

**SEMINAR ON
CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN EARLY INDIAN BUDDHISM**

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Key Note Address: UNDERSTANDING THE BUDDHA'S DHARMA

Lama Doboomb Tulku

Siddharth Gautama, also known as Tathagata, the Buddha, spent some 45 years of his life teaching the dharma which he had found as a result of relentless search. The dharma is described as profound, peaceful, free from confusion, unconditioned and nectar-like. The Buddha said in a sutra that his mission is to show the path of the dharma, it is up to the people to follow the path to liberation. Following the dharma path is not a matter of mere scholarly knowledge or intellectual study, not to say that these kinds of study are not important.

According to the ancient system of understanding, knowledge of dharma comes about as a result of the interplay between three kinds of understanding, namely, that which arises from listening (sruta), that which arises from reflection (Cinta), and that which arises from meditation (dhyana). The subject matter of listening, reflection and meditation is dharma.

Now, what is the main body of the dharma? It is three-fold: Ethical conduct (Sila), meditative technique (Samadhi) and the direct realization of the truth (Prajna). These are referred to and categorized as three-fold training. They are more in the sense of means or sadhana or practice rather than merely gathering information.

Sruta basically means study, not the mere listening of a sound or gathering information. We can learn from the written words: e.g. scripture, but that was not originally the medium of communication of the dharma. The ancient Indian tradition emphasizes that the dharma must be passed from guru to pupil directly. Vedas, which predates Buddha Dharma, is passed on from teacher to student. This explains why there is no author of Vedas.

There is also an emphasis that an unbroken lineage or succession of teachers and pupils should be ensured. Thus, the Buddha's Dharma is preserved and handed down to us by the sangha community. Preservation of Buddha's Dharma, or Buddhism as we call it today, is not achieved by preservation of manuscripts, epigraphy, rock carving and so on or by mere academic studies. It is not by passing a recollection of a vague idea of the teaching by any person, but a transmission by one who is actually living the teaching. However, in today's context, when interest in the Buddha's teaching is rapidly increasing world over, it may not be very practical for everybody to rely only on guru and sangha community. The teaching may come from anywhere... the kalayana mitra. Kalyanmitra is a person who inspires you and who leads you, even though he/she may not be known to you personally or intimately.

These days so many people seem to be in search of spiritual gurus. The "search for the guru" is certainly a part of Buddhist vocabulary in the scriptures. But I personally do not believe that one can physically go around and search for a guru, in the way people think. As we live in the information era, the digital world, we tend to think everything can be searched for from the internet. I believe that one has to be extremely diligent in looking for

a spiritual guide. The wrong kind of guide can lead you along a wrong path which will be disastrous for those who wish to traverse the spiritual path. The role of guru is very significant in Buddhism. Guru means a perfect or near perfect person in guiding you along the path to perfect path.

However, there are fake gurus, fake sadhus, fake lamas who disgrace the Dharma. The fake Gurus etc. are like a crystal vase filled with dirt, and wrapped in a costly silk brocade and jewel ornaments. Those fake guru's interests lay only on wealth, possession, position in the society, some big name and crowd surrounding him/her.

There is also a danger of Buddhism getting carried away by over simplification such as an idea of only an intellectual or academic knowledge is enough for understanding Buddhism. Similarly chanting of some mantras, holding grand ceremonies and so on are essence of Buddhism. I can also mention a pattern of wave of competition in erecting the tallest statue of Buddha or building the biggest temples and gathering the biggest crowd etc.

Also, there is a prevailing attitude in some societies that Buddhists don't need to believe in the rebirth and karma. This is in contrast to Buddha's dharma. We must also remember that raising social issues is important, raising voice against injustice is necessary but we must know that these need not necessarily be Buddhism.

