

Society or the Individual

Students doing FPMT's Discovering Buddhism at Home program (available from www.fpmt.org/shop) have access to a lively online discussion group. This question from a newcomer prompted a lot of responses.

Hello! I am new to the forum and wish to pose the following question from Module I: In the discussion about Socialism, Lama Yeshe stated that universal religion would not work; that Buddhism should not be the "universal" religion. How does that statement reconcile with the dedication of merit to all sentient beings? Doesn't the wish for all beings to reach enlightenment imply a universal or "socialist" ideal?

Thanks to Nick Ribush for posting the following excerpt from *Becoming Your Own Therapist* by Lama Thubten Yeshe which provides a definitive answer (*Therapist* is available from Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive www.lamayeshe.com)

Q: Can a bodhisattva be a Marxist in order to create social harmony? I mean, is there a place for the bodhisattva in Marxism or, vice versa, is there a place in Marxism for the bodhisattva? Could Marxism be a tool in the abolition of all sentient beings' suffering?

Lama: Well, it's pretty hard for someone like me to comment on a bodhisattva's actions, but I have my doubts about a bodhisattva becoming a communist in order to stop social problems. Problems exist in the minds of individuals. You have to solve your own problems, no matter what kind of society you live in, socialist, communist or capitalist. You must check your own mind. Your problem is not society's problem, not my problem. You are responsible for your own problems just as you're responsible for your own liberation or enlightenment. Otherwise you're going to say, "Supermarkets help people because they can buy the stuff they need in them. If I work in a supermarket I'll really be contributing to society." Then, after doing that for a while, you're going to say, "Maybe supermarkets don't help that much after all. I'd be of more help to others if I took a job in an office." None of those things solve social problems. But first of all you have to check where you got the idea that by becoming a communist, a bodhisattva could help all mother sentient beings.

Q: I was thinking that many people in the world today are hungry and deprived of basic needs and that while they're preoccupied with hunger and the safety and security of their family, it's hard for them to grasp the more subtle aspects of phenomena, such as the nature of their own minds.

Lama: Yes, I understand what you are saying. But don't forget that the starving person preoccupied by hunger and the obese person obsessing over what else to buy in the supermarket are basically the same. Don't just focus on those who are materially deprived. Mentally, rich and poor are equally disturbed, and, fundamentally, one is as unhappy as the other.

Q: But Lord Krishna united India in a spiritual war, the war of Dharma, and as a result, at one time, all the people of India had the ability to engage in spiritual practice. Couldn't we now spread the Dharma amongst all the people on earth and establish a better global society through a kind of spiritual socialism?

Lama: First of all, I think that what you're saying is potentially very dangerous. Only a few people would understand what you're talking about. Generally, you can't say that actions that give harm to mother sentient beings are those of a bodhisattva. Buddhism forbids you to kill other sentient

beings, even for supposedly religious reasons. In Buddhism, there's no such thing as a holy war. You have to understand this. And secondly, it's impossible to equalize everybody on earth through force. Until you fully understand the minds of all beings throughout the universe and have abandoned the minds of self-cherishing and attachment, you will never make all living beings one. It's impossible.

Q: I don't mean making all people the same, because obviously there are going to be different mental levels. But we could establish a universal human society on the basis of socialistic economic theory.

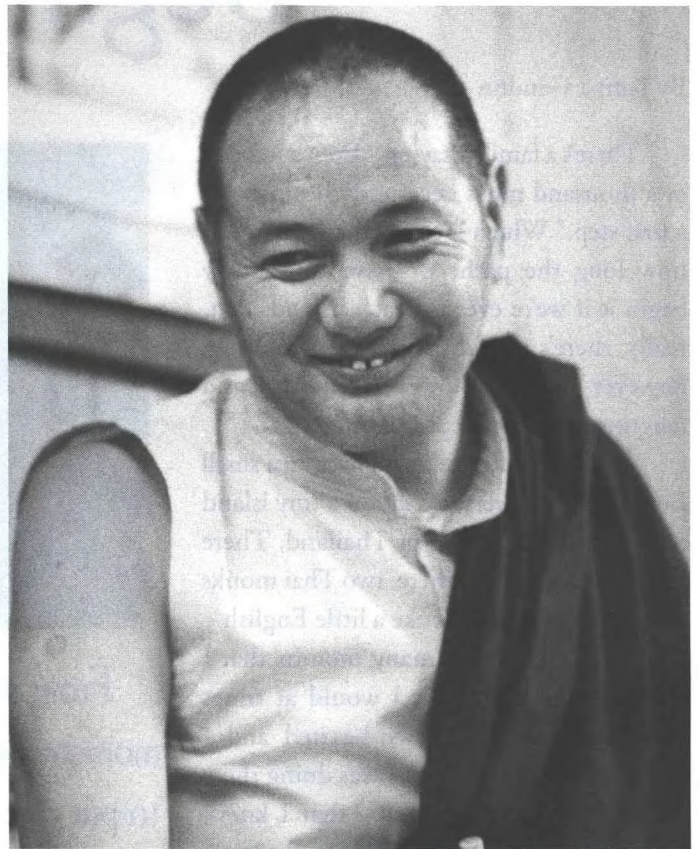
Lama: I think you shouldn't worry about that. You'd be better off worrying about the society of your own mind. That's more worthwhile, more realistic than making projections about what's happening in the world around you.

Q: But is it not a spiritual practice to strike a balance between your own self-realization and service to humanity?

Lama: Yes, you can serve society, but you can't homogenize all sentient beings' actions simultaneously, just like that. Lord Buddha wants all sentient beings to become enlightened right away, but our negative karma is too strong, so we remain uncontrolled. You can't wave a magic wand, "I want everybody to be equally happy," and expect it to happen just like that. Be wise. Only a wise mind can offer equality and peace. You can't do it through emotional rationalization. And you have to know that communist ideas about how best to equalize sentient beings are very different from those of Lord Buddha. You can't mix such different ideas. Don't fantasize; be realistic.

Q: In conclusion, then, are you saying that it's impossible to create one common spiritual society on this planet?

Lama: Even if you could, it would not stop people's problems. Even if you made a single society of all the inhabitants of the entire universe, there would still be attachment, there would still be anger, there would still be hunger. Problems lie within each individual. People are not the same; everybody is different. Each of us needs different methods according to our individual psychological makeup, mental attitudes and personality; each of us needs a different approach in order to attain enlightenment. That's why Buddhism completely accepts the existence of other religions and philosophies. We recognize that they are all necessary for human development. You can't say that any one way of thinking is right for everybody. That's just dogma. ☸



PHOTOS: Carol Royce-Wilder, 1975, 1977