

# **When Buddhadharma comes to the West**

## **Part I: Future History in the Making**

Buddhadharma means “the Truth of the Awakened one”. It refers to the unique set of teachings set forth by the historical person we know as “the Buddha”. “Buddhism is a Western word coined to refer to the many different Eastern religions that are based on the Buddhadharma. The Buddha didn’t start a religion, nor did he promote any existing religion. But every Asian culture in which his teachings have become established has incorporated the Dharma into pre-existing religious frameworks, thus making it into a religion. This is good news for us, because it means that Buddhist spirituality doesn’t require anyone to abandon his or her current religion, even those who count themselves as agnostic or atheist. Indeed, many Buddhist meditators today don’t identify their religion as Buddhism.

Bodhidharma was an Indian Buddhist monk of about 1500 years ago who introduced Buddhadharma to China. Bodhidharma couldn’t have been more appropriately named, considering his role in this historical event. The impact on both Chinese culture and “Buddhism” was profound. As the result, a completely new form of Buddhism was born (the Ch’an/Zen tradition). Whenever Buddhism has encountered a new culture, it has always changed that culture and been changed by it as well. In every case, it retains its essence as Buddhadharma while being reinvented as a new kind of “Buddhism” that is applicable, accessible, and relevant to its new environment. This process of cultural translation is how Buddhadharma spreads, and it accounts for forms of “Buddhism” as different as Japanese Zen and Tibetan Vajrayana.

We are participating in a similar historic encounter today. But there are some differences as well. First, we have been blessed with not one but many different Bodhidharmas, coming from Japan, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, China, India, and Tibet. This is the first time ever that all of the different schools of Buddhism have come together in one place at one time. Asian-born teachers, steeped in their own traditions, have introduced meditation and related practices to Western disciples, both in the West and in their Asian monasteries. A wave of Western-born Buddhist teachers who trained under them began transmitting those traditional teachings to students in their own countries. They are the ones who opened the doors for the rest of us. Now, the first crop of Dharma teachers trained solely in the West under the guidance of Western teachers is beginning to emerge. And they are the ones who will lead us across the threshold into the future of Western Buddhism.

Second, everything happens much more quickly today, and the dissemination of information in particular is much faster and more widespread than ever before. When Buddhism migrated from India, its integration, and assimilation into Chinese culture extended over hundreds of years and involved many generations monks and scholars. The widespread introduction of Buddhist teachings to the West has taken little more than fifty years, and is not the exclusive domain of monks and scholars; it is available to everyone and anyone in bookstores, on the internet, and through every other form of media.

Finally, the differences between the modern West and traditional Asia are even greater than those between China and India at the time of Bodhidharma. Buddhist thought and training needs to be made meaningful, accessible, and relevant to modern life. Our job is to lay the

foundations for a form of Buddhism that is in harmony with the scientific, egalitarian, democratic, and socially engaged values of the West. It must be a Buddhism that is compatible with the rapid pace of change and discovery that characterizes modern life. It must also be assimilated into modern culture in a way that changes that culture for the better. As neuroscientist Francisco Varela writes, “It is our contention that the rediscovery of Asian philosophy, particularly of the Buddhist tradition, is a second renaissance in the cultural history of the West.”

As individuals, we are leading the way by working to integrate wholesome Dharma values, Buddhist lifestyles, and contemplative practices into the mainstream of our society. In an overcrowded, competitive, deeply troubled and often violent world, we must become exemplars of harmony, collaboration, mutual respect, understanding, patience and openness. We must learn to be honest, ethical, and humane, all without taking ourselves too seriously!

We have been given the opportunity to sample and try out many different teachings and practices before deciding which suits us best; to choose for ourselves what resonates most with our own experience and personal aspirations. But it is a mistake to think we need to choose one or another of these many versions of Buddhism. As the Dalai Lama says, “It is important to adopt the essence of Buddha’s teaching, recognizing that Buddhism as it is practiced by Tibetans is influenced by Tibetan culture and thus it would be a mistake to try to practice a Tibetanized form of Buddhism.”<sup>1</sup>

Many of us already study and practice with teachers from several different traditions, and may have formed a synthesis of what we found most useful and applicable from each. But this isn’t what the Dalai Lama meant, either. Elsewhere he says, “The past is past; the future is important. ... you in the West should be creative in adapting the timeless essence of the Dharma to your own cultural times and circumstances.” This is echoed by Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh who says, “The forms of Buddhism must change so that the essence of Buddhism remains unchanged. This essence consists of living principles that cannot bear any specific formulation.” In other words, it is the essential truth of the Dharma itself that is timeless, and it cannot and must not be limited by the trappings of any particular culture, language, or period. What our future holds is not some transplanted or hybridized version of Theravada, Vajrayana, Zen, or Pure Land Buddhism inherited from Asia. It is going to be a new, completely modern, and uniquely Western form of Buddhism, and it will begin with us. We are the ancestors of generations to come, and the elders of the future.

