

# Advice to Buddhists in the West

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**Q: Your Holiness, what advice might you give those of us who are working to develop Buddhist communities and organizations in the West ?**

**A:** As I often tell my Buddhist friends, if we want to keep the excellent tradition of Buddhism developed in Tibet alive, it will depend on the existence of freedom in Tibet. To that end, since you are already working together, I would like you to continue to work for the cause of Tibet's freedom with those who are already doing so.

We try to make a distinction between the words "freedom" and "independence." The use of the word independence is somewhat delicate. Obviously, I have been trying to establish contacts with the Chinese government and begin serious negotiations. For fourteen years I have been trying my best, persisting in this approach, and pursuing my efforts incessantly to bring these negotiations to a successful conclusion through direct talks with the Chinese government.

I would like to share some of my thoughts with all of you gathered here, brothers and sisters in Buddhism. First of all, Buddhism corresponds to a new tradition, a religion which did not previously exist in the West. Consequently, it is normal that all those who are interested in Buddhism in its Tibetan form would also like to be informed about and continue to study other religions and traditions. This is perfectly natural. However, for those who are seriously thinking of converting to Buddhism, that is, of changing your religion, it is very important to take every precaution. This must not be done lightly. Indeed, if one converts without having thought about it in a mature way, this often creates difficulties and leads to great inner confusion. I would therefore advise all who would like to convert to Buddhism to think carefully before doing so.

Second, when an individual is convinced that Buddhist teachings are better adapted to his or her disposition, that they are more effective, it is quite right that this religion be chosen. However, human nature being what it is, after their conversion and in order to justify it, such a person may have a tendency to want to criticize his or her original religion. This must be avoided at all costs. Even if the previous religion does not seem as effective as he or she would have liked (and this is the reason for the change), this is not sufficient reason to claim that the old religion is ineffective for the human spirit. That religion continues to bring immense good to millions of people. For this reason, as Buddhists, we must respect the rights of others, for other religions help millions of people. In particular, we are in the process of trying to create and maintain a perfect harmony among all religions. In these circumstances it is absolutely essential to be aware of the need to respect other religions.

Third, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition emphasis is always placed on the combination of study and practice. Of course, it may happen that you devote yourself more or less to

study. Some people may pursue their studies very far, others may be satisfied with a more limited level of study. Whatever the case, at the foundation you must never separate study, reflection, and meditation. You must also preserve the tradition of practice in which study, reflection, and meditation are indivisible.

Fourth, I would like to insist upon the importance of non-sectarianism. It sometimes happens that people attribute an exaggerated importance to one or another of the different schools and different traditions within Buddhism, and this can lead to an accumulation of extremely negative acts with regard to the Dharma. The advantage of non-sectarianism is that after receiving the transmission of the instructions, initiations, and explanations pertinent to each different tradition, we will be able to have a better understanding of the different teachings. From my own experience, this is without doubt very beneficial. Consequently, if we keep a non-sectarian attitude, as we receive teachings from different traditions, think about them, and put them in practice, it is certain we will improve our understanding of the Dharma. This is why non-sectarianism is so important.

Traditionally in Tibet there have been two approaches used by the many great scholars and accomplished masters. Indeed, while some concentrated on the study and practice of their own tradition, their own spiritual heritage, others expanded the field of their study and their practice of Buddhism from a non-sectarian point of view. This tradition already existed in Tibet among the great masters, and I think that today this non-sectarianism is extremely important and is the best Tibetan custom to follow.

There is a fifth point I would like to go into. For just under thirty years, Tibetan Buddhism has been spreading through the different continents of our earth. Lamas, tulkus, and Geshes have made an enormous contribution to the flowering of Tibetan Buddhism all over the world, aided by hundreds of thousands of students and disciples. During the same period, some rather unhealthy situations have arisen, and this has led to difficulties. Initially this was due to an excess of blind faith on the part of the disciples and also to certain teachers who eventually took advantage of their disciples' weaknesses. There have been scandals, financial and sexual abuses. Such things happen! As a result I must insist at this point that it is absolute necessary that both disciples and teachers keep the goal in mind--to preserve a perfectly pure Dharma. It is the responsibility of us all to put an end to this type of unhealthy activity.

