

What Makes You a Buddhist?

By Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse

It's not the clothes you wear, the ceremonies you perform, or the meditation you do, says Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse. It's not what you eat, how much you drink, or who you have sex with. It's whether you agree with the four fundamental discoveries the Buddha made under the Bodhi tree, and if you do, you can call yourself a Buddhist.

Once, I was seated on a plane in the middle seat of the middle row on a trans-Atlantic flight, and the sympathetic man sitting next to me made an attempt to be friendly. Seeing my shaved head and maroon skirt, he gathered that I was a Buddhist. When the meal was served, the man considerably offered to order a vegetarian meal for me. Having correctly assumed that I was a Buddhist, he also assumed that I don't eat meat. That was the beginning of our chat. The flight was long, so to kill our boredom, we discussed Buddhism.

Over time I have come to realize that people often associate Buddhism and Buddhists with peace, meditation, and nonviolence. In fact many seem to think that saffron or maroon robes and a peaceful smile are all it takes to be a Buddhist. As a fanatical Buddhist myself, I must take pride in this reputation, particularly the nonviolent aspect of it, which is so rare in this age of war and violence, and especially religious violence. Throughout the history of humankind, religion seems to beget brutality. Even today religious-extremist violence dominates the news. Yet I think I can say with confidence that so far we Buddhists have not disgraced ourselves. Violence has never played a part in propagating Buddhism.

However, as a trained Buddhist, I also feel a little discontented when Buddhism is associated with nothing beyond vegetarianism, nonviolence, peace, and meditation. Prince Siddhartha, who sacrificed all the comforts and luxuries of palace life, must have been searching for more than passivity and shrubbery when he set out to discover enlightenment.

When a conversation arises like the one with my seatmate on the plane, a non-Buddhist may casually ask, "What makes someone a Buddhist?" That is the hardest question to answer. If the person has a genuine interest, the complete answer does not make for light dinner conversation, and generalizations can lead to misunderstanding. Suppose that you give them the true answer, the answer that points to the very foundation of this 2,500-year-old tradition.

One is a Buddhist if he or she accepts the following four truths: All compounded things are impermanent. All emotions are pain. All things have no inherent existence. Nirvana is beyond concepts. These four statements, spoken by the Buddha himself, are known as "the four seals." Traditionally, seal means something like a hallmark that confirms authenticity. For the sake of simplicity and flow we will refer to these statements as

both seals and “truths,” not to be confused with Buddhism’s four noble truths, which pertain solely to aspects of suffering. Even though the four seals are believed to encompass all of Buddhism, people don’t seem to want to hear about them. Without further explanation they serve only to dampen spirits and fail to inspire further interest in many cases. The topic of conversation changes and that’s the end of it.

The message of the four seals is meant to be understood literally, not metaphorically or mystically – and meant to be taken seriously. But the seals are not edicts or commandments. With a little contemplation one sees that there is nothing moralistic or ritualistic about them. There is no mention of good or bad behavior. They are secular truths based on wisdom, and wisdom is the primary concern of a Buddhist. Morals and ethics are secondary. A few puffs of a cigarette and a little fooling around don’t prevent someone from becoming a Buddhist. That is not to say that we have license to be wicked or immoral.

Broadly speaking, wisdom comes from a mind that has what the Buddhists call “right view.” But one doesn’t even have to consider oneself a Buddhist to have right view. Ultimately it is this view that determines our motivation and action. It is the view that guides us on the path of Buddhism. If we can adopt wholesome behaviors in addition to the four seals, it makes us even better Buddhists. But what makes you not a Buddhist? If you cannot accept that all compounded or fabricated things are impermanent, if you believe that there is some essential substance or concept that is permanent, then you are not a Buddhist. If you cannot accept that all emotions are pain, if you believe that actually some emotions are purely pleasurable, then you are not a Buddhist.

If you cannot accept that all phenomena are illusory and empty, if you believe that certain things do exist inherently, then you are not a Buddhist.