This is a challenge that also involves a great responsibility: to be true to the spirit and heart of the Buddhaharma, while not being afraid to let outmoded forms die and be reborn in accordance with current conditions. As Lawrence Levy of Juniper ([www.juniperpath.org](http://www.juniperpath.org)) writes, *“We do not see ourselves as inventors of something new but as stewards carrying into our own culture and time an extraordinary methodology for inner development.”* Buddhadharmā is a universally applicable methodology for training the mind and cultivating inner well-being that is not dependent upon any one culture, style, or implementation. It is adaptable to every time and circumstance. But all of our sources for the Buddha’s teachings come from cultures and times that are vastly different than our own. Buddhist training hasn’t really come to us in a ready-to-use package. Therefore, our challenge is to extract the essence of these teachings from the cultural wrappings in which we have received them, but without losing that essence.

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Meaning of Life from a Buddhist Perspective*.

Some may question whether we have either the right or even the ability to subject the teachings of the Lamas, Roshis, Sayadaws, and Achans to this kind of critical examination. But it is, in fact, exactly what the Buddha has asked us to do:

**Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations.**

**Do not believe in anything because it is spoken and rumored by many.**

**Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.**

**Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders.**

**But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason, and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.**

This is a very powerful teaching. The Dharma isn't fragile; it can withstand scrutiny. As students of truth, we shouldn't be afraid to question anything—from the teachers to the teachings. And we don't have a choice. It is our Western karma that we must do so

As Stephen Batchelor notes, “Buddhism cannot be said to be any of the following: a system of ethics, philosophy, or psychology; a religion, a faith, or a mystical experience; a devotional practice, a discipline of meditation, or a psychotherapy. Yet it can involve all these things.”<sup>2</sup> That Buddhism has become religion wherever it has been established actually says far more about human nature than it does about anything the Buddha taught. And to quote the Dalai Lama once more: “I believe deeply that we must find, all of us together, a new spirituality. This new concept ought to be elaborated alongside the religions in such a way that all people of good will could adhere to it.” So our first task must be to strip away all the religious and cultural accretions added since the death of the Buddha and find the true Buddhadharma at the core of all these different “Buddhisms”. Once we have found and clearly understood that core, we can take ownership of it and create from it our own “Buddhism”.

As for the future direction of Western Buddhism, American born teacher Lama Surya Das identifies ten trends:

### **Trend #1. Meditation-based and Experientially Oriented**

As Westerners, we typically come to Buddhism for meditation and contemplation in an attempt to improve our quality of life. We want to bring more mindfulness to what we do. We are usually attracted to Buddhism... because we want personal transformation, direct religious experience, and we want to integrate wisdom, goodness, and compassion into our daily lives. The Dharma is not just something we believe in, but something we do.

### **Trend #2. Lay-oriented**

Although there is certainly room for traditional monasticism—both short- and long-term—Buddhism in the West is obviously much more lay-oriented than it has been historically. Practitioners are now bringing personal issues of relationships, family, and work to the Dharma center in an effort to make more sense out of life.

### **Trend #3. Gender Equal**

In an effort to go beyond traditional patriarchal structures and cultures, we have already made great strides in supporting women as well as men in teaching and leadership roles... Gender equality remains an ideal, but one that seems reachable. We all—male

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture*.

and female—have an opportunity to refine our more feminine aspects and practice a Buddhism in which we keep the heart and mind balanced, respectful of both body and soul. We are trying to learn from the past so as not to unwittingly repeat the mistakes of others.

#### **Trend # 4. Democratic and Egalitarian**

Western Buddhism... is evolving in a much less institutionalized, less hierarchichal, and more democratic fashion. Almost by definition, personal growth and the interests of the individual are going to be stressed more than institutional preservation and growth.

