

An interview with Ven. Professor Samdhong Rinpoche

Samdhong Rinpoche is the Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government in exile.

He answered a host of questions about refuge, vegetarianism, sectarianism,

and greed-versus-need in Helsinki, Finland in July 2007.

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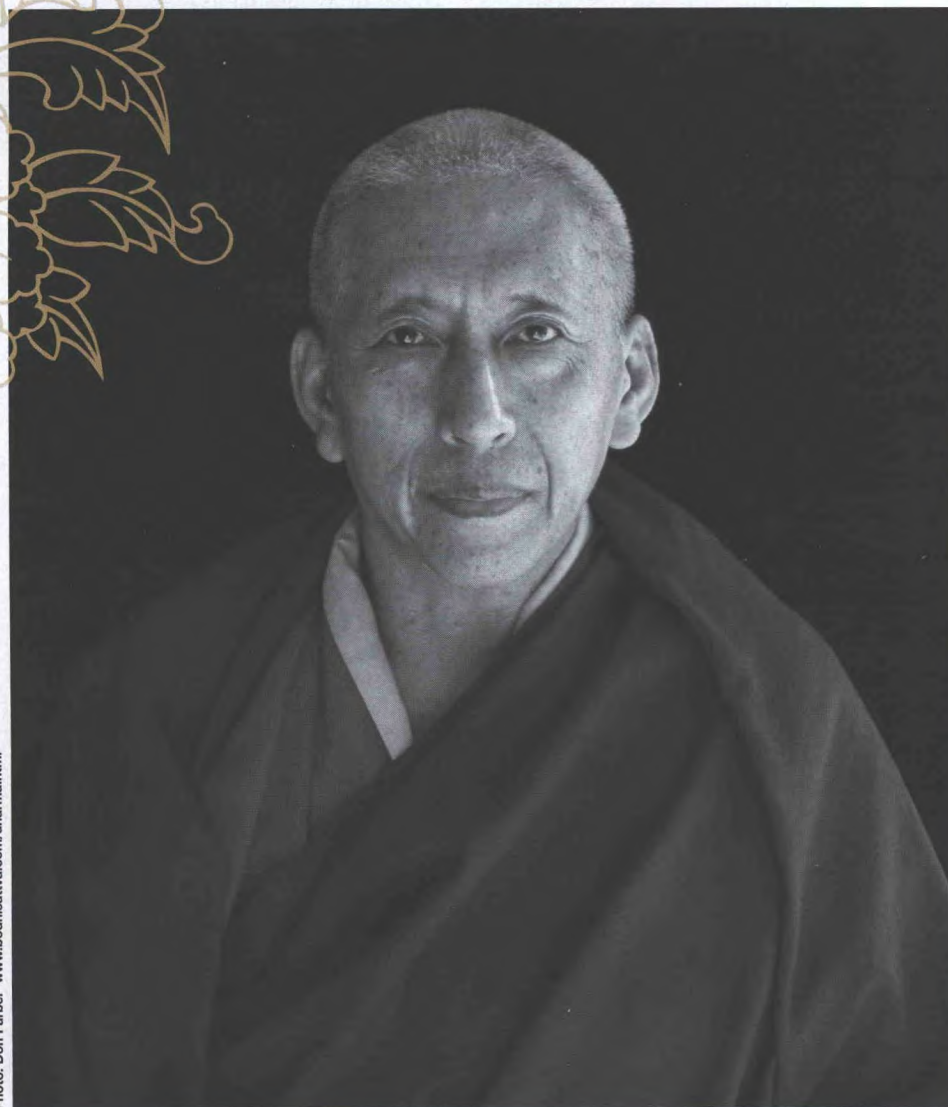


Photo: Don Farber www.bodhisattva.com/dharma.html

Q: Can a person be a Buddhist without taking refuge? Is it enough that a person decides in his mind that "I'm a Buddhist" without any formal refuge ceremony?

A: Of course formal refuge ceremony is not necessary for anyone to become a Buddhist. But without taking the refuge, I don't think that you can be a true Buddhist. You may be practising some of the Buddhist techniques or teachings, but you cannot be classified as a Buddhist. The door to enter into Buddhism is through taking refuge. Once you take refuge, then you become a Buddhist; and when you lose/give up the refuge, then you go back into being a non-Buddhist. Taking refuge in Dharma is a necessary condition for becoming a Buddhist, but that does not need any ceremony or a guru or a teacher or guide – you can take it by yourself.

Q: Sometimes people take refuge without further thought, so how serious an attitude should a person have when taking refuge? Does taking refuge awaken some



old tendencies or qualities, *skandhas*, in a person? Because sometimes you see that bad qualities appear to be coming to the surface after some people have taken refuge.