The Buddha taught the four ways to bring together the disciples, and this was to ensure the welfare of others. The six perfections (Sanskrit: *paramita*) are practised to achieve one's own good, and the four ways of bringing together the disciples to achieve the good of others. This involves, first of all, giving material gifts, then practising right speech, then providing help, and finally harmonizing one's words and acts. Above all, it is important to keep this last point in mind. If we do not master our own mind, it is impossible to master the minds of others. We do not know whether or not it is possible to master the mind of another, but it is what we are supposed to do! Whatever the case, it is essential for those who claim they wish to help others that they control their own minds. To do this it is very important nowadays for teachers to be reminded again and again of the teachings of Buddha on how to help others and harmonize words and acts.

As far as the disciple is concerned, to quote a Tibetan proverb: A disciple must not throw himself upon a spiritual master "as a dog throws itself upon a piece of meat." A disciple must not rush to place their trust immediately in a master, but must rather take the time to reflect carefully and examine the master's qualities before establishing a spiritual bond with them by receiving their teachings. It is preferable to receive the teachings of a master while viewing him or her first and foremost as a spiritual friend. We must not rush to hear their teachings and consider them our master at the same time. Little by little, if having observed them we are convinced that they are a true master, fully qualified and worthy of trust, we can follow their teachings by considering them our master. We must not hurry.

The sixth point which I would like to go into regarding Dharma centres concerns our oft-invoked prayer: "May all beings find happiness and its causes." This is something we should apply directly by doing something useful for society. engaging in social activity in the community, by trying to help those who are in difficulty, such as those with mental or other problems, for example. This does not necessarily mean we should teach them the Dharma, but rather use the teachings ourselves in order to help them. I think such activity directed toward others is something we should develop. It is the natural conclusion of another common prayer: "May all beings attain happiness and be free from suffering." On this principle, if we can bring good, even if only to one person, we are fulfilling in part the vow we have made. Moreover, the entire Buddhist community of these centres should participate in social engagement by assisting others, and I think this is something very important with regard to the operation of these centres.

A vegetarian diet is not obligatory for Buddhists. Still, for those of us who follow the teachings of the Great Vehicle, it is important. But the teachings of the Buddha were open and flexible on this subject, and each practitioner has the choice to be vegetarian or not. Large gatherings are sometimes held in Dharma centres and when there are such festivities, celebrations, or teachings, I think that if a great number of people are to be fed it is very important to serve only vegetarian food for the entire duration of the meeting.

Seventh point: we often say this prayer, "May the teachings of the Buddha (the Dharma) be propagated." If Tibet regains its freedom, this will certainly help to preserve the vast and profound teachings of Buddha, including the Lesser and Great Vehicles as well as all the Tantras. There is therefore an obvious connection between the freedom of Tibet and the preservation of the teachings of Buddha in the world. If this were not the case, if the fundamental question of Tibet's freedom were solely a political issue, then as a monk and a disciple of the Buddha's tradition I would have no reason for such concern. But the two aspects are closely linked.

Even when I am advocating the demilitarization of Tibet, that it be made into a peace zone, although the term "demilitarization" is not strictly speaking a term from the Dharma, the project is nevertheless closely related to the Dharma. Many of you, representatives and members of the different centres, are among those who have already contributed to the cause of Tibet's freedom. I thank you for that and ask you to continue your efforts, bearing in mind the relation between the preservation of the teachings and

the freedom of Tibet, in order to give practical expression to the vow that the Buddha's teachings be preserved and developed.

My last point--you must keep your mind happy and know how to laugh!

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