understanding.

A friend once remarked to me, “Old people in the west wait to die; but our old people have no time to die.” This is because our religion gives our elderly and the aged the motivation to seek higher spiritual realization and accumulate good karma for a better afterlife. And today, with so many religious leaders giving teachings and blessings all over the country, our faithful are kept fully engaged which is good not only for religion, for their health too. These wouldn't have been possible if our Dratshang and monastic traditions did not show the way with His Ven the Je Khenpo, leaving the cloisters of the temples to reach out to the common masses to spread the word of the Buddha.

#4. Preserve and Promote National Identity. I used to joke with my friends when I was studying Delhi that if all Bhutanese were brought to Delhi and scattered in the city, probably we would not meet one Bhutanese in a day, given that Delhi's population is more than 25 million people. That's how small we are, both geographically and population-wise. This makes it all the more important for us to preserve and promote our national identity.

We have no military might, we have no economic leverage, we have no oil, we have no uranium. But we have traditions, languages, values and ways of doing things that are distinct. Simply dressing the way we do; the way we carry ourselves in public, the reverence we show for our kings, our parents, our monks, the songs and dances etc... are all what we are proud of and what we should celebrate as they make us, us.

It is only goodwill that will endear and bind us to others. So every day, in whatever we do, let us strive to be courteous and gentle and kind because that's what is core to our national identity. Let us strengthen it, let us promote it.

¹ Tennyson in the poem, Passing of Arthur

#5. *Protect our Culture and our Natural Heritage.* First let me talk about our natural heritage. It was in 1973 that I first travelled to Thimphu. One thing I noticed when I passed through Wangduephodrang was the bare hills where the tree line had receded almost to the tops of the mountains. Today, much of that barren landscape is covered with forest. This is testament to the wise policies regarding forest management and environment conservation efforts of our government. It is an example to the world in preserving a nation's natural heritage in that our forest act of yore and, more recently, the Constitution of Bhutan mandates "the Government to ensure that a minimum of 60 % of Bhutan's total land area is maintained under forest cover for all time." today we are probably the only country in the world who is carbon negative!

Our culture is rich and varied. Whether it is our annual lochoe offering, Losar celebration, a game of archery or *parala*², our architecture, art and paintings, including the marvellously varied (in color and size) phalluses painted on the walls- all are part of our rich cultural heritage. And we are proud that we have so much that makes us Bhutanese and it is our duty to preserve these tangible and intangible heritages.

#6. *Foster National Unity.* It's almost a cliché now to say, 'United we stand; divided we fall.' It is tragic beyond proportion to see large segments of Iran's population celebrate when their country was being bombed by US and Israel. It shows how easy it is for a nation to fall when its people cannot be united, especially in the face of external aggression.

But you don't need external aggression to fracture national unity. Internal disunity is sufficient. Again, I come back to Sudan as an example. Carrying colonial legacy of divide and rule, authoritarian and corrupt leadership and a sectarian bend in national ethos all contribute to today's carnage and misery and the loss of national unity.

We must remember everyday how grateful we are to have a peaceful country. For over a century we have not seen major internal disunity and have weathered many external threats due mainly to the wise leadership of our successive Kings. But it is the duty of each one of us, in both private and in public, to not only foster but maintain unity. Individual difference is normal but when it comes to national sovereignty and national security, we must all think and act, always, as one.

#7. *Reject Complacency.* Nothing kills progress faster than complacency. Complacency arises from laziness or a failure to realise that progress requires attention to perform the best in whatever you do so that even if you cannot excel others, you can always better yourself the next time. It is this effort to strive to be the best, to do the best, and to know that competition is always good for progress and that it defeats complacency.

Therefore, the "*chalta-hai*" attitude isn't enough. The quest must be to always to be the best. If you are a surgeon, try to be the best surgeon there is. Likewise, if you're a nurse, be the best nurse there is, just to mention a few.

² Parala is a game of dice

#8. *Strong People Build Strong Nation.* Strength is not merely brawn, but also of brain. His Majesty emphasized the importance and the value of training one's mind to be strong, to empower oneself with knowledge.

Unfortunately, in today's world of social media, the narcissism of abject self-promotion and perpetual competition to look better than someone else has taken away the time and the efforts to read. Reading is now becoming a forgotten art.

