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JETSÜN KHANDRO RINPOCHE

Transcripts & Documents

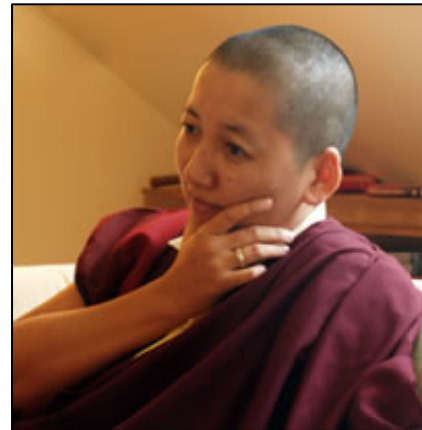
An Interview with Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, Part I

This two part conversation between Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche and Lopön Helen Berliner was recorded on 15 October 2009 at Lotus Garden and published on 2 December 2009 by Chronicles Radio.

On Buddhism in the West

Helen Berliner: Rinpoche, as Buddhism spreads in the West, practitioners view Buddhism less as a religion and more as a way of life. Would you please speak to the cultural implications of Buddhism, particularly vajrayana Buddhism?

Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche: The spread of Buddhism in the West is a crucial topic—crucial, because at this point we can't speak of Buddhism in the West for any simpler or more mundane reason than the West needing to realize what is happening.



It is not just a question of the dharma beginning to flourish in a certain country or region of the world. Rather karmically, the karma of sentient beings and the karma of the world is going through a transition such that the container being formed, in which the future dharma will be held, is fast pointing to the western direction.

Many people feel very happy to hear about dharma coming to the West, the "westernization of Buddhism" as it's popularly called these days. But this may not always bring to their minds an awareness of the responsibility that comes with it.

From the teachers' perspective, teachers must realize that this is not just about speaking in English or translating certain texts. It is about the continuity of the stream of the essence of dharma, which must unfold in this country in the most pure and authentic ways. This requires much more dedication and much more understanding of what it means to say that dharma is coming to the West. Teachers must realize this responsibility.

And students must realize that this is not something to simply be happy about. The expression of your happiness and joy—"Oh how nice, how good, dharma is coming to the West"—is not sufficient at this point. What you must now understand is that you are building something that you must have the courage to hold—again, in the most pure and authentic of ways.

This calls for both teachers and students of this and the next generation to understand the profoundness and depth of what the westernization of Buddhism actually means. Having received Buddhism in the most authentic way, we must now continue that in a very changed world—while still upholding the values and principles, the truth, depth, and purity in an unbroken lineage and an unbroken way.

Religion or Way of Life?

HB: As Buddhism spreads in the West, practitioners view Buddhism less as a religion and more as a way of life. Would you speak to the cultural implications of Buddhism, particularly vajrayana Buddhism?

JKR: This is another level of discussion. It is very true that Buddhism is a way of living, an art of living we could say. But practitioners who fall into thinking "Oh Buddhism is a way of living, therefore I'm not going to view it as a religion" may be mistaken. Let me clarify this very carefully.

Buddhism in its essence is not a theistic religion, per se. But when we talk about Buddhism as a way of living, we're really talking about ourselves: who we are, what our potentials are, and the need to generate the wisdom to discern between negative tendencies, habitual patterns, and neuroses versus the basic nature, which we say is fundamentally pure. We are talking about using this wisdom courageously to transform the coverings of veils of ignorance, to genuinely bring forth our most precious fundamental basic goodness.

Now if you are a person of very superior acumen and you can do this out of your own mindfulness, awareness, and realization, very good. This is what Buddhism fundamentally is talking about—and this is why we call it a way of life. However, only you can judge how much of that wisdom you are able to generate mindfully, without falling into the many levels of neurosis that we usually get stuck in.

Likewise, the courage that brings us out of the quagmire of delusion and neurosis is faith and devotion. But truthfully speaking—while we'd all like to believe we have tremendous faith and devotion to our basic nature—we forget about it more often than is good for us.

Because this world we live in is all about concepts and designations, we are very dependent on outer sources of refuge. And so the whole presentation of buddhadharma as a religion has, in eastern cultures, had tremendous value and

usefulness, in that having this external source of refuge has given people tremendous strength, courage, protection, and reminders.

