

## **Buddhism in the West**

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**M**y thoughts on buddhism in the West have actually changed over the years. At this point I feel very positive and optimistic; not that I was skeptical or doubtful in the past, but one becomes more sure over time. There seems to be greater possibility for the roots of buddhism to be established in the West. I have become much more certain of this from personal experience—certain to a certain degree.



Over the years, interest in buddhism has continued to increase in the West. Such interest could be a very positive sign that people are understanding and connecting to the true meaning of the Buddha's teachings. With a growing appreciation for the teachings, more books are being read, more lectures are being given, and more people from all walks of life are coming to buddhism—many of them without much previous knowledge of the teachings. As they connect with the dharma and bring it into their own experiences, they are finding it to be meaningful. And not only are individuals studying and practicing, different groups of sanghas also have a real interest in studying and practicing dharma. If we observe what's happening within these buddhist sanghas—whether Theravadin, Zen, or Tibetan traditions—it's quite wonderful. Much has already been done to establish buddhism in the West. Yet overall, I think there is a lot more work to be done.

While many teachings have been given and practices introduced, many have been in terms of their outer forms and structures. Establishing the essence of dharma in the West is going to take time. And it is going to depend on how well people do with what they are given and how much they appreciate where it comes from.

In order to establish greater depth of dharma in the West, it is important to have some reference, some guidance for our inspiration. If we look to the people of Tibet, China, Japan, Sri Lanka or Thailand, we can see the tremendous time, energy, and dedication they put into bringing the dharma from the noble land of India to their native lands. When we study history we can see that their work, commitment and hardships are still unmatched. It is not at all matched with respect to the depth of

devotion, commitment, dedication and overcoming challenges. Now many people in the West, indeed, have great devotion and the ability to overcome challenges—but it is essential to step up our effort, not just on an individual but on a global level.

And, since we are trying to establish something that transcends any sense of ego, it is most important to examine our effort. When it comes to dharma, the results depend on how genuine effort is and whether or not it is more than self-serving. Is it directed only towards ourselves, or is this something we are doing for others as well? To establish sacred dharma in the West, we must really examine our motivation and how we go about learning, practicing, and teaching the dharma. There is a real need to examine one's motivations and the ways in which one tries to learn, practice and teach the dharma. This kind of a very open critical mind to embody the wisdom of buddhism rather than getting sidetracked into all sorts of worldly concerns is going to be a very crucial point in whether buddhism gets established in the West or not.

We must carefully examine our organizations as well. Even a very large organization that has seemingly established true dharma and is doing much good may in essence be influenced by one's own self-serving motivations. In which case it will no longer promote a genuine, long-lasting sense of dharma and therefore will no longer be of great benefit. It may only last for one generation, and even in one generation there could be many changes. So we have to make a genuine effort—individually and collectively—to study and practice dharma in a way that goes beyond self-serving concerns.

The flourishing of buddhism in the West will also depend on outer circumstances such as the world situation. The world should be stable, with peace and economic progress. If there is war, famine, destruction, or changes in governments from democracy to more radical or fanatical forms, this will have an effect on people. When auspicious factors come to fruition as they did in the most excellent way in the noble lands of India, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka—where dharma and authentic lineages continue to flourish—dharma will be established.

### ***Challenges on the Path***

There are many challenges on this path. These challenges, or maras, are not unique to the West; the works of maras are crucial buddhist teachings. In the Prajnaparamita [Sutra], there are many teachings on the challenges and obstacles of maras and how they appear to individuals on the path or to groups trying collectively to establish something positive. It is up to these individuals and groups to have some understanding of how to overcome them. Many practitioners in the noble land of India and other countries where buddhism is widespread have been able to do this. Not giving into the maras, they have been able to lead genuine spiritual lives and to accomplish much for themselves and for others. It is crucial that this also happen in the West.

If our individual and collective efforts of dedicated practice are going to bear greater fruit in the end, we must really make an effort to understand the dharma and to put our understanding into practice. We must also work with the obscurations that keep us from realizing the truth that is within all of us. Then we will not only be of service to ourselves, we will also bring much benefit to others.

### *Transmission of the Teaching & Practice Lineages*

Beyond this, a lot more work needs to be done to establish genuine transmission of the teaching and practice lineages in the West. There has already been progress in these areas, and people are already reaping the benefits of that progress. But a great deal more effort is required to translate these teachings into the various western languages.

To establish the teaching lineage, there must be widespread teaching of dharma with a real sense of lineage. Otherwise dharma is open to all sorts of interpretations—and our own interpretation is not necessarily what is taught in the dharma or in the texts. Receiving transmission of the teachings through the lineage safeguards against this and enables us to cultivate knowledge far more than simply reading or interpreting a book.

