

Is Buddhism a Religion?

By Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

We often talk about Siddhartha, the young man who became known as the Buddha, as if he were a god. The fact is that he was just a simple Indian guy, a human being like you and me. We think of him as some kind of super-genius for having attained complete spiritual awakening, but in fact his real genius was in showing how any one of us can attain the same awakening as he did. We describe him as a prince and a member of the elite royalty of his time, and we think that must have given him an advantage over us -- but the reality is that most of us today are probably better off, in material terms, than Siddhartha was.

We talk about his kingdom and so forth, but what the prince Siddhartha had was really no more than what you might find in any middle-class American household. He might have had more wives, but you've got more gadgets, more technologies and comforts and conveniences. Siddhartha didn't have a refrigerator, and you do. He didn't have WiFi, or a blog, or Facebook or Twitter. He might have had more houses and land, but you've got a more comfortable bed than he had. Maybe you even have one of those new, space-age Tempur-Pedic beds. Think of how much time you spend in bed, and how important your bed is. I guarantee that Siddhartha had a worse bed than you have. The point is, we shouldn't mythologize Siddhartha's life and think that his spiritual awakening was due to his special circumstances. Most of us today actually live in conditions very similar to Siddhartha's, in terms of our material situation. Siddhartha was a truth seeker, nothing more. He wasn't looking for religion, as such -- he wasn't particularly interested in religion. He was searching for the truth. He was looking for a genuine path to freedom from suffering. Aren't all of us searching for the same thing? If we look at the life of Siddhartha, we can see that he found the truth and freedom he was seeking only after he abandoned religious practices. Isn't that significant? The one who became the

Buddha, the "Awakened One," didn't find enlightenment through religion -- he found it when he began to leave religion behind.

The Lure of Religious Trappings

A lot of people prefer to think of Buddhism as a religion. It's easy to see why, when Buddhism abounds with religious trappings: the rituals and the chants and the golden statues sitting on the shrine. Buddha himself never wanted to be deified in any kind of icons; at the beginning, he told his students no icons, no worshiping. But it's said that he had a very devoted student who kept pestering him, requesting his permission to make a statue of him, until finally the Buddha gave up and allowed the first image to be made. And now we have all these elaborate golden icons that look like they were dug out of an Egyptian pyramid. It's nice to have these reminders, but we must remember that's what they are: reminders of something, an example to be followed, not idols to be worshiped. If our goal is to turn Buddhism into a religion, that's fine -- in America we have freedom of speech and the Bill of Rights. We can make Buddhism into a religion, or a branch of psychology, or a self-help program, or whatever we want. But if we're looking for enlightenment, we won't find it through relating to the Buddha as a religious idol. Like Siddhartha, we'll find real spiritual awakening only when we begin to leave behind our fixed ideas about religious practice. Seeing the Buddha as an example and following his example -- recreating, in our own lives, his pursuit of truth, his courage and his open mind -- that's the real power of Buddhism beyond religion.

Truth Has No Religion

Siddhartha actually became the Buddha through his failure at religion. He saw that the ascetic practices he'd been engaged in were not leading him to true liberation, and so he left them behind. But he had five colleagues who continued

their religious practices of asceticism, and they regarded Siddhartha as a failure. From their point of view, he just couldn't hack it, and that's why he gave up. Later, after he attained enlightenment and became known as the Buddha, they became his first five disciples; but at the time when he left behind their religious program, they regarded him as a failure. I find that very encouraging. As spiritual practitioners, we should be open to being a failure. We can take heart in the fact that Siddhartha found enlightenment not through his great success at religious practices, but through his failures. As Buddhists, Siddhartha's example is the most important one for us to follow. He was a great explorer of mind and its limits. He was open-minded, seeking truth, with no preconceived agenda. He thought, "Okay, I'll do these religious practices and see if I can find the truth that way." He did the practices, he didn't find the truth, and so he left the religion. Like Siddhartha, if we really want spiritual enlightenment we have to go beyond religiosity. We have to let go of clinging to preconceived religious forms and ideas and practices. Religion, if we don't relate to it skillfully, can trap us in another set of rules. On top of all the ordinary rules we are already stuck with in this world, we pile on a second set of religious rules. I'm not saying there is anything bad about religion or rules, but you should be clear about what you're seeking. Do you want religion and a set of rules to follow, or do you want truth? Truth has no religion, no culture, no language, no head or tail. As Gandhi said, "God has no religion." The truth is just the truth. If you are interested in "meeting the Buddha" and following his example, then you should realize that the path the Buddha taught is primarily a study of your own mind and a system for training your mind. This path is spiritual, not religious. Its goal is self-knowledge, not salvation; freedom, not heaven. And it is deeply personal. Without your curiosity and questions and your open mind, there is no spiritual path, no journey to be taken, even if you adopt all the forms of the tradition.

The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche is acknowledged as one of the foremost scholars and meditation masters of his generation in the Nyingma and Kagyu schools of

Tibetan Buddhism. He is known for his sharp intellect, humor, and the lucidity of his teaching style. Fluent in the English language and well-versed in Western culture and technology, Rinpoche is also an accomplished calligrapher, visual artist and poet.