Reading not only gives us knowledge but makes us a thinking being, it helps us become rational, and great literature helps us dream of higher things. Therefore, read, read. Put aside time even if it is only half an hour daily to read; make the effort to read a good book, a great essay or a well-argued article on a contemporary theme.

"Books are the quietest and most constant of friends; they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors, and the most patient of teachers," said Charles W. Eliot, one of the most famous Harvard Presidents.

#9. *Nurture the Young with the Right Values.* As parents all of us today struggle with how to nurture and bring up our children. We are losing our future to the empty world of Tik-Tok, Facebook and other similar so called social media platforms. But we must strive to inculcate values such as respect for teachers, parents, the elders. We have to teach our children to value money, accept the dignity of labour, and the virtue of independence and self-respect.

Discipline, persistence, focus are values that make the foundation for success. By example and through careful guidance, we have to teach our children that without these, their lives can be desultory, their future uncertain.

It is hard but we must not give up because it is our investment in the future of not only our children, but also in the future of our country!

#10. *Uphold Our National Reputation.* Bhutan, a tiny kingdom, with no significant economy or military power to boast of, is yet seen as a peace-loving country that strives for global convergence on human values and the pursuit of happiness, and world listens with respect. That respect is earned and nurtured through careful calibration of our relations with nearby neighbours and distant countries with equal focus and consideration.

Likewise, our people, whether they be in Perth or Los Angeles, carry that particular appreciation of a race that is dependable, friendly and able to deliver quality. Wherever our people go, we stand out and are appreciated for being Bhutanese.

For example, I talk to a professor from a University in Japan and I am told that the University is so proud to have a Bhutanese that excels Japanese in Japanese to become the best student in class. Similarly, I talk to a gentleman from Singapore who says that Bhutanese trainee nurses are greatly appreciated for their decorum, industry and intelligence so that they are the best nursing students as compared to students from many other countries.

That is what makes us Bhutanese, and that reflects Bhutan as a country.

#11. Establish Good Systems and Laws. It is not within our remit to establish laws. For that we have the Parliament. But we can, and we have to, establish good systems. What do I mean?

A definition of system according to the Oxford Dictionary is “*a set of principles or procedures according to which something is done.*” A good system leads to efficiency, clarity and stability. Opposite of a good system is entropy or disorder.

I have been striving to bring in this concept of a system whereby there is a clear objective, a well thought through process, a relevant check-and-balance mechanism, and a redressal system if the system does not work as intended.

Let us take for example, inviting a foreign expert to the country. As an organization or an institution, there must be a system where the relevant person initiates a proposal, an authority that examines the validity or relevance of the proposal and approve or reject, and then a system which kicks in automatic processes such as visa clearance, logistics of visit, and the series of agreed activities such a person would be engaged in, aimed towards the goal of how such a visit strengthens the institution. It should not be a single person deciding on such matters and conducting the whole process without due consideration of a systems approach.

Therefore, anything we do, we must always keep in mind that the process must lead to strengthening the system, rather than bypassing or weakening the system if any such system exists.

#12. Always be Adaptive. ‘Adapt or die,’ is an age-old adage. It’s said the dinosaurs perished because they became too big and couldn’t adapt to the changes taking place around them. But let me briefly tell of a modern-day example- that of the fall of Nokia.

Since the beginning of mobile phone industry, Nokia was the leader and seen as synonymous with quality product and business success. And by 1999, Nokia’s profit reached \$4 billion! Even when Apple introduced the iPhone in 2007, Nokia still had over 50% share of the global users of mobile phones.

By 2010, Nokia had lost more than 90% of its market value and from then on, it was downward, all the way, for Nokia!

In 2013, the CEO of Nokia, tearfully said, “**We didn’t do anything wrong, but somehow we lost.**” Nokia didn’t do anything wrong. They just failed to adapt to changing circumstances. They felt insular, arrogant, and failed to keep up with evolving services and technology.

Medicine is an ever-evolving science. We must strive to keep up with the advances in drugs, medical technology and medical practices, lest we become obsolete. That means our learning must never stop. Today, with internet that is possible without spending anything. We can read almost all journals online.

Therefore, let us always be alert to changes so that we can change when we need to. That is to do better, to improve, to innovate and to survive in a competitive world.

Colleagues, these twelve gems of wisdom are precious gifts from a wise King. Let us cherish them, let us translate them in our daily thoughts and our actions!

Thank you and Tashi Delek

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