In Tibetan, the terms chepa, tsöpa and tsampa are very important. Chepa means ‘to teach,’ tsöpa means ‘to discuss,’ and tsampa means ‘to compose.’ Tremendous amounts have been written on the Buddha’s teachings by the great mahapanditas and then by all the great translators from the various buddhist countries. Now we must transmit these teachings in the western languages in an authentic way without any personal interpretations. This would be so valuable.

At the same time, for a truer understanding of what is being taught and its relevance to those interested in the path to enlightenment, there needs to be a great deal of discussion. Such discussions are integral to true understanding of what is being taught and how it is relevant to someone on the path to enlightenment. And then we must actually compose compositions if we can. This should be done in accordance with the rules of composition from the point of view of the buddhist sutras. In this way, we could make a real contribution to the world.

To establish the practice lineage, it must be passed down through realizations of the teachings on view, meditation and conduct. Whatever instructions are given to us must be completely understood through our own personal experience. Only then will our own realizations be real and equal to the realizations passed down to us. By embodying, or holding, realization in this way, we can actually free ourselves from the suffering of samsara and cyclic existence and fulfill the greater motivation of benefiting others. With time and the consistent effort of many people dedicating their

lives to finding meaning through the practice of dharma we can really establish the practice lineage.

Since this is a very intimate process, the relationship between the student and teacher is crucial. The genuineness and extent of our devotion greatly affects what we understand and how we translate that into our own experience. If there were no devotion, it would simply be an exchange of information. There would be no real heart in receiving or learning the teachings, no real appreciation for what we receive, and no real transformation of our mind and life. Therefore, devotion must come naturally and is very important.

### *A Culture of Devotion*

Devotion is challenging to modern people, who are very individually oriented to preserving their own sense of identity and pride. It is challenging to people who want to learn but have no real sense of surrendering ego.

It is going to be important, therefore, to have a culture that really supports devotion—not just a shallow or pop-culture devotion, but something that actually comes to us from the time of the Buddha. In the noble land of India itself, in the vinaya and in all the teachings of the Buddha, there is a tradition of devotion. In all the lands where buddhism spread and practice was genuinely established, there is a culture of devotion and many individual stories of devotion. When there are many individuals who—by being close to the teacher and following the guidance of the teacher with heartfelt devotion—have benefited and transformed their lives, they are an inspiration to others. There is a sense of actual “evidence” that it works!

### *Dharma as a Lifelong Passion*

Dharma is not a hobby or part-time practice; it is not like going to school or university and getting a degree at the end. Dharma is a lifelong passion that requires a lifelong intention. We need to dedicate our lives to the dharma, and, through practice, seek the meaning of that which we admire as a worthy way of life. Regardless of the challenges that confront us, we must rise to the occasion and face each challenge and go beyond it. Only in this way will there be benefit in the end. If we do retreats and really practice dharma as it was practiced in the past, the fruition will be the same as it was in the past.

### *Think Long Term*

It is true that times have changed and our lifestyles have changed—but in terms of establishing the dharma in each of our lives, nothing has changed. This is because individual human beings, with our various make-ups and obscurations, are the same now as they were in the past. The content of our lives may have changed a bit, but not our basic nature. Therefore, nothing has changed in terms of how we need to pursue dharma and truly become free from obscurations. Whatever the great masters

did in the past, this is what we need to do now. They found great skilful means in practicing the dharma, which we can appreciate and implement today.

Modernization has had a negative impact on all religions, not just buddhism—on the other hand, it can be a great support. So we cannot make excuses for ourselves as modern people in the 21st century. If we as ‘modern people’ want our dharma practices to suit us and orient only to our own convenience rather than to genuine dharma— then this becomes our own convenient dharma, rather than the authentic dharma with a 2500-year lineage.

Dharma is very new in the West, and it is going to take time to establish it firmly. It will depend on whether or not the same conditions—the individuals, groups of sanghas, teachers, and auspiciousness of the world—that made dharma flourish in other countries come together here. If they do, dharma will prevail in the West, and it will touch the lives of many beings and contribute much goodness to the world.

The western world is a dominant political and economic global power. If dharma prevails in the West, the essence of dharma—which is to serve all beings—will also be fulfilled. There could then be a much greater future for mankind through the spread of buddhism. I am not saying this as a buddhist or as someone raised in the buddhist philosophy; we can actually and historically see evidence of this and verify it for ourselves.

I sincerely hope for such a time in this century and for many centuries to come. We have to think long term; thinking about a few centuries is actually very short term when we think about mankind and what might serve mankind best. Technology and science have contributed much to the progress and comfort of mankind. If however, the true spirit of human beings is to flourish in a genuine and positive way, it will depend on how much dharma is there in the world—not just dharma in name, but dharma in essence.