With the westernization of Buddhism, many people talk about their basic nature: "Being able to realize my fundamental nature is the pith, it's the essential thing that Buddhism teaches. I'll just stay on track with that. I don't want to get into all those other aspects of 'eastern culture.'" This seems quite right—if you have the ability to do so. Only you can be the judge of this for yourself.

Truthfully speaking, we ordinary human beings are very reliant on outer sources. To feel happy, we rely on outer characteristics; and so many outer sources are the causes of our feeling sad. It is crucial, therefore, to have the courage to develop basic awareness, to surrender to the Three Jewels, to take refuge in the Three Roots, and to have devotion and faith.

This is an aspect of Buddhism that the western culture seems to have a low opinion of, without really realizing how very helpful it is. Of course, like any skillful method, this aspect of Buddhism must be used correctly. Otherwise, it does become an orthodox system of belief. That's the downside of it.

But having an overly optimistic sense of confidence in the potential of a seed before it becomes a fully fruited tree can also set you back. You want to trust your basic nature, but so often you forget about it—meanwhile you refuse to depend on any sort of external refuge. This crucial point has to be understood.

On Cultural Habits: East and West

HB: Rinpoche, do you think that the individualism of the West contributes to this difficulty?

JKR: It is very much related to that, and to our understanding of what it means for Buddhism to come to the West. I often hear westerners say how they don't want to get into the eastern cultural aspects of Buddhism. Now, however, you must be able to separate authentic, essential Buddhist training from western culture.

Attachment to any strong cultural habits, or habitual culture, is always very tricky. Western culture, for instance, has a very strong emphasis on individualism and on trusting your instincts, your feelings and emotions. When you try to bring that western culture into your study of Buddhism, especially in the context of vajrayana Buddhism, you make it into a kind mishmash. Then

when you talk about trusting in your basic nature, you may just be trusting in your own neurotic mind.

And of course there is no end to neurosis, and no end to the conceptual ideas you can gather. The human senses are such that we have so many feelings. To trust in those feelings and emotions—and to try to uncover the basic nature from that—may, for one thing, take a tremendously long time. Then, too, it's so easy to get persuaded by those feelings and emotions, you may not have the clarity and strength of mind to go into the fundamental basic nature in depth.

HB: This individualism seems to contribute to the difficulty of conceiving of community life, living in community.

JKR: Well, people often go to extremes—for instance, relying on your awakened wisdom nature instead of any external refuge.

This is "extreme" in that you're not accepting the fact that, as an ordinary beginner on the path of practice, you're completely wrapped up in habitual tendencies. And given that your primordially enlightened nature is so covered in layers of veils of ignorance and habitual karmic patterns, you may not be able to rely on it on your own. You may need to rely on someone or something else, be it the teacher, the teachings, the Three Jewels, or the sangha, the community itself.

Other people swing to the extreme of thinking of themselves only in terms of karmic patterns, neuroses, and habitual tendencies. They have absolutely no confidence in their basic nature.

This swinging back and forth happens when you see yourself as alone and think "It's all up to me." This western individualism thinks that if I'm good it's up to me, if I'm bad it's up to me; if I'm good or bad, it's because of me. Criticism is all about me—as is any overly optimistic perception of myself.

It's a very self-cherishing society, and because of that self-cherishing you see yourself as an island. This context could be said to be contradictory to the Buddhist belief in interdependent origination or interdependence.

Relating with others allows you to challenge how well you know yourself and how well you are training yourself. The exchange of benefiting others and benefiting yourself can happen fluidly, which is why the Buddhist tradition holds living in community to be extremely important.

Community living gives you the chance to put the teachings into practice in a much more realistic way. You can't just assume you're doing the right thing when you very well may be creating a bubble around yourself. Living cut off from others can lead to becoming very egoistic and self-centered. Or, it may make you so afraid and unable to relate with things, you develop an extremely pessimistic view of yourself. Like a desolate island, you become very isolated and alone.

Living in samsara, you have to analyze interdependence—because of which you can rely on others, and because of which you can know yourself better.

The Buddhist Culture of Community

HB: This path of avoiding extremes, as you describe it, would seem to create a Buddhist culture—not an eastern culture or a western culture, but a Buddhist culture. Is that idealistic thinking or is that what actually transpires?

