

Introduction to Buddhism

Questions & Answers



Q: What is the essential characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism?

Thrangu Rinpoche: One tends to associate Tibet with the quintessential path of the Vajrayana. Generally speaking, people tend to class the Buddhism that took root in Ceylon, Burma, and Thailand as 'Theravada', that which took root in China and Japan as the 'Mahayana', and that which spread through Tibet and Mongolia as 'Vajrayana'. However, it seems to me that one finds the Vajrayana present in all of those lands and traditions.

In the meditation instructions of the Theravada and in the artwork of their temples there can be found traces of what is normally associated with Vajrayana. For instance, they have temple protectors, and in China and Japan there are Vajrayana sadhana practices to Amitabha, Vajrapani, and others. They also sometimes recite mantras. However, it was mainly in Tibet that Vajrayana spread. There were very many buddha-aspects venerated and meditated upon, all to suit individual choices and needs. People have very different aspirations and capacities, and if the teachings only offer one sort of practice (that they all would have to do), then they would feel very restricted, very uncomfortable.

Lord Buddha taught a very wide variety of techniques so that anyone would be able to have a practice that suited just their preferences and capacities. Some want to meditate on an aspect of Buddha that will help increase wisdom, some seek particularly the Buddha's protection, some have faith in his compassion, etc.

This is why there are so many forms upon which they can meditate--male forms, female forms, peaceful ones, wrathful ones, etc. By fulfilling their aspirations then Lord Buddha helps them all to develop in the quickest way.



Q: I'm sure His Holiness could answer this question for hours, but I felt the need to ask it anyway. Just, perhaps, a little insight into the birth and death cycle that might give us a better understanding.

H.H. Karmapa: His Holiness says that there are many people in the world who believe in rebirth and many who do not. But believing in rebirth goes along well with believing in the law of Karma, or cause and effect. In Buddhism, the quality of one's birth is dependent on how sincerely one has respected the law of Karma. If within this particular lifetime you perform virtuous activities, beneficial activities in terms of helping other beings,



and activities of kindness and compassion, then it is possible, even certain, that you will experience a fortunate rebirth in the next lifetime.

It is like sowing a good seed and then facilitating its growth by giving it the necessary water, fertilizer and so on. By putting forth this sort of effort it's quite certain you will have a beautiful flower.

It's the same in life. If you perform beneficial activities and respect the law of Karma, there is a possibility that you will be reborn as a human being, with the opportunities and the prerequisites necessary for you to understand the profundity of the spiritual path and the spiritual practices, thus enabling yourself to progress in a non-returning direction. Whereas, if you spend your life indulging in negative activities, activities that are destructive to yourself and others, then even if you are born as a human being in the next lifetime, you may be deprived of the possibilities of further progress. You could be born into a situation of complete destitution. This sort of rebirth, unfortunately, leads to further negative activities which means suffering the consequences and then again suffering the degradation in quality of your rebirth. Putting it simply, the quality of your rebirth depends on how honestly you live up to the universal law, the law of cause and effect and result.



Q: How can we, in our present life or each life, best fulfill our destiny and be of the most service not only to mankind but to the universe in general?

H.H. Karmapa: His Holiness says that the best way to fulfill your destiny in life, as well as benefiting others, is to follow the Dharma by learning and putting into practice the Mahayana teachings. But for this practice to become the foundation of your life, you must first understand the process of rebirth and gain confidence in the truth of Karma--the truth of cause and effect.

If you apply the Mahayana teachings in your life, with understanding and confidence, you will fulfill your destiny by experiencing awakening or enlightenment. Having done this, there is no doubt that you will be in a position to benefit others. Not only could you benefit human beings, but also sentient beings in general. In this respect, the teachings are very fruitful. There are many different methods or skillful means which we can apply to our own lives. The teachings speak of the six perfections of the path: perfection of generosity, perfection of discipline, perfection of patience, perfection of meditation, perfection of effort, and the perfection of wisdom. We can work toward perfecting ourselves in such a way that through inherent potential we develop our destiny while spontaneously benefiting others. Willingness as well as capability to benefit other beings comes through the development of the remaining four perfections of fruition (another of Buddha's teachings) which concern the perfection of skillful means, perfection of strength, perfection of prayer, perfection of wisdom, and the perfection of fruition.



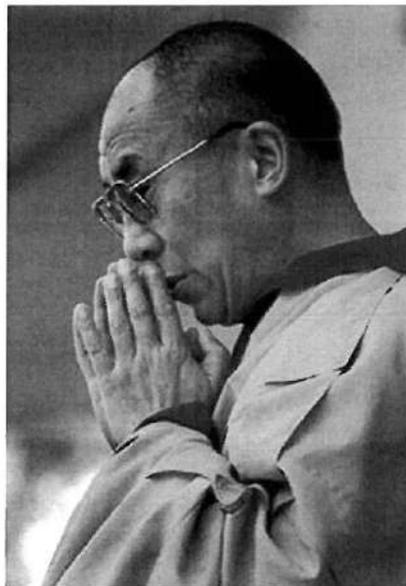
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