

Buddhism without sectarianism

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In undertaking to study the Dharma, we need to understand that there is a right way to do it. As you listen to this exposition of Buddhist teachings, put aside all distractions and focus your mind with single-minded intent upon its words and their meaning. This, too, should be done in an attitude of remembrance of all those beings who are unable to hear the teachings of enlightenment. Bring them to your mind with thoughts of love and compassion and with a resolve that, on their behalf, you will learn the Dharma rightly, remember it, experience it and realize it through your own efforts.

In order to purify the mind of ordinary conceptualizations about the nature and value of Dharma, you should also think of your teacher as being none other than Shakyamuni Buddha himself. For if the Enlightened One himself were here before you, he would not teach other than this Dharma.

Visualize your teacher in the form of Shakyamuni Buddha and imagine that boundless rays of golden light shine forth from his body to touch all living beings. These lights remove from them and from oneself obstacles to the experience of the Dharma Realm and establish them in the pure joy of liberation. As these rays of lights touch your heart, think that there arises in your mind insight into the true sense of the Dharma that is being expounded.

Think of yourself as being none other than the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Manjushri, who in fulfillment of his vow, tirelessly seeks out all the teachings of the Dharma on behalf of suffering beings. Imagine that you are receiving this Dharma in the pure realm of the Buddhas. There, all things are seen, not as substantial and real in the way that we see them through delusion, but as similar to the images that appear in a mirage or in a dream. Without grasping at anything as real, allow your mind to dwell, in the state of emptiness. In these ways, your efforts to learn here and how will approximate the transmission of holy Dharma as it takes place on the level of ultimate reality.

All such opportunities as this --- to hear, to learn, and to integrate within one's own consciousness the teachings of enlightenment taught by Shakyamuni Buddha --- are extremely rare. Very few beings have such an opportunity. Many live their lives cut off from the Dharma. They have no access to the path of liberation. As a result, they suffer and, through delusion, create more suffering for themselves and for other beings. This suffering goes on and on; it is endless and manifold in its manifestations.

It was truly spoken in the sutras that it is rare for beings to hear even the name of the Buddha. Throughout countless lifetimes, most beings do not have even that much of a chance for liberation from their delusion and pain. Every teaching should, therefore, be valued as rare, and cherished while one still has the opportunity to receive it.

Fortunate beings such as ourselves, who now have the advantages and leisure of human life at a time when the teachings are present, should be mindful of our situation. Human life is extremely short. It passes away more rapidly than the falling waters of a mountain stream. Our life is passing away swiftly and death lies ahead for each one of us. In this world, distractions are many and obstacles are rife. It is hard to find the will to practice Dharma. It is hard to awaken within our minds the resolve to win enlightenment, hard to apply ourselves rightly to this resolve in a way that truly benefits ourselves and other.

Yet we must find the strength to awaken this resolve within ourselves through reflection upon the facts of our human existence and the facts of existence as a whole. For we, like other beings, are being

carried along by the great river of karmic propensities (actions born out of attachment, aversion and ignorance). At the time of death, the propensities of our mind will determine our future whether we shall again find such an opportunity to receive and practice the Dharma or whether we shall have lost it for good, whether we shall suffer in the lower realms among the hell-beings, hungry ghosts, and animals, or find ourselves bereft of Dharma among the gods and titans.

The law of karma that turns the great wheel of interdependent origination, the inexorable cycle of deluded mental processes, will carry us away from this unique opportunity to take hold of, and be rescued by, the saving Dharma. If we remain under the control of this round of delusion, the evolution of the twelve nidanas, or links of interdependent origination will cause us helplessly to roam about from one state of existence to another. If we do not break free from the wheel of delusion through wisdom and right understanding of the Way, we are sure to continue to experience pain. If we do not make this break, the three kinds of pain --- of impermanence, of pain itself (in the lower realms), and of conditioned existence --- will continue to plague us. This is the future that awaits each one of us who fails to pause, reflect, and make a sincere effort to realize these Dharma truths.

In a situation such as ours, what are we to do? This was the matter upon which the Enlightened One, Shakyamuni Buddha, pondered for years and it is through His great compassion for beings like ourselves that we have had revealed to us a way whereby we might free ourselves from our plight.