A: When you are attending a refuge taking ceremony, you are not necessarily really taking the refuge. Taking refuge means that you must have a basic understanding of the Dharma, and you also must have a basic understanding of the misery of the worldly life. And what is meant by taking refuge? It means you establish the faith in your mind that Dharma alone can save you from misery or unhappiness, and for that matter you must have understood that you have a number of sufferings, and you also have a desire to get rid of the suffering. You must also have an understanding that Dharma alone can give you freedom from suffering. If these basic understandings are within you or any person, then the person is automatically taking refuge without taking any ceremony. Otherwise you might have attended a ceremony a hundred times, but you still remain without any refuge. So refuge is a mindset, it is not a ceremony.

Q: Sometimes practising Buddhism makes Westerners gloomy and melancholic, as if they had lost their joy of life. What might be the reason for that? Are people expecting too much? Is there some kind of wrong attitude in practising, if this is the result?

A: That can be a problem. The attitude and intention for embracing any Dharma needs to be a real and deep-rooted one, not an emotional one. Many people with fleeting emotions think that they have the required mindset, but they haven't, and they also have immediate expectations for some great results. But if you practise Dharma with such an idea of worldly reward or achievement, then that is not the real practise of Dharma. Practising Dharma needs a long-term determination to practise continuously in this and all the coming lifetimes. So I think that has not matured in the minds of many new Western Buddhist practitioners, and

due to this short-term expectation and day-by-day evaluation, which hardly shows swift progress, one day you will find yourself frustrated and give up the practise. So before entering into the practise, you must have a deep understanding and study, and then examine yourself, whether you are able to endure it on a sustainable basis and only then should you get into the practise of Dharma. Otherwise it will become a kind of child's play and that may be no good for anyone.

Q: So it means that a person should understand the law of karma and reincarnation before he takes refuge?

A: Even if he or she does not have a proper understanding, some kind of awareness should be there. For example, we say in the chants: "To the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha I take refuge until I reach enlightenment." This is a very long-term business.

Q: Unfortunately Westerners want enlightenment to come in this lifetime!

A: To get enlightenment in this lifetime is possible, but for that you need the right kind of practise and deep understanding and expert guidance and endurance; you need so many things. But if these things are there, it is possible to get enlightenment in one lifetime.

Q: How can we make sure that our motive for practising does not change into a wrong one?

A: Of course it depends on your ability to cultivate the mind in a proper way. Cultivation of mind is sometimes a difficult job; if you do not understand your mind properly, then you may not be able to cultivate it. Right in the beginning, to enter into Buddhism or take refuge in the Triple Gem does not have anything to do with life's worldly achievements. Spiritual achievement means the improvement of your mind, your consciousness. Improvement of your consciousness is not necessary for lifetime achievements such as name, fame, wealth, happiness, enjoyment, house, car – these do not require changing the mind set, changing the consciousness or

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improving it. If you really are concerned about your inner self, your consciousness, which needs to be improved, purified and pacified, then the need for Dharma comes. And in that matter, when you take refuge in the Dharma, you are not seeking anything to happen the very next day. So the process of purifying your mind will go a very long way, and it is very gradual and time consuming. The Buddhist canon says achieving Buddhahood needs *three uncountable aeons*. That means a very, very long-term process, and this understanding and motivation must be there in the beginning.

Secondly, when the improvement comes to your inner self, it will gradually grow. So you do not need to evaluate every day how much improvement and progress has been done. If you are anxious to measure achievements day-by-day, then your long-term determination is not there. So therefore we should be very patient and not look for immediate results, but be determined to purify inner consciousness from all kinds of negative emotions sustainably. After a number of years of practising you will become adjusted to that process, and then it will become sustainable.

Q: Is it important to be a vegetarian for cultivating compassion?

A: Yes. Vegetarianism has so many positive effects. Number one: by remaining vegetarian, your body becomes more natural. Human beings are not meat eaters by nature, they are vegetarian, and by accident human beings began eating everything. That is unnatural. By remaining natural the body will be healthier and more conducive to spiritual development. Secondly, by eating non-vegetarian food, you are eating the flesh of some living creature, and when you are able to eat the flesh of a living creature, it means that your compassion to those living creatures is not sufficient. Then, also, cultivating loving-kindness for those creatures becomes more difficult.

