Tha Damtshig: Integrity

The Bhutanese concept of *tha damtshig* (མཐའ་དམ་ཚིག) refers to personal integrity or moral rectitude and has an Indian Buddhist origin. In its religious application, the term translates the Sanskrit word *samaya* and refers to the precepts of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Giving an etymological explanation, scholars describe *damtshig* (དམ་ཚིག) as 'an oath, which ought not be transgressed' (འདད་བར་བྱ་བ་མ་ཡིན་པའི་ཐ་ཚིག). It denotes the many general (སྤྱི), special (ཁྱད་པར) and extraordinary (རྣམ་པ) dos 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 vows (སྡོམ་པ) and precepts (བསླབ་པ) 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 timely. Tantras also vary in the number and type of *damtshigs*. The Kālacakra cycle, for instance, proclaims fourteen primary *damtshigs*, such as the prohibition of deriding women, faulting one's spiritual companions and giving up love for sentient beings, and numerous minor ones while others such as Guhyagarbha have five primary and many auxiliary ones. *Damtshig*, as a solemn oath and code of practice for the esoteric Vajrayāna form of Buddhism, is seen with much awe and fear. The proper observance of *damtshig* rewards the practitioner with swift enlightenment but an infringement of it is said to cause rebirth in the lowest level of hell. Hence, the tantric path with its solemn *damtshigs* are often compared to trapping a snake in a bamboo stem. There are only two polar exits to either go up or down. *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 corrupted, and often excommunicated from the community of practitioners.

This religious application of *damtshig* to tantric precepts however got extended to several social and moral notions, attitudes and behaviours in the popular worldly use. Supplied with the prefix *tha* (མཐའ), denoting moral limitation or boundary, *damtshig* acquired a range of social meanings in Bhutan. To the Bhutanese, *tha damtshig*, depending on the context, can mean honesty, fidelity, moral integrity, rectitude, coherence, reciprocal affection, gratitude, filial piety, etc. To say a shopkeeper did not have *tha damtshig* for charging more or manipulating the scales meant the shopkeeper lacked honesty. A spouse with no *tha damtshig* generally referred to lack of marital fidelity while *tha damtshig* in connection with teacher-student and master-servant relationship usually referred to kindness, respect, gratitude and loyalty. Among family and friends, it denotes affection, feeling of kinship, sense of obligation and reciprocity. Lack of *tha damtshig* is equal to being unethical and socially irresponsible. An important social concept, *tha damtshig* thus has a wide range of referents and applications.

For a family, community or a nation to function smoothly, *tha damtshig* is an essential human value. An individual must possess a pure sense of *tha damtshig* and act accordingly to be respected by others. For a team or social group to thrive with mutual benefit, members must espouse *tha damtshig*. As the traditional social fabrics of Bhutan disintegrate due to rapid urbanisation, development of nuclear families and rising individualism and penchant for private space, it is important to reflect on important timeless values such as *tha damtshig* and make it an integral part of one's character.



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