



Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

Relevant aspects of the Buddha's teachings in modern times

1) Democracy

The Buddha implemented democratic principles in his ordained community more than 2500 years ago, about 100 years before they were established in Greece. The differences between these two democratic systems are quite significant. In Greece, not everyone was able to participate. Women, for example, could not vote, which already eliminated 50% of the population. Also slaves, the under-aged or people without land were excluded, so only maybe around 15% of the people were able to actively participate in the democratic process. Basically, it was democracy by name, but only catered to the rich and male.

Within a Buddhist community in the times of the Buddha, all nuns and monks had the same right to vote, there were no slaves, no distinctions were made based on caste, wealth and so on. Also no age limit applied as long as the person could think clearly and was able to take an informed decision.

These days, of course, democracy has flourished in many countries, and includes more people than during the Greek times. Within the Buddhist monastic communities it sometimes decreased, though, due to certain rules or regulations.

The question might arise, how democracy and the student-teacher relationship correlate. Here there is a difference between taking decisions as a community, where all monks and nuns exercise the same rights, and private connections between a teacher and his or her disciples. In the latter, the teacher's wishes or commands supersede the disciple's due to his greater knowledge, compassion and other qualities.

2) Equality or equal rights

The relationship between Buddhism and equal rights needs to be very strong or else whatever the Buddha taught cannot possibly support world peace or individual peace of mind.

When we think of the Buddha's life and his teachings, we can see the ways in which he promoted equal rights. Concerning his own life, he was born into the royal caste, of the four castes prevalent in India. He left the royal caste and took up the lifestyle of the Brahmin caste by taking ordination and practicing meditation under the guidance of the master Sadubhave. As a member of the royal caste, his responsibility would have been to wage war and not to largely engage in meditation. This shift of caste was problematic, but the Buddha went ahead nonetheless, undermined the Brahmin privilege to meditate and advocated that anyone should be able to lead a spiritual life. This was his first step towards equal rights between castes.

The second step was that the Buddha went to the house of anyone who offered him alms, regardless of his or her social status. In the Indian society, the lowest class are the Untouchables, who should not touch or be touched by higher classes or socially mix in any way, like taking meals together. The Buddha, however, accepted anyone as his disciple, ate with anybody and accepted alms from anybody. Even though he did not lead a revolution as such, his actions showed that he awarded an equal status to everyone.

When the Buddha taught, he also made no distinctions between his students based on caste. He said that the success of the practice depended on the individual's effort and understanding and not on their social status. That was the third step of caste equality.

In his teachings, the Buddha said: *The caste and the family line are not of main importance, but the precious training is the most important.* This is a definitive statement. Here he does not say that there is no difference between people at all, but that the superiority of a person is based on their practice, their wisdom, their compassion and so on. Therefore, external factors are unimportant, but inner factors mark the difference.

During the time of Mahatma Gandhi, there was someone called Dr. Ambedkar in India, who was born into a lower caste, but converted to Buddhism after studying the religion closely. His main reason to embrace Buddhism was that it did not distinguish between social backgrounds. Eventually, he led more than 600.000 people to convert to Buddhism. He also requested Mahatma Gandhi several times to include equality between castes in the fight for independence from England, but Gandhi's priority was to gain independence first and then to promote equal rights within the Indian society. Unfortunately, Gandhi died too soon to do this, but Dr. Ambedkar was instrumental in promoting equality.

These days there are a lot of discussions about equality between men and women. The Buddha made no distinctions between genders in his teachings. In the *Heart Sutra* he says: “...any noble sons or daughters who wish to practice the Perfection of Wisdom should see this way...” This shows clearly that the Buddha saw both sexes as equally fit to engage in the Buddhist practices. Especially in the Mantra teachings, being aware of the great difference his contemporary society made between men and women, the Buddha set down a fundamental rule that women were not to be discriminated against. Any unequal treatment therefore defies directly the rules set by the Buddha.

Generally the Buddha taught that all sentient beings are equal in the sense that they all strive for happiness and well-being and try to avoid suffering. The physical form of the sentient being or its status makes no difference in regard to this basic common feeling that everyone shares. If we think about it, then we all share this feeling, starting with the smallest insect up to a whale, and the Buddha taught that every being is therefore equal in this regard. To overcome concepts that there are fundamental differences between beings, Buddhists engage in a meditation stressing that all beings are equal in their basic make-up. Generally, I teach the *Four Immeasurables* where the fourth line reads: *May all of them abide in the state of the fathomless mind in great equanimity, free from passion to the close ones and hatred towards distant ones!* This shows clearly, that we should not make any differences between beings.

3) The use of logical investigation and reasoning

The main point here is that Buddhism should not be followed out of blind faith. Our trust in the Buddhist teachings needs to be based on logical investigation and valid reasoning. Only then can one become an authentic follower of the Buddha. What does that mean? It means to go beyond limited reasons like “Buddhism is important”, “it’s nice to follow Buddhism” or “it’s part of my culture”. We need to look for valid reasons and find them out for ourselves. If we gather these valid reasons and it makes logical sense to us to study and practice Buddhism, our foundation will be solid. If we don’t know why we follow Buddhism, we behave like a dog on a leash that is taken for a walk by its owner. The dog just follows the owner without understanding why they are taking the walk now or where they are going.

This path of logical reasoning is greatly relevant. All scientists, like biologists, chemists, physicists, use experimentation, the gathering of information etc. to deduce logically how things work, what is valid and what is not. Through this, they can find ways to implement their findings and develop learning systems.

The first step is always to develop a theory and then to see what works and how it works. Just ideas like something is important or good are not sufficient. In the case of Buddhism it means that we need to try the teachings out, for example during our working day. If we follow the Buddha’s advice on patience, do we get less angry? Do we

get less jealous of our colleagues if we rejoice in their success? Do our difficulties during work diminish? Do we feel less overwhelmed when our workload is high? These are the criteria to judge whether there is a valid reason to follow Buddhism. We need to find the connection of the cause and the effect like rice seeds producing rice. This approach makes Buddhism and its logical approach valid in contemporary society.

4) Interdependence

The Buddhist philosophical view is very close to the relativity theory and quantum physics in modern science, whose foundations were developed by the physicists Isaac Newton and more recently Albert Einstein.

In Buddhism we use the word *tendrel*, which can be translated as interdependent origination, interconnectedness or interdependence. Tendrel describes two kinds of interdependence. One is interdependence based on relation of one phenomenon to another. The other is a causal connection of one phenomenon arising out of another.

Interdependence through relation

Here we are talking about how one phenomenon comes into being in relation to another. Let's think of concepts like front and back, big and small, long and short, heavy and light. Something can only be the front, if we relate it to something being the back. Or something can only be small in relation to something regarded as big and so on. These phenomena or concepts can only arise in relationship to something else.

Interdependence through a causal link

This means that a phenomenon arises due to a direct link to its causes and conditions. For example, if we want to have an apple tree, it is of no use to plant an orange seed. We need an apple seed, because that is the immediate cause. Then the apple seed causes the trunk to sprout, from which the branches develop, then the flowers and then again apples, which contain the seeds for new apples trees. One phenomenon serves as a cause for the next phenomenon to arise when the appropriate conditions are assembled. This is how it works for outer phenomena.

The same principle likewise works for inner phenomena like our afflictive emotions. They arise due to our way of thinking and result in us feeling unhappy, uncomfortable and so on. Anger, for example, cannot result in happiness. If we want to enjoy well-being, we need to know what leads to it, like for example patience instead of anger. We also call that karma, the law of cause and effect.

*Translated from Tibetan by Daniela Hartmann
Edited by Zuzanna Griffiths*