And if you think that enlightenment exists within the spheres of time, space, and power, then you are not a Buddhist. So, what makes you a Buddhist? You may not have been born in a Buddhist country or to a Buddhist family, you may not wear robes or shave your head, you may eat meat and idolize Eminem and Paris Hilton. That doesn’t mean you cannot be a Buddhist. In order to be a Buddhist, you must accept that all compounded phenomena are impermanent, all emotions are pain, all things have no inherent existence, and enlightenment is beyond concepts.

It’s not necessary to be constantly and endlessly mindful of these four truths. But they must reside in your mind. You don’t walk around persistently remembering your own name, but when someone asks your name, you remember it instantly. There is no doubt. Anyone who accepts these four seals, even independently of Buddha’s teachings, even never having heard the name Shakyamuni Buddha, can be considered to be on the same path as he.

The Beautiful Logic of the Four Seals Consider the example of generosity. When we

begin to realize the first seal – impermanence – we see everything as transitory and without value, as if it belonged in a Salvation Army donation bag. We don't necessarily have to give it all away, but we have no clinging to it. When we see that our possessions are all impermanent compounded phenomena, that we cannot cling to them forever, generosity is already practically accomplished.

Understanding the second seal, that all emotions are pain, we see that the miser, the self, is the main culprit, providing nothing but a feeling of poverty. Therefore, by not clinging to the self, we find no reason to cling to our possessions, and there is no more pain of miserliness. Generosity becomes an act of joy.

Realizing the third seal, that all things have no inherent existence, we see the futility of clinging, because whatever we are clinging to has no truly existing nature. It's like dreaming that you are distributing a billion dollars to strangers on the street. You can give generously because it's dream money, and yet you are able to reap all the fun of the experience. Generosity based on these three views inevitably makes us realize that there is no goal. It is not a sacrifice endured in order to get recognition or to ensure a better rebirth.

Generosity without a price tag, expectations, or strings provides a glimpse into the fourth view, the truth that liberation, enlightenment, is beyond conception.

If we measure the perfection of a virtuous action, such as generosity, by material standards – how much poverty is eliminated – we can never reach perfection. Destitution and the desires of the destitute are endless. Even the desires of the wealthy are endless; in fact the desires of humans can never be fully satisfied. But according to Siddhartha, generosity should be measured by the level of attachment one has to what is being given and to the self that is giving it. Once you have realized that the self and all its possessions are impermanent and have no truly existing nature, you have nonattachment, and that is perfect generosity. For this reason the first action encouraged in the Buddhist sutras is the practice of generosity.

A Deeper Understanding of Karma, Purity and Nonviolence

The concept of karma, the undeniable trademark of Buddhism, also falls within these four truths. When causes and conditions come together and there are no obstacles, consequences arise. Consequence is karma. This karma is gathered by consciousness – the mind, or the self. If this self acts out of greed or aggression, negative karma is generated. If a thought or action is motivated by love, tolerance, and a wish for others to be happy, positive karma is generated.

Yet motivation, action, and the resulting karma are inherently like a dream, an illusion. Transcending karma, both good and bad, is nirvana. Any so-called good action that is not based on these four views is merely righteousness; it is not ultimately Siddhartha's path. Even if you were to feed all the hungry beings in the world, if you acted in

complete absence of these four views, then it would be merely a good deed, not the path to enlightenment. In fact it might be a righteous act designed to feed and support the ego.

It is because of these four truths that Buddhists can practice purification. If one thinks that one is stained by negative karma or is weak or “sinful,” and is frustrated, thinking that these obstacles are always getting in the way of realization, then one can take comfort in knowing that they are compounded and therefore impermanent and thus purifiable. On the other hand, if one feels lacking in ability or merit, one can take comfort knowing that merit can be accumulated through performing good deeds, because the lack of merit is impermanent and therefore changeable.

The Buddhist practice of nonviolence is not merely submissiveness with a smile or meek thoughtfulness. The fundamental cause of violence is when one is fixated on an extreme idea, such as justice or morality. This fixation usually stems from a habit of buying into dualistic views, such as bad and good, ugly and beautiful, moral and immoral. One’s inflexible self-righteousness takes up all the space that would allow empathy for others. Sanity is lost. Understanding that all these views or values are compounded and impermanent, as is the person who holds them, violence is averted. When you have no ego, no clinging to the self, there is never a reason to be violent. When one understands that one’s enemies are held under a powerful influence of their own ignorance and aggression, that they are trapped by their habits, it is easier to forgive them for their irritating behavior and actions. Similarly, if someone from the insane asylum insults you, there is no point in getting angry. When we transcend believing in the extremes of dualistic phenomena, we have transcended the causes of violence.