JKR: That is correct. One thing the Buddhist culture of community, or sangha, teaches us is that everything is moving. The community changes, the dynamics change, events change, the way you live changes. The most beautiful thing about Buddhist culture is that it allows for the continual unfolding of growth, transformation, exhaustion, and renewed growth.

People would be mistaken to think that a Buddhist community is a perfectly structured way of life. That would be a Camelot—which can only remain as long as there is a fantastic leader. Upon the death of that fantastic leader, it will again go into a state of change—argued against by some and held to by others, along with all the suspicions, disliking of one another, and other complications that always occur.

Some of the uncomfortableness people feel in community is caused by always looking for something to hold onto. A big mistake that people will make is to think: "This is the best community and it should remain so." Or "This is how we do things. It's the best way, the best system. From our system, others will learn the best ways to do things."

This then goes into solidification, and as the teachings tell us, all causes of confusion and harm come from trying to grasp onto and solidify things.

So it is very important for a community to understand that each day is a new day. And as each day unfolds, that unfolding has to be used in the best and most

productive, constructive ways. This means that each individual generates the best of the training individually, out of which comes benefit for one's own self and for others.

Community and Creativity

HB: I wonder if you would say something about artistic expression in this context, because what you just described seems to be a definition of creativity.

JKR: Yes, it is. Everything we do is mudra, everything we say is a mantra-and basically everything is being done within the rhythm of the essence of dharma. So there is no definite or solid "one way."

The only definite structures we have are certain ways of going about things: abandoning the ten unvirtuous actions and cultivating the ten virtuous actions; developing the six or ten paramitas; living by the principles of the Four Immeasurables; reflecting on and really developing the wisdom of the Four Noble Truths; understanding life to be the Twelve Nidanas, and then living according to the Eightfold Path.

These are the guidelines for the culture of Buddhism and for those on the path of practice. Everything else works in tandem with this understanding.

This is why in vajrayana we say that life is a "magical dance." You never know what the next gesture is going to be, you never know what the next melody or rhythm is going to be. What you do know is that it has to be balanced on awareness.

HB: That's interesting because in the western arts, we think of creative expression as arising out of personal passions, spontaneity, and creativity. Any other reference point would be...

JKR: That's a bit different. The path and practice of vajrayana is a method, a skillful method. Vajrayana itself means "a trained mind." A person practicing vajrayana is someone who is trained to work skillfully. That said, the skillful method of vajrayana is to uphold the view of mahayana, which is bodhichitta, the selfless awareness of the needs of others.

So a vajrayana practitioner is someone who lives life properly trained in being skillfully aware of the needs of the others, and who is able to selflessly respond to that every moment of their life.

Mandala Principle: The Sphere of Awareness

HB: Rinpoche, how would you then define mandala principle, as related to our everyday lives?

JKR: Mandala is a very crucial point, from the perspective of vajrayana practice. The dimensions of a mandala are the sphere of your mind. You can make it as small as a mustard seed or let it expand limitlessly. It's all up to you.

The whole cultural aspect of working with mandala is the art of suppleness and flexibility-and making it vast or small, in response to your view. And in this case, we're talking about how the mahayana view would require you to respond.

One way to look at it would be to look at the sphere of mind of our great gurus. It just shifts according to the needs of sentient beings, and time and environment. With such suppleness, such flexibility, it can be here and everywhere. It can be now and everything, and yet so precise and to the point-all with absolute grace and elegance and simplicity.

So you are training the mind and the dimensions of mind to really be flexible. And of course, this training would include the various vajrayana methods: for example, seeing all phenomena and thoughts as your mind; seeing the inner and outer mandalas, and the union of both, and so on. And it would not be done with a sense of sacrificing to the needs of others, but with the understanding that ultimately this is your basic awareness. This sphere is the main essence of the mandala principle.

An Interview with Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, Part II

Masters and Methods of Training

HB: Rinpoche, from that perspective, how would you envision or define a curriculum for training students into this view?

JKR: I think traditional methods are the best methods. People would argue with that. And I'm not saying that everything done in olden times has to be done again in the modern world. But a lot of wisdom has been passed down by great enlightened masters, and we can generate great benefit from that.