But we cannot say that a non-vegetarian can never grow spiritually. During Buddha's time the monks were asked not to refuse if somebody

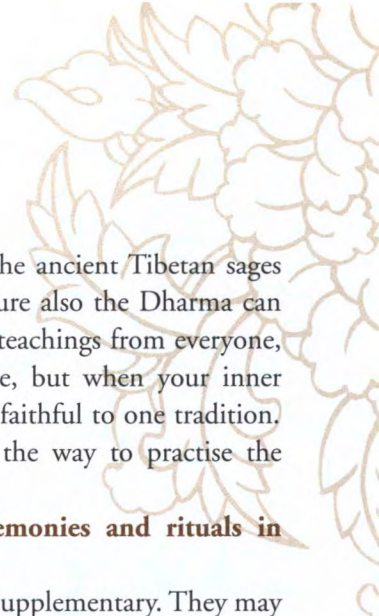
offered a non-vegetarian meal while they were begging for alms in the street, so that is why Buddhist monks are not necessarily vegetarian, particularly in Theravada countries like Thailand, Burma or Sri Lanka; the monks there don't refuse to take meat. But the Buddha also said that if somebody has invited you tomorrow for a meal, then you must ask for a vegetarian meal. Otherwise some creature might be killed in order to feed you, and that will be a direct cause for violence. So if you heard or see that an animal is killed in order to give you the meat, then you must refuse. This very clearly indicates that eating meat must not cause directly or indirectly the killing of the animal, and once the animal is already killed, whether you eat or don't, then eating meat does not contribute to the killing of that animal. But by and large, if there is no eater, there is no killing, so by this logic non-vegetarian food is not good and vegetarian is much better.

Q: How important is it to read Buddhist books regularly and extend one's knowledge of Buddhism?

A: The understanding of Buddhadharma is acquired from threefold study: the first is learning from hearing or from reading. Without hearing from a teacher or reading from books we do not have the information, so that is the first stage. The second stage is analyzing them by yourself, through an analytical and rational mind. The third stage is that you meditate upon it and have the direct perception. So these three stages are in sequence and depend on each other. Therefore reading and attending teachings is absolutely necessary for the understanding of Buddhadharma.

Q: Nagarjuna has said that contentment is the greatest wealth. So how can we distinguish between need and greed?

A: I think that is very easy. 'Need' means need for the body or need for the mind. In order to maintain your body, you need balanced food, and clean drinking water. Pure water is sufficient to quench your thirst or make the body function.



A costly apple juice or other kinds of tasty drinks – those are not needed by your body, only your taste and your ‘greed’ for the taste require them. You cannot survive without drinking water, but you can very well survive without drinking wine, and that is the clear differentiation. The same applies also to food and clothes. Four or five sets of clothes are necessary, one for the day and one for night, and when one is being washed, you need another set, so this is ‘need’. Without clothes, you cannot go out into society. But many costly sets of clothes are ‘greed’, not ‘need’. A reasonable house to live in and raise a family: that is ‘need’. For a parent with growing children, having three or four bedrooms may be the need according to the size of the family. But, thirteen or fourteen bedrooms? This is greed. Need means for the maintenance of the life, greed means not required for the maintenance of the life – it is very easy to differentiate.

Q: Western practitioners classify themselves very easily and quickly as Gelug-pa, Nyingma-pa or Kagyu-pa etc., and think that other traditions are not so good. How do we avoid becoming sectarian?

A: If you practise your Dharma very sincerely, then I’m sure you will not become a sectarian, and you will have equal respect for all sects and traditions. To become sectarian, thinking that ‘my sect is superior and the others are inferior,’ means that your mind is not touched by Dharma: You are involved in a kind of worldly institution, a group or a party and then Dharma is left somewhere and you are trapped – in the name of Dharma – in an organization or party. So whoever has this kind of mentality, for sure he or she is not a religious practitioner, but rather a party to some group.

Q: Unfortunately this is very common in the West.

A: Yes, that is very unfortunate. It is necessary to follow a sect that is good. If your teacher is Nyingma-pa, you should stick to Nyingma tradition and not change frequently from here to there. And if you are a Sakya-pa or Gelug-pa, you try to stick to that tradition with equal respect for other traditions. Because these traditions have certain specific methodology, that is why the different traditions have been developed, and mixing up all these specific or unique techniques should not happen. So from the beginning to the end you follow one tradition very sincerely and very faithfully, but do not become a sectarian, thinking that this is the only way and the others are useless. That is absolutely an irreligious mind that will harm you, and the growth of your spirituality. So equal respect for every tradition, but faithful study or practise

of one tradition, that is the way the ancient Tibetan sages and seers followed, and in the future also the Dharma can grow in that way. You can receive teachings from everyone, you can have respect for everyone, but when your inner practise is concerned you must be faithful to one tradition. That is not sectarianism; that is the way to practise the Dharma.

Q: How important are ceremonies and rituals in practising Buddhism?

A: Rituals and ceremonies are supplementary. They may sometimes create an atmosphere, an environment for opening up the mind, and that is the only purpose. Otherwise it is not an indispensable or inseparable part of Dharma. You can have it, if you think it is helpful, but you can leave it, if you think it is not helpful. It is a kind of a social activity: When a lot of Dharma practitioners get together, then they can chant, pray and make ceremonies, which will create a kind of social atmosphere and environment, and sometimes it is helpful for people.