According to my understanding, union of wisdom and method is the unique and essential message of Buddhism. That is to say that despite non-existence of an Atman, or a person having its own being, the act and result relation - Karma Phala system is infallible. Buddhism means going into the depth of nature of all phenomena. That means to look into the nature of being or searching the meaning of shunyata, emptiness. That means nothing has its own being including shunyata itself, but all are dependent on others.

Along with this understanding of shunyata, foundation of Buddhism is expansion of mind and heart. Bodhicitta basically means that. It means spreading well-wishing-thought to everywhere.

Dependent origination is a profoundly radical teaching. It is not stating that nothing exists, the manner in which all things occur is different from either existence, which implies independence, or non-existence, which implies a denial of occurrence. The point of Buddha's teaching on dependent origination is that it takes the "middle way" between inherent existence, non-existence, both and neither. What Buddha taught was that there is no self. Buddha was not denying people's self, but he was denying that self or anything exists independently.

Integrating the view of emptiness with Bodhicitta helps us overcome our anxiety like "What will happen to me, if I altruistically help others?" Cultivation of Bodhicitta is possible by loosening the grasping to self and things. It deepens our compassion for sentient beings who are under the control of affliction and karma. "Nothing exists from its own side; everything exists by being merely designated by mind. "Self" and "others" exist dependent on labels; there is no inherently existent I or others and no inherently existent suffering or happiness. Contemplating that all these exist in mutual dependence and thus, are empty of their own inherent nature, lessens our fear of suffering and our clinging to our own happiness. In this way, our minds become more courageous and joyful in practicing the bodhisattva deeds."

Buddha's teachings handed down to us are known as Tripitaka a Sanskrit technical term literally meaning "Three Baskets" and used as the title for the collection of scriptures of early Buddhism. The three individual "baskets," of Buddhist scripture include: 1) Vinaya Pitaka or "Baskets of discipline" 2) Sutra Pitaka or "Basket of Discourses" and 3) Abhidharma Pitaka or "Basket of Higher Philosophy". The scripture collection of Theravada Buddhist School, which was derived from Sthaviravada, one of the eighteen schools in ancient Indian subcontinent is preserved and handed down in Pali. The Tripitaka of Mahayana schools are translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan more completely. Many have also been translated into Chinese.

PALI TRIPITAKA:

A. VINAYA: Monastic Rules

1. Suttavibhanga
 - Mahavibhang 227 rules for monks
 - Bhikkhunivibhanga 311 rules for nuns
2. Khandakas
 - Mahavvagga
 - Cullavagga
3. Parivara: accessory, appends, index.

B. SUTTA: General Discourses: five Nikayas

1. Dighanikaya
2. Majjimanikaya
3. Samyuttanikaya
4. Anguttaranikaya
5. Khuddakanikaya: fifteen books
 - Khuddakapatha
 - Dhammapada
 - Udana
 - Ltiuttaka
 - Suttaipatta
 - Vimanavatthu
 - Petavattha
 - Theragatha
 - Thrigatha
 - Hatakas: it's commentaries
 - Nidessa: Cilla-and Maha-
 - Patisambhidamagga
 - Buddhavamsa
 - Apadana
 - Cariyapatika

C. ABHIDHAMMA: Higher religion, Scholasticism

1. Dhammasangani
2. Vibhanga
3. Dhatukatha
4. Puggalapannatti

5. Kathavatthu
6. Yamaka
7. Patthana

SANSKRIT/TIBETAN CANON:

1. Kangur

The Tibetan canon is composed of the Kangyur and the Tangyur. Kangyur - the Buddha's word is in 108 volumes.

Vinaya (dealing mainly with monastic discipline)

Prajñāparamita (the texts on the "transcendent perfection of wisdom")

Avatamsaka (the "Flower-Ornament" collection of related sutras)

Ratnakuta (the "Heap of Jewels" class of sutras)

Other sutras

Tantra (the texts of the Vajrayana or "adamantine vehicle") Nyingma Tantra (the tantras brought to Tibet in the early translation period)

Dharani (short texts based on formulae for recitation)

The Tibetan canon was redacted and codified by Buxton in the fourteenth century. The first rendition of the Tibetan canon was published not in Tibet but in China in 1411. Later editions were published in Tibet in Nartang in 1731-42 and later in Dergé and Choné.