The Four Seals: A Package Deal In Buddhism, any action that establishes or enhances the four views is a rightful path. Even seemingly ritualistic practices, such as lighting incense or practicing esoteric meditations and mantras, are designed to help focus our attention on one or all of the truths.

Anything that contradicts the four views, including some action that may seem loving and compassionate, is not part of the path. Even emptiness meditation becomes pure negation, nothing but a nihilistic path, if it is not in compliance with the four truths.

For the sake of communication we can say that these four views are the spine of Buddhism. We call them “truths” because they are simply facts. They are not manufactured; they are not a mystical revelation of the Buddha. They did not become valid only after the Buddha began to teach. Living by these principles is not a ritual or a technique. They don’t qualify as morals or ethics, and they can’t be trademarked or owned. There is no such thing as an “infidel” or a “blasphemer” in Buddhism because there is no one to be faithful to, to insult, or to doubt. However, those who are not aware of or do not believe in these four facts are considered by Buddhists to be ignorant. Such ignorance is not cause for moral judgment. If someone doesn’t believe

that humans have landed on the moon, or thinks that the world is flat, a scientist wouldn't call him a blasphemer, just ignorant. Likewise, if he doesn't believe in these four seals, he is not an infidel. In fact, if someone were to produce proof that the logic of the four seals is faulty, that clinging to the self is actually not pain, or that some element defies impermanence, then Buddhists should willingly follow that path instead. Because what we seek is enlightenment, and enlightenment means realization of the truth. So far, though, in all these centuries no proof has arisen to invalidate the four seals.

If you ignore the four seals but insist on considering yourself a Buddhist merely out of a love affair with the traditions, then that is superficial devotion. The Buddhist masters believe that however you choose to label yourself, unless you have faith in these truths, you will continue to live in an illusory world, believing it to be solid and real. Although such belief temporarily provides the bliss of ignorance, ultimately it always leads to some form of anxiety. You then spend all your time solving problems and trying to get rid of the anxiety. Your constant need to solve problems becomes like an addiction. How many problems have you solved only to watch others arise? If you are happy with this cycle, then you have no reason to complain. But when you see that you will never come to the end of problem solving, that is the beginning of the search for inner truth. While Buddhism is not the answer to all the world's temporal problems and social injustices, if you happen to be searching and if you happen to have chemistry with Siddhartha, then you may find these truths agreeable. If that is the case, you should consider following him seriously.

Richness Within Renunciation As a follower of Siddhartha, you don't necessarily have to emulate his every action—you don't have to sneak out while your wife is sleeping. Many people think that Buddhism is synonymous with renunciation, leaving home, family, and job behind, and following the path of an ascetic. This image of austerity is partly due to the fact that a great number of Buddhists revere the mendicants in the Buddhist texts and teachings, just as the Christians admire Saint Francis of Assisi. We can't help being struck by the image of the Buddha walking barefoot in Magadha with his begging bowl, or Milarepa in his cave subsisting on nettle soup. The serenity of a simple Burmese monk accepting alms captivates our imagination.

But there is also an entirely different variety of follower of the Buddha: King Ashoka, for example, who dismounted from his royal chariot, adorned with pearls and gold, and proclaimed his wish to spread the buddhadharma throughout the world. He knelt down, seized a fistful of sand, and proclaimed that he would build as many stupas as there were grains of sand in his hand. And in fact he kept his promise. So one can be a king, a merchant, a prostitute, a junkie, or a chief executive officer and still accept the four seals. Fundamentally it is not the act of leaving behind the material world that Buddhists cherish but the ability to see the habitual clinging to this world and ourselves and to renounce the clinging.