Q: The origin of mantras is very pure, but can reciting mantras be harmful or dangerous for a person who does not know their meaning?

A: I don’t think so. Chanting of mantras, whether knowing the meaning or not knowing it, should not be harmful. It may not be beneficial, but it will not be harmful.

Q: What is the most important advice for a person who wants to start doing meditation and is a beginner? Are there any dangers in meditation?

A: Yes, in the beginning meditators must have some guidance. Without a teacher, self-learning meditation may go right or it may not. If it goes wrong then you may not be able to understand the wrong till it is quite late. That is the real danger. So it is better to have some guidance in the beginning. For example, the Theravada tradition of vipassana, now there are ten-day vipassana courses. This kind of ten-day course is quite sufficient to help a beginner to meditate by oneself, and there are many kinds of these courses. In the beginning these short courses should be taken with guidance, and thereafter one can pursue meditation alone, and if you find difficulties then go back to your guide. Without guidance, meditation sometimes goes wrong.

Q: Is acceptance of the law of karma and reincarnation essential for practising meditation?

A: No. Meditation is a technique for training the mind for concentration, or for making good analysis, and that can



be done by anyone. Non-believers can also meditate. The concept of karma and reincarnation is related to Dharma. If you are a Buddhist Dharma practitioner, then you have to understand all this theory. Otherwise just for meditation, anybody can meditate.

Q: How can we help a person who is afraid of dying but does not believe in rebirth?

A: If someone does not believe in rebirth then why should he or she be afraid of death? We are afraid of death because of what kind of rebirth will be taking place, because there is a future. If death is just like going to sleep or unconsciousness then there need not be any worry.

Q: In the Christian tradition we have the idea of going to heaven or hell so people are afraid of going to hell.

A: If you accept heaven and hell that means you accept birth after death so there is not much difference. And for that kind of person, I don't think you can help them much at the time of death. The cause for going to heaven or the cause for going to hell, these are all accumulated during the lifetime and at the moment of death. I don't know whether even in the Christian tradition it can be changed or if something can be done – that you can ask from Christian teachers.

Q: Do you think that a Buddhist approach to life could solve all or at least most of the problems of the world?

A: I don't think so. There are so many different problems in the world and a number of them can be solved by the Buddhist approach to life, and some need to be solved by a secular method, and others can be solved through other religious teachings. The world is so diverse, therefore the need for so many methods is also there. So if only Buddhism would be sufficient for all the problems of the world, then no other religions would be necessary. But even in Buddhism how many differences are there? There are Theravada, Mahayana, Gelug-pa, Kagyu-pa, Nyingma-pa, because of the vast need of the people.

Q: What do you think of changing one's own religion to another religion?

A: I do not recommend a change of religion. Religion is not like clothes that you can change whenever you like. Religion is a quality of mind. Once your mind has grown into a specific religion and you really created a religious mind in that tradition, then you will never think of changing it. If, from the start, you are not religious about the faith you are born in or the faith that your family or community follows, and if you

turn to another religion, that's not changing. This is very funny. When a child is born in a Buddhist family, he/she is considered to be a Buddhist, although the child does not know anything about refuge or about the Dharma. And when a child is born in a Hindu or a Christian family, automatically he/she is considered to be a Hindu or a Christian, although the child does not have any religious mind in any of these traditions. So someone born and brought up in Christian family, going to church all the time, but who does not understand Christianity and does not develop the Christian religious mind in one's heart, if he then really likes Buddhism and takes refuge and really becomes Buddhist, that is a new entrance into Buddhism, not converting from Christianity to Buddhism, because he was not a Christian at all in a true sense of word. It is the new entrance of a non-believer into Buddhism, and once a person has become a real Buddhist he should never go back to something else. A boy born in a Buddhist family, who is told that he is a Buddhist, but who enters into Christianity, this is not conversion, it is new entrance into Christianity; he does not have the Buddhist mind and he newly entered the Christian tradition, that is okay. This, for me, is religious freedom. But once you really have entered into a religious tradition, then one shall never change or convert. And if someone really converts then that means that there is something wrong with that person, not with the religion.

Q: How do you see the future of mankind – are you optimistic?

A: The future of mankind can be very dark or very bright. The present generation of mankind is the key factor. If it could bring positive things, then mankind will have a bright future. I think this is a time for a change and that change can be positive or negative – I don't know which way it will go. I do not say that the future is completely dark, but the challenges are enormous, the challenge of voidness of morality and spirituality, which has caused violence, environmental degradation, disparity, injustice – all these are there. But all these challenges can be dealt with effectively, if the present generation could become aware of things and have a positive mental attitude. So it is a very important time for all the religious people, for all the theosophists, for all the right-thinking people. They should work hard, come together to co-operate with each other and make the future good. ☸

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