The Buddha taught a path of liberation based upon purity and morality, a path of experience that consists of right study, reflection and meditation, a path that has as its end the attainment of the great happiness of freedom. Through His skill in means and knowledge of the various kinds of beings and the various karmic propensities which cause beings to differ from each other, He expounded several systems of practice.

First, He taught the system of the Hinayana Buddhism with its concept of individual salvation. For others of greater spiritual capacity, He taught the noble doctrines of the Great Way of Mahayana Buddhism with its concept of universal salvation. In the Mahayana system, one takes the Bodhisattva's vow to liberate all living beings as well as oneself. It has as its result the attainment of the three kayas, or aspects of perfect enlightenment. However, this path of Mahayana practice requires that three incalculable aeons be spent in perfecting the qualities of Bodhisattvahood.

For those whose compassion for the world is intense, who find it intolerable that beings be kept waiting so long before one is able to free them from suffering and establish them in the happiness of liberation, Lord Buddha expounded the swift path of Vajrayana Buddhism. Because of the superior meditative techniques of this system, it becomes possible to attain Buddhahood in a very short while.

If one preserves one's vows and meditates diligently, one will attain perfect enlightenment - -- Buddhahood --- in this very lifetime. But this system does require that one be endowed with superior mental faculties: one must be extremely intelligent and diligent. Yet one can be assured of enlightenment either in the bardo state or in the next life-time if one is only of mediocre abilities, understanding, and diligence. Even if one has very little spiritual development and is unable to practice at all, one is still assured of the attainment of Buddhahood within not more than sixteen lifetimes.

This last system taught by the Buddha is, therefore, extremely effective. Buddhists who are moved by intense compassion for the world, who have resolved quickly to free beings from suffering and to establish them in happiness should apply themselves to this system of practice. The qualities that are required here are courage, diligence in practice, and enthusiasm for virtue.

These three systems of Dharma expounded for beings of different spiritual capacities are all of great benefit to the world. Through them, all beings may find a way to liberation. Whoever receives the Dharma receives benefit, for it was taught by the Compassionate Buddha to help us achieve our aims. We all seek happiness and try to avoid pain. The Dharma shows us the way to remove the causes of pain and to attain the experience of supreme well-being.

Yet there is the danger of taking hold of Dharma wrongly. If this danger is not avoided and one's approach to Dharma is faulty, 'Dharma' becomes a cause of harm instead of benefit. This is not the intent of the Enlightened Ones nor of those masters who have entrusted it to us.

Recognise and avoid this danger: it is called 'narrow-mindedness'. It manifests in sangha circles in the form of sectarianism: an attitude of partiality, a tendency to form deluded attachments to one's own order and to reject other schools of Buddhism as inferior.

I have seen this narrow-minded spirit detract from Buddhism in my own land of Tibet and, during the past 20 years of my stay in America, I have also seen it grow among the many Dharma centers founded here by Tibetan teachers and their disciples. It is always with sorrow that I observe sectarianism take root among Dharma centers. It is my karma, as a representative of Buddhism and as a Tibetan, to have the opportunity and responsibility to speak out, when asked, against this 'inner foe'.

It was common in Tibet for the least spiritually developed adherents of each of the four great orders to nurture this spirit of sectarianism. Often monks and lay disciples of one order would refuse to attend the services of other orders. Monks would refuse to study or read the literature of others simply because they were the writings of masters who belonged to another lineage - -- no matter how good the literature might be.

The great Nyingma order - - - the Order of the Ancient Ones - - -has its own special pride. Some of its followers feel that, as members of the earliest school, they have profound doctrines unknown to the later schools of Tibetan Buddhism. They maintain that somehow their doctrine of 'Great Perfection, is superior to the 'Mahamudra' perception of ultimate reality. They make this claim even though, by logic and the teachings of the Buddha Himself, we know it is not possible that there could be any difference in the realization of ultimate reality. They also claim that theirs is a superior path endowed with secret teachings and levels of Dharma unknown to the other schools. The Gelugpa school, founded by the great Tsongkhapa, has its proud adherents, too. They think they are sole guardians of the teachings that were transmitted into Tibet by the great pundit Atisha, even though these are available and commonly practiced in the other orders. They have pride in proclaiming a superiority in moral conduct. They feel their observance of monastic discipline and their custom of devoting many years to study before finally turning to the practice of meditation constitute a superior approach to Vajrayana practice. They consider themselves to be superior both in deportment and in learning.