As we begin to understand the four views, we don't necessarily discard things; we begin instead to change our attitude toward them, thereby changing their value. Just because you have less than someone else doesn't mean that you are more morally pure or virtuous. In fact, humility itself can be a form of hypocrisy. When we understand the essencelessness and impermanence of the material world, renunciation is no longer a form of self-flagellation. It doesn't mean that we're hard on ourselves. The word sacrifice takes on a different meaning. Equipped with this understanding, everything becomes about as significant as the saliva we spit on the ground. We don't feel sentimental about saliva. Losing such sentimentality is a path of bliss, sugata. When renunciation is understood as bliss, the stories of many other Indian princesses, princes, and warlords who once upon a time renounced their palace life become less outlandish.

This love of truth and veneration for the seekers of truth is an ancient tradition in countries like India. Even today, instead of looking down on renunciants, Indian society venerates them just as respectfully as we venerate professors at Harvard and Yale. Although the tradition is fading in this age when corporate culture reigns, you can still find naked, ash-clad sadhus who have given up successful law practices to become wandering mendicants. It gives me goose bumps to see how Indian society respects these people instead of shooing them away as disgraceful beggars or pests. I can't help but imagine them at the Marriott Hotel in Hong Kong. How would the nouveau-riche Chinese, desperately trying to copy Western ways, feel about these ash-clad sadhus? Would the doorman open the door for them? For that matter, how would the concierge at the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles react? Instead of worshipping the truth and venerating sadhus, this is an age that worships billboards and venerates liposuction.

Adopting Wisdom, Dropping Distorted Mortalities As you read this, you may be thinking, I'm generous and I don't have that much attachment to my things. It may be true that you aren't tightfisted, but in the midst of your generous activities, if someone walks off with your favorite pencil, you may get so angry that you want to bite his ear off. Or you may become completely disheartened if someone says, "Is that all you can give?" When we give, we are caught up in the notion of "generosity." We cling to the result—if not a good rebirth, at least recognition in this life, or maybe just a plaque on the wall. I have also met many people who think they are generous simply because they have given money to a certain museum, or even to their own children, from whom they expect a lifetime of allegiance.

If it is not accompanied by the four views, morality can be similarly distorted. Morality feeds the ego, leading us to become puritanical and to judge others whose morality is different from ours. Fixated on our version of morality, we look down on other people and try to impose our ethics on them, even if it means taking away their freedom. The great Indian scholar and saint Shantideva, himself a prince who renounced his kingdom, taught that it is impossible for us to avoid encountering anything and everything unwholesome, but if we can apply just one of these four views, we are protected from all nonvirtue. If you think the entire West is somehow satanic or immoral, it will be impossible to conquer and rehabilitate it, but if you have tolerance

within yourself, this is equal to conquering. You can't smooth out the entire earth to make it easier to walk on with your bare feet, but by wearing shoes you protect yourself from rough, unpleasant surfaces.

If we can understand the four views not only intellectually but also experientially, we begin to free ourselves from fixating on things that are illusory. This freedom is what we call wisdom. Buddhists venerate wisdom above all else. Wisdom surpasses morality, love, common sense, tolerance, and vegetarianism. Wisdom is not a divine spirit that we seek from somewhere outside of ourselves. We invoke it by first hearing the teachings on the four seals – not accepting them at face value, but rather analyzing and contemplating them. If you are convinced that this path will clear some of your confusion and bring some relief, then you can actually put wisdom into practice.

In one of the oldest Buddhist teaching methods, the master gives his disciples a bone and instructs them to contemplate its origin. Through this contemplation, the disciples eventually see the bone as the end result of birth, birth as the end result of karmic formation, karmic formation as the end result of craving, and so on. Thoroughly convinced by the logic of cause, condition, and effect, they begin to apply awareness to every situation and every moment. This is what we call meditation. People who can bring us this kind of information and understanding are venerated as masters because, even though they have profound realization and could happily live in the forest, they are willing to stick around to explain the view to those who are still in the dark. Because this information liberates us from all kinds of unnecessary hiccups, we have an automatic appreciation for the explainer. So we Buddhists pay homage to the teacher.