2. Tangyur

The great Indian commentaries in Tibetan are in 225 volumes. Most of these volumes were translated into Tibetan directly from Indian languages, chiefly Sanskrit, although a few were translated from, Pali and Chinese and Central Asian languages.

The second section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, Tangyur is rendered "Translation of Teachings", because this portion of the collection contains works attributed to the individuals other than the Buddha. It is by some, considered only semi-canonical. The snar-thang edition of the Tangyur appeared in 1742. It contains 1 volume of stotras or praises including 64 texts, 86 volumes of commentaries on the tantras including 3055 texts, and 137 volumes of commentaries on the sutras including 567 texts.

TRIPITAKA IN CHINESE:

The Taisho edition of the "Chinese Tripitaka" comprises fifty-five volumes, each containing some 1000 pages of Chinese characters.

The Chinese canon was first published in 983, and several other renditions were published later. The standard edition used now is the Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo, published in Tokyo in 1934. It consists of four parts: sutras, vinaya, sastras (treatises), and miscellaneous texts

originally written in Chinese. The Chinese canon is very inclusive, sharing many texts with both the Pali and Tibetan canons. In particular, the Agamas in the Chinese canon correspond to the first four Nikayas in the Pali canon.

Two principle ‘canons’ or traditions of Buddhist scriptures survive today corresponding to the two main traditions of living Buddhism:

- 1) The Pali or Theravada canon of Sri Lanka and South East Asia (modern printed editions of the Pali canon up to some fifty moderately sized volumes).
- 2) The Sanskrit, Tibetan Kagyur and Tangyur tradition of Tibet and Mongolia (Tibetan Kagyur and Tangyur comprises 300 traditional poti volumes) along with the tradition of China, Korea and Japan.

These two scriptural traditions are broadly categorized into Sanskrit, Northern tradition, Mahayana tradition on one side and Pali, Southern tradition, Theravada tradition on the other side. Considerable numbers of texts from the tradition of Sravakayana (also termed as Hinayana which sounds derogatory) scriptures are translated into Tibetan and Chinese language from Sanskrit.

When the contents of the two scriptural traditions are compared it is apparent that, while significant portions of the Pali canon are parallel in the Chinese collection, and there is considerable overlap between the Chinese collection and the Kagyur and Tangyur tradition of Tibet.

This seminar on “Challenging stereotypes in early Indian Buddhism” is a very specific topic. I am neither a student of history, nor have I any expertise of passing judgment on correctness or otherwise in different styles and systems of Buddha’s Dharma. The only comfort I have of justifying my attendance here as the seminar’s key-note speaker at the kind invitation of IIC and Himanshu Prabha Ray is that I am among the follower of the trend or a pattern of thought which is emerging in the world now. Thanks to the tireless efforts of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many other leaders in bridging different traditions and cultures, deeper feeling of closeness amongst people are prevailing everywhere. I realize that each of Buddhist schools, in various parts of world has its own distinctive features, unique contributions, and different points of emphasis. However, none of them are monolithic.

To conclude, I would like to read two lines from the Foreword written by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana in a book entitled “Buddhism One Teacher Many traditions”, authored by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Venerable Thubten Chodron. “People today are generally more broadminded than those who lived before. Though the world is not without conflict, a unifying trend is emerging as we become more economically and culturally interconnected. Given this current trend, Buddhist unity is overdue.” The venerable also wrote: “When we investigate Buddhism’s major traditions, we can see that they have contributed to the world a rich tapestry of culture, social and spiritual knowledge. The knowledge offers deep insights into psychology, philosophy and mental health.”

Thank you.