Certain followers of the Sakya order also have their conceit about learning. They believe that only their school understands and preserves the profound teachings that were introduced into Tibet from Buddhist India. It is common for these Sakya scholars to look down on the practitioners of other orders, thinking that other Tibetan Buddhists are ignorant practitioners whose practice is not supported by right understanding of the Dharma's true meaning.

Some Kagyu adherents have their own special pride. They claim that their lineage of masters is so superior that they themselves should be considered superior --- as heirs of Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa and Dagpo. These masters, it is true, were very great but it does not necessarily follow that

one who claims to be an adherent of their tradition is also great. The greatness of these masters depends upon their realization. Blind allegiance to these masters cannot make Kagyu practitioners superior.

All of these are attitudes commonly found among Tibetan Buddhist monks and lay people. They may be common attitudes but they are not Buddhist attitudes. The great Kagyu master and Ris-med proponent, Kongtrul Rinpoche, stated that a wise person will have faith in the teachings of all orders, will love the Dharma found in each just as a mother cherishes all her children. A wise person's mind is vast like the sky, with room for many teachings, many insights, many meditations. But the mind of an ignorant sectarian is limited, tight, and narrow like a vase that can only hold so much. It is difficult for such a mind to grow in Dharma because of its self-imposed limitations. The difference between the wise Buddhist and the sectarian Buddhist is like that between the vastness of space and the narrowness of a vase. These are the words of Kongtrul Rinpoche.

The great sage of the Sakya Order, Sapan wrote in his Three Vows that, in his youth, he studied extensively the literature of all the orders of Tibet, under different masters. He made special efforts to learn, understand, and realize the doctrines of these different schools and never despised any of them. He cherished them all.

Long-chen Rab-jampa, the great scholar of the Nyingma Order, practiced similarly. He received transmission of Dharma from masters of all four orders without discrimination. From the biography of the great Tsongkhapa, we learn that he, too, studied extensively under masters of all orders. The great Khyentse Wangpo, foremost teacher of the Ris-med, or non-sectarian movement, wrote in his autobiography that in his youth he had studied under one hundred and fifty masters of all the four orders of Tibetan Buddhism.

Kongtrul Rinpoche, another Ris-med master, included all the essential doctrines of each of the four orders, as well as of the minor subsects, in his great masterpiece, *The Treasure of Doctrine*.

All of these great masters, the greatest minds that Tibetan Buddhist history have produced, agreed that there is no place in the pure Dharma for a sectarian attitude. The Buddha Himself taught in *The Book of Discipline* and in various sutras that those Buddhist who form attachments to their own school of Buddhism and despise the teachings, masters and followers of other schools, create great harm for themselves and for the Buddhist community as a whole.

First of all, one who despises another Buddhist school despises the Buddha. He impairs the transmission of the Dharma. The presence of the Dharma is jeopardized by such an attitude, and one becomes cut off from its transmission. This is so because one's refuge vows are based upon reliance on the Enlightened One, His Teachings, and the Holy Community. If one rejects Dharma one breaks one's refuge vow and thereby becomes cut off from the Dharma. By rejecting this Dharma that is the only door to happiness for beings and oneself, one accumulates inexhaustible sin.

Therefore, the Buddha taught that one should also not despise the Dharma of non-Buddhists for it is their source of happiness and benefit. One should not despise or harbour contempt for the doctrines of the Hindus, Christians, or other non-Buddhist religions because this attitude of attachment to one's own side while rejecting the possibility of differences is harmful to one's own spiritual career.

Those people who harbour voiced or unvoiced contempt for the teachings and the lineage of other schools incur great sin and terrible consequences. Worst of all, this attitude is as unnecessary as it is harmful.