Once you have intellectually accepted the view, you can apply any method that deepens your understanding and realization. In other words, you can use whatever techniques or practices help you to transform your habit of thinking that things are solid into the habit of seeing them as compounded, interdependent, and impermanent. This is true Buddhist meditation and practice, not just sitting still as if you were a paperweight.

Even though we know intellectually that we are going to die, this knowledge can be eclipsed by something as small as a casual compliment. Someone comments on how graceful our knuckles look, and the next thing we know we are trying to find ways to preserve these knuckles. Suddenly we feel that we have something to lose. These days we are constantly bombarded by so many new things to lose and so many things to gain. More than ever we need methods that remind us and help us get accustomed to the view, maybe even hanging a human bone from the rearview mirror, if not shaving your head and retreating to a cave. Combined with these methods, ethics and morality become useful. Ethics and morality may be secondary in Buddhism, but they are important when they bring us closer to the truth. But even if some action appears wholesome and positive, if it takes us away from the four truths, Siddhartha himself cautioned us to leave it be.

The Tea and the Teacup: Wisdom Within Culture The four seals are like tea, while all other means to actualize these truths – practices, rituals, traditions, and cultural trappings – are like a cup. The skills and methods are observable and tangible, but the truth is not. The challenge is not to get carried away by the cup. People are more inclined to sit straight in a quiet place on a meditation cushion than to contemplate which will come first, tomorrow or the next life. Outward practices are perceivable, so the mind is quick to label them as “Buddhism,” whereas the concept “all compounded things are impermanent” is not tangible and is difficult to label. It is ironic that evidence of impermanence is all around us, yet is not obvious to us. The essence of Buddhism is beyond culture, but it is practiced by many different cultures, which use their traditions as the cup that holds the teachings. If the elements of these cultural trappings help other beings without causing harm, and if they don’t contradict the four truths, then Siddhartha would encourage such practices.

Throughout the centuries so many brands and styles of cups have been produced, but however good the intention behind them, and however well they may work, they become a hindrance if we forget the tea inside. Even though their purpose is to hold the truth, we tend to focus on the means rather than the outcome. So people walk around with empty cups, or they forget to drink their tea. We human beings can become enchanted, or at least distracted, by the ceremony and color of Buddhist cultural practices. Incense and candles are exotic and attractive; impermanence and selflessness are not. Siddhartha himself said that the best way to worship is by simply remembering the principle of impermanence, the suffering of emotions, that phenomena have no inherent existence, and that nirvana is beyond concepts.

Now that Buddhism is flourishing in the West, I have heard of people altering Buddhist teachings to fit the modern way of thinking. If there is anything to be adapted, it would be the rituals and symbols, not the truth itself. Buddha himself said that his discipline and methods should be adapted appropriately to time and place. But the four truths don’t need to be updated or modified; and it’s impossible to do so anyway. You can change the cup, but the tea remains pure. After surviving 2,500 years and traveling 40,781,035 feet from the Bodhi tree in central India to Times Square in New York City, the concept “all compounded things are impermanent” still applies. Impermanence is still impermanence in Times Square. You cannot bend these four rules; there are no social or cultural exceptions

Practicing Harmony Profound truths aside, these days even the most practical and obvious truths are ignored. We are like monkeys who dwell in the forest and shit on the very branches from which we hang. Every day we hear people talking about the state of the economy, not recognizing the connection between recession and greed. Because of greed, jealousy, and pride, the economy will never become strong enough to ensure that every person has access to the basic necessities of life. Our dwelling place, the Earth, becomes more and more polluted. I have met people who condemn ancient rulers and emperors and ancient religions as the source of all conflict. But the secular and modern world has not done any better; if anything, it has done worse. What is it that the

modern world has made better? One of the main effects of science and technology has been to destroy the world more quickly. Many scientists believe that all living systems and all life-support systems on Earth are in decline.

It's time for modern people like ourselves to give some thought to spiritual matters, even if we have no time to sit on a cushion, even if we are put off by those who wear rosaries around their necks, and even if we are embarrassed to exhibit our religious leanings to our secular friends. Contemplating the impermanent nature of everything that we experience and the painful effect of clinging to the self brings peace and harmony – if not to the entire world, at least within our own sphere.

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