#### **Trend #5. Essentialized, Simplified, and Demystified**

For the most part, noticeably absent from Western Buddhism are the complex, esoteric rites and arcane rituals designed for initiates only. Western teachers stress essence more than form, as well as teachings that are relevant for daily life. It is thus practical and this world oriented, rather than otherworldly and hermetic, with great emphasis on integrating Dharma practice via mindfulness and compassion into daily life.

#### **Trend #6. Nonsectarian**

Most Westerners seem to have a true appreciation for many different meditation techniques and traditions. We have seen how politics, the quest for power, and sectarian bias have created chaos within various religious communities. We understand it is essential that we strive diligently not to fall into those same traps. As practitioners, we are generally interested in broadening and deepening our experience of the various different Buddhist spiritual practices. I think it is safe to say that there is a true appreciation of the benefits of nonsectarianism, ecumenicism, and cross-fertilization. In fact, many teachers are already synthesizing the best of the various traditions into the one amalgamated Western Dharma that seems inevitable. American karma is our great melting pot. We have to live with that and make the most of it.

#### **Trend #7. Psychologically Astute**

There is a growing appreciation for explaining Buddhist principles within the idiom of transformational psychology. Faith and devotion are important and useful for some, but the larger appeal is to the individual's spiritual development and psychological and emotional well-being. Dharma students are encouraged to bring spirituality into their lives as opposed to using spirituality as a way of avoiding personal issues. We are working on ourselves, and there are any number of interdisciplinary tools and methods. Psychotherapy and Buddhism are most often taken as complementary.

#### **Trend # 8. Exploratory**

In line with our scientific and skeptical upbringing, questioning and inquiry are encouraged. We are striving to be dynamic and forward-looking instead of mere preservationists. I see contemporary Dharma as basically a Buddhism without beliefs, a Dharma that's less doctrinaire, dogmatic, and belief-based while being much more inquiring, skeptical, rational, and devoted to testing and finding out for ourselves. Western Dharma is trying to stretch beyond dogma, insularity, and fundamentalist thinking.

#### **Trend # 9. Community Oriented**

Through our shared spiritual, ethical, and educational interests, we are strengthening and building our spiritual community as well as our connections to each other. There is a

great emphasis on the needs of the sangha in the sense of the larger community instead of individual priests and leaders. One day Ananda asked the Buddha, “Is it true that the Sangha, the community of spiritual friends, is half of the holy life?” Buddha answered, “No, Ananda, the Sangha community is the whole of holy life.” Spiritual friends, spiritual friendships, and simple friendliness—this is the holy life. Here in the West where more and more people are expressing their personal needs for spiritual growth, it is the challenge of the sangha today to provide spiritual encouragement and a loving, supportive, nourishing environment for generations to come.

#### **Trend # 10. Socially and Ecologically Conscious**

Gandhi once said, “Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not understand religion.” Increasingly as Buddhists we are attempting to extend our sense of social and moral responsibility to include others, particularly those who are suffering from various injustices and deprivations. We are also searching for ways to express our deep concern for the natural world. The contemporary lay sangha is like an interdisciplinary “Lobby for Wisdom and Compassion.” This differs dramatically from the image of the traditional reclusive monk, who is often isolated and out of touch with the problems of the world.<sup>3</sup>

The Buddha divided his teaching into three parts: Wisdom – which includes both *philosophy* and *psychology*; Virtue – the practice of a rational *ethics*; and Meditation, which integrates the other two into a *technology* for human transformation. Stripped of religious accretions, these teachings are an excellent fit with scientific rationalism, and it is their secular and scientific nature that resonates most strongly with us. Of these three parts of the Dharma, it is Meditation that has been most fully embraced in the West so far -- as a method for stress relief, a kind of personal psychotherapy (eg. Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction or MBSR), and as a tool for brain science (eg. MRIs of monks meditating). But like a tripod, Buddhadharma requires all three supports to be truly effective, and Wisdom and Virtue have so far been rarely addressed outside of transplanted Asian religious contexts. There is a real risk that scientific materialism and extreme secularism will result in the baby (the transformational power of the Dhamma) being thrown out with the bathwater (Asian religious doctrines).

This weekend we will be focusing on the Wisdom and Virtue teachings, free from religious doctrine. Through experiential exercises, we will explore how they become a powerful spiritual path when incorporated into meditation. Finally, we will examine controversial Buddhist religious doctrines in light of the Buddha’s original teachings.

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<sup>3</sup> "Toward a Western Buddhism and Contemporary Dharma" by Lama Surya Das, <http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/blog/2010/apr/26/toward-western-buddhism-and-contemporary-dharma-la/>