Students of Dharma ought to be moved by faith in the teachings of the Buddha to renounce the distractions, delusions, and bonds of the world and to direct their efforts toward purifying their minds of obstacles, obscurations, and sins. They should devote themselves to efforts in accumulating those virtues and realizations that bring about Buddhahood and great benefit for themselves and others. This is the real task that each Buddhist has before him or her. Our work is not one of competing or vying with other Buddhist practitioners, thereby creating obstacles for them and for ourselves. This was not the responsibility set before us when we took upon ourselves the vows of refuge and the vows of Bodhisattvahood.

Faith is the foundation of the Dharma. It is faith in the authenticity and the truth of Buddhist teachings and confidence in the efficacy of the path to enlightenment that impels us to take upon ourselves the commitments of vows. It moves us to take upon ourselves the commitments of the monastic vows, novice vows, or the precepts of the lay householder.

In all of these, our faith in the authenticity of the Three Jewels is the cornerstone of the vows and trainings to which we commit ourselves. If we reject the Dharma of other Buddhists, we destroy our own commitment to Dharma. We impair our standing in the Dharmic and create an obstacle to its reception. We destroy the cornerstone of our own spiritual career.

For these reasons, keep always in mind the great value of Dharma. Reject within yourself and in others any attitude that promotes the lessening of faith. We strive always for pure faith --- faith that is intelligent, based upon the understanding that we must cherish these Three Jewels as the foundation of our own hopes for Buddhahood.

People who adopt this narrow-minded attitude of sectarianism are usually ignorant of the doctrines that other orders possess. Instead they base their sectarianism upon lineage. They reject the teachers, rather than the teachings of other schools.

The lineages of each of the three systems of discipline, which form the structure of Dharma training for all Buddhists, are derived directly from Shakyamuni Buddha himself. The Pratimoksha vows originated with the Buddha and were transmitted in succession through the great Indian sages to the Tibetan patriarchs. They have continued in a pure and unbroken succession down to our present time.

The same is true of the profound doctrines and precepts of the Bodhisattva's 5 vows, which were also taught by the Shakyamuni Buddha and transmitted through the great sages of Buddhist India and Tibet. From the master Nagarjuna we have the 'Manjushri tradition' of the Bodhisattvas vows and from the master Asanga and his successors we have the 'Maitreya tradition'

Similarly, in the Vajrayana, all the tantras were expounded by Buddha in His tantric form --- that of Vajradhara. These tantras and their instructions were transmitted from Vajradhara to various masters of Buddhist Tibet. Those same tantras and instructions have been transmitted purely, without interruption, down to the present time. They are common to all of the four orders. Though the lineage of masters may vary from order to order, there is no flaw in the purity and continuity of their transmission.

These three sets of vows provide the framework or structure that enables each one of us to progress on the path to liberation. Thus, there is no fault in any school, or its doctrines or its lineage. Where in all these could an intelligent person find justification for sectarianism?

It is certainly natural and permissible that we might feel a special affinity with one or another school or be drawn to a particular system of practice, to a particular circle of meditators or to a particular

teacher. But when we do this, we must also be sure to watch our mind and weed out from it any feelings of contempt for, or aversion to, other schools of Buddhism. We should not shun their teachings or their teachers. Whenever we act simply out of attachment to our own order or from a wish not to be receptive to the teachings or teachers of other orders, we are indulging ourselves in this very harmful attitude of sectarianism.

One whose Dharma career is tainted by narrow-mindedness and attachment to one's own interests while rejecting those of others will never overcome the many obstacles to the attainment of wisdom or insight.

Sectarianism turns the pure Dharma into poison through it, one accumulates great sin. In this life one will be frustrated in one's own Dharma efforts. Upon death, one will fall into hell as swiftly as an arrow shot from a bow. These are the consequences of spending a lifetime in rejecting others' spiritual efforts on such narrow-minded grounds.

Therefore be mindful not to indulge in this attitude that brings so much unsought harm upon yourself. Do not create obstacles to your own Dharma. Strive instead for pure faith and maintain that faith in all manifestations of the Three Jewels, no matter whether they are represented in one school of Tibetan Buddhism or in another. Painstakingly nurture your refuge vows and pure faith and thereby grow truly in the Dharma.