

An Interview with His Holiness Sakya Trizin

1

During a visit to the Sakya Thinley Rinchen Ling in Bristol in 1991, His Holiness Sakya Trizin kindly agreed to be interviewed by the Dechen Review. Here we reprint the interview which contains immeasurably useful advice for any Western practitioner of the Buddhadharma.

D.R. Your Holiness, based on your tours in the West, what are your general impressions of how Buddhism is doing in the West at the moment?

H.H. I think the quality of practice is improving. Although there are not quite so many people turning to Buddhism now as there used to be, those people who are practising Buddhism now have more knowledge and are more serious about their practice, so I think this is an improvement.

D.R. Could Your Holiness explain why there appear to be less people practising Buddhism now than there were when Buddhism first came to the West?

H.H. I think this is because, in the West, everything follows a fashion. However the time for mass conversion is past and those practitioners that remain are the more committed ones.

D.R. Are there any particular obstacles which might prevent Western people from practising Buddhism properly?

H.H. I think that generally because Western people do not have a Buddhist background they lack a basic faith in Buddhadharma. Easterners and ordinary Tibetans may not have any great intellectual knowledge of dharma but they have a very strong inclination to believe Buddha's teachings. It is also particularly difficult for monks and nuns in the West because there is no proper monastic community. However, I hope this situation will improve. In the West, people have more intellectual knowledge of dharma than ordinary Easterners but because they lack faith this knowledge is not stable. For instance a person may have practised Buddhism for many years and then leave. I do not think this kind of thing would happen if that person had a firm belief. Although logical reasoning and investigating what Lord Buddha said are very important, it is that deep faith in the law of karma and rebirth which underpins all Buddhist practice.

D.R. Does monasticism play an important part in this?

H.H. Yes, the monastery system is very important if the whole of Buddha's teachings are to take root in the West.

D.R. What does Your Holiness think are the essential qualities a man/woman must possess to be able to be a successful monk/nun and is this possible in the West at the moment?

H.H. In order to be a proper monk or nun, a person needs to have developed renunciation thoughts. When you have these, you have an inner urge to become a monk or nun. The reason why some western monks and nuns fail is also due to a lack of belief and faith. However I do not see any reason why westerners should not be able to start a Buddhist monastic system here since there are already many Christian monasteries.

D.R. Your Holiness, attachment to material possessions and success is a big problem in the West. Do you have any specific advice as to how people can overcome this?

H.H. If people concentrate on the preliminary teachings such as impermanence and death they will realise that there is no use in having attachment to wealth because one day you have to leave everything behind. The more one has attachment to material possessions, the more suffering this brings. Shantideva says accumulating, protecting, losing are the source of all suffering.

D.R. Does Your Holiness think one can be a good dharma practitioner within the family situation?

H.H. Yes, dharma is to be practised mainly through mind. If the mind is strong and used in the right way one can be a very good dharma practitioner even within the family. In Tibet, dharma kings and ministers were all householders and were exceptional dharma practitioners and obtained very high realization. I think it depends on the individual. For some people the way of a monk or nun is very good but for others being a householder is better.

D.R. How can we best ensure the continuing purity and strength of the vajrayana teachings?

H.H. In the vajrayana, guru yoga is emphasized a great deal. Through the guru one can purify all one's negative deeds by visualizing the guru in the form of Vajrasattva. For your dharma practice to be stable, you require good merit. If you have good karma, your wish to practise dharma becomes very great, and through this your practice itself becomes strong. I think it is very important to emphasise guru yoga.

D.R. Do you think that the teachings will only keep strong if they are pure?

H.H. The basic teachings themselves should be pure but the way in which one teaches, or the outer forms can be changed. Buddha himself said the vinaya should be according to the time and place. The basic teachings such as karma, interdependent origination, the emptiness view, enlightenment thought, cannot be changed. However, the way we recite, what we wear, what we offer, these could all be changed.

D.R. Would you like to say anything about the great surge of interest there is nowadays in Buddhism among the Malaysian Chinese and whether it is different in character from the interest shown in the West?

