

## Preface

The autumn 2025 edition of The Druk Journal will explore the concept of “mindfulness”, from its origins in Buddhist philosophy to its practical applications in contemporary society. This theme aims to provide a varied and nuanced understanding of mindfulness as more than a trendy wellness practice, examining its deeper significance as both a spiritual discipline and a guiding principle for national development. As Bhutan interprets mindfulness living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through initiatives like the Gelephu Mindfulness City, we examine how this ancient concept can authentically inform governance, urban living, and daily life in a rapidly changing world. How do we comprehend a term that applies to situations across the lifespan, from childhood to old age? How do we define a concept whose interpretation ranges from a “feel good” culture to the ultimate wisdom?

### Spiritual origins

In its original context, mindfulness is inseparable from Buddhist ethics, wisdom, and the path to liberation from suffering. The concept of mindfulness (*smṛiti* and *sati* in Sanskrit and Pali) was taught by the Buddha to know your mind as a means to achieve self-realisation. In a socio-cultural context, it is understood as a heightened awareness and consciousness of the values of life.

Mindfulness is a thought-provoking study in Science and Humanities, weaving together ancient wisdom and modern scientific understanding. Its principles inform good governance and public policy, business ethics and organisational culture, health care and indigenous health, child development and educational practices. As both a personal practice and social philosophy, mindfulness offers a framework for addressing contemporary challenges by fostering greater awareness and action across these domains.

### Mindfulness Today

Introduced in the West by Buddhist masters as a meditation practice, mindfulness is now a large industry in itself in the modern world - a condition for spiritual practice, a focus for research, but often divorced from its traditional roots and reduced to a technique for stress relief,

mental therapy, self-improvement, or even performance enhancement. It is a buzzword.

It was popularised by spiritual seekers of different backgrounds who travelled to Asia in the 1960s and 1970s in search of Gurus and wisdom teachings. Like many other trends seen over the decades, young Asians, whose ancestors were the source of such wisdom, began to “do mindfulness” Western style. Once adopted by Western society, mindfulness was repurposed, branded, commodified, and aggressively marketed for use in a secular context to reduce stress, enhance attention, and boost performance.

## **In Bhutan**

Bhutan adopted a mindful approach to development and change, drawn from values shaped over the generations articulated as Gross National Happiness by the fourth King. This philosophy is a reminder that human development needs higher aspirations beyond material progress. As terminology evolves with time, mindfulness is an expression of the core values that GNH encompasses.

Bhutan, a Vajrayana Buddhist kingdom, offers a unique vantage point for understanding mindfulness as more than just a tool for well-being. Traditional practices of mindfulness in Bhutanese culture and daily life is a means to transcend worldly and inner distractions, addressing ignorance and negative emotions. It is conscious living. And it is a reminder to instill values as in interdependence, impermanence, in the culture of governance as well as the education system rather than merely pursuing efficiency and growth.

## **Mindfulness in Practice**

Envisioning Bhutan’s future, the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) maintains mindfulness at the core of nation building. Unlike conventional urban centres designed purely for economic growth, GMC aims to redefine city life by integrating mindfulness principles into its physical design, social systems, and governance structures.

As a special administrative region (SAR), GMC is defined by governance features focusing on investor-friendly laws and a comfortable and safe

living environment aligned with mindful principles. Its uniqueness is that GMC offers investors and residents a new scenario of balanced living in harmony with nature, and the conditions for a prosperous life for the people, where residents experience life in harmony with nature with greater awareness. The city represents a bold experiment in conscious urbanisation.

A 21<sup>st</sup> century SAR with a Bhutanese identity raises compelling questions and exciting challenges that will inform policies and mindful approaches to national development beyond Bhutan's borders. The city's investor-friendly policies will be uniquely balanced with regulations that ensure development remains aligned with mindful principles.

GMC represents a bold experiment in conscious urbanisation — one that acknowledges development as inevitable while questioning its conventional forms. It offers the world a living laboratory for how ancient wisdom might address modern challenges of urban life.

## **Discussing Mindful Governance**

This issue of The Druk Journal carries 17 insightful articles that offer perspectives on mindfulness and its relevance to change and development in Bhutan and beyond. Scholars, spiritual practitioners, professionals including lawyers, urban specialists, educators and cultural commentators reflect on the meaning, practice, and adaptations of mindfulness, and its impact on human governance and on society.

The focus on different aspects of governance looks at the positive impact of mindfulness on national policies, law, employment, technology including the latest culture of AI. Governance, in its real sense, means the functioning of society. How does mindfulness affect society as a whole? How does Bhutanese society - civil society - understand spirituality, health, education, in the context of mindfulness?

How is mindfulness preserved? Inevitably, nearly every article on the journal's theme, "mindful governance, mindful society", refers to the GMC as an example of mindfulness in action. This issue of The Druk Journal describes the beginning of the concept, its evolution into what is described as a diamond strategy, and numerous suggestions on the governance of the GMC's forward-looking policy priorities.