H.H. Although the Malaysians' forefathers were Buddhist they don't have any proper teachers who can teach them dharma so they are very happy to see the Tibetan teachers. Also, although they have a basic faith in dharma, they lack any understanding of it and cannot actually explain what it is, or what the sangha is and without being able to explain what you believe then how can you practise? Easterners often think it is sufficient to go to the temple, burn incense and make offerings. They think that practising Buddhism is simply showing devotion in this way. They don't think it is important to study. For example many educated Malaysians and Singaporeans say they do not need any more empowerments because so many lamas have already come and given empowerments which ordinary people just do not understand. What they need is solid dharma talks to enable them to learn dharma. So these are arranged, but nobody comes! However when Dzambhala initiation is given, hundreds of people come.

D.R. Isn't it true that empowerments have a magical element and is it always therefore necessary to understand what is going on?

H.H. It is true that in any empowerment there is a great blessing. However there is a vast difference between understanding and not understanding. If you understand exactly what is happening in an empowerment, the empowerment will have a real effect on your practice.

D.R. In the sutras, although there is a specific prohibition on abortion, nothing is said about contraception. Could Your Holiness say whether contraception is permissible or not?

H.H. This is a difficult question. In one way you could say that since precious human birth is so difficult to obtain, to use contraceptives is to add another obstacle to it. However, I think that sometimes one has to take the individual's situation into account. For instance it could be that the mother is weak and that her body would not therefore be able to carry a child. I could not therefore say that contraception is absolutely wrong. Buddha said that we should chose the middle way and perhaps we should do this where contraception is concerned – being mindful of precious human birth but also making allowances for individual circumstances.

D.R. Could you say something about how dharma is faring among the young Tibetans these days. Is dharma practice still strong among them?

H.H. Yes. In some ways it is improving. Traditional Tibetans, just like many Easterners have a strong belief but they don't know so much. They find it sufficient to go to the temple, circumambulate and make prostrations. However, now the younger Tibetans are more educated so that they want to know more about dharma. They want to know what Buddha actually said, and what type of philosophical view we must hold. There are many lay people who are studying actual dharma teachings. Many young Tibetans are educated in modern schools and in one way they are lacking in actual dharma practice but they are improving as far as knowledge of dharma is concerned.

D.R. In Tibet was dharma, for most people, a matter of faith rather than intellectual understanding?

H.H. Yes, because in Tibet most people were not educated. But now people can read and write and understand dharma books. One interesting thing a young Tibetan told me is that he could understand dharma better when it was written in English than when it was written in Tibetan because actual Tibetan colloquial language and written dharma language are very different.

D.R. Would it be true to say that the main thing people were worried about in Tibet was death and the quality of rebirth and that these concerns were people's driving force for practising dharma?

H.H. Yes. The law of karma and rebirth are embedded deep in the mind of Tibetans and everybody has a strong faith and belief in these things.

D.R. There are many stories about zombies in Tibetan history. Do people still encounter them nowadays?

H.H. I don't think there have been any instances recently (laughs). However, when I was visiting in Ladakh earlier this year I noticed that the door frames were very low and wherever you went your head was always hitting the frame. They told me that this was because there used to be a great many zombies in Ladakh and zombies are not supposed to bend. The height of the doors was therefore to stop them getting anywhere! One does not find such stories nowadays, however.

D.R. Have you met any zombies?

H.H. No. However, I have seen a dragon, and I mentioned this in my autobiography. Nearly 20 years ago, when we were celebrating Tibetan New Year in Purwala, it was raining and lightning. Some parts of the sky were blue. Suddenly there was a big thunderclap and as the place where the clear sky met with the clouds we saw a long tail the colour of dark clouds shaped just like the tail of a dragon. As we heard the thunderclap the tail shook and disappeared into the clouds.

D.R. One final question: would you like to say anything about the usefulness of astrology or divination?

H.H. I think astrology is useful because Buddha said everything comes from dependent origination. Our body and mind are connected with what is happening outside of us so that the stars, the sun and the moon and the whole of the outside world have an effect on one another. Everything goes together. According to my own astrological chart, I never noticed the marks on my body but when I read the chart it said that there was a mole on my right shoulder. I never knew this but then I looked and I saw that I had a mole exactly in that place.

D.R. Is it a good idea to consult an astrologer and to have one's chart drawn up?

H.H. Yes, as long as it is done properly.

D.R. The same goes for divination?

H.H. Yes. Regarding divination there are books which say something is either good, medium, or bad, etc. However, it is not enough simply to consult these books. Divination requires long experience because each method of divination works differently for different people. After long experience you can judge a situation yourself without following the full text.

D.R. Your Holiness, thank you very much.