To devise new things is also necessary to some extent, but not because you don't know what the traditional methods are, or because it's easier to just compose something. Unless you, yourself, are absolutely realized or enlightened, that would be dangerous to get into. The new ideas you come up with or compose might be very good for a time. But if you've not thought out all aspects of your creations, there may be loose ends that leave some people out. Or they may just backfire. Or you may have to keep renewing them, like those endless new technologies we get stuck with.

When that happens with the training of human minds, it can get very confusing for students on the path of practice. So it is essential and beneficial to exert effort to understand and retain the training methods of the great masters. Then, as the Buddha and many of our teachers have said, model them according to the needs of the time with slight variations—which, again, shouldn't be taken as an excuse for drastic change.

The human mind is basically the same as it was 2500 years ago. Objects may increase or decrease, but the basic pattern of mind is the same. Desire is the same; likewise anger, and ignorance, and jealousy are the same.

The Dharma and the training of mind are basically about working with people. In working with students or communities, we must understand the principles and methods that have been given to us. Understand how to apply them so they really allow people to benefit by generating their best capabilities and qualities.

Training in Community

In this context, I think it is crucial for today's students to live in communities under the guidance of teachers. Some teachers have made this determination and commitment to live closely with western students. If you don't live in community and have that close training with a teacher, you might easily think you're doing well. You might say, "I have no jealousy, I'm not jealous of anyone at all." But with no one to check you—unless you are very good and honest with yourself—it's easy to develop ideas about who you are, and what you can and can't do.

Living far from everyone else, you may only see people once or twice a year for a weekend teaching. For that period of time you can behave very well, because when you go back to your apartment, you won't have to communicate with anyone at all.

When you live closely with a teacher in community, however, you have no place to hide. You can pretend or force yourself to be mindful for a couple of days or weeks. But the time will come when there's someone you don't like, or someone gets in your face, or you become jealous of someone, or threatened by something. And then there are no excuses. You come to know yourself and others in ways you never imagined were there. The presence of the community and teachers acts as such a clear mirror.

Of course this is very difficult training. But if you are serious about training yourself, I think it's the best way to train yourself and something you all should go through.

When the teachings are just given in a lecture situation, you can feel very good about yourself and think you can do very well by giving yourself lots of time and space. But realistically speaking, I don't know how you could come out of samsara like this. To think that the thousands of lifetimes of habitual tendencies we've accumulated and held onto could be so easily broken may be overly optimistic. Some people seem to think they can do it, but I would find it difficult. (JKR: laughs)

Training in Leadership

HB: Rinpoche, having been raised in a convent school and then grown up in the feminist movement, I've always associated convent training as the infantilization of those nuns, who were never really encouraged to realize their potential.

JKR: That depends on the leader. The same thing can happen in any community; it can happen in the monastic environments in the east. It's very easy to fall into—and it doesn't happen because of any negative intention. It happens when people try to be very loyal to a system.

Loyalty to a system and what you think it expects of you and the administrators can take over the organic growth of the people living within the system. You try to keep to the technicalities of those expectations that you think best express your loyalty and devotion (JKR: laughs)—and they become more crucial than the needs of the people in the community.

It's a very, very tricky situation, and there is no one solution—other than to depend on good leaders. Good leaders will give those running the communities the freedom to see the needs of the people as more important than any ideas of fulfilling obligations as loyal subjects. This is a very important point. It is crucial to train in leadership, not just at the top but at all levels of leadership.

HB: This point seems to be coming up in many sanghas. In many cases, Buddhist mandalas are seen as very top-down situations. But we now have an aging sangha; people are actually becoming elders and just naturally maturing, if not spiritually maturing—although hopefully that is happening too.

JKR: You know, it's the same in every community, but let's talk here about Buddhist communities. First of all, the growth of Buddhist communities and their ability to help others really well cannot happen until those who run the places follow the rules themselves.

Number two: Until those in administrative and leadership positions have knowledge, experience, and a strong practice background themselves, there will be problems.

Number three: If the leaders or those actually holding these communities don't have genuine compassion for others, there will always be problems.

Number four: You cannot be a good leader if you have an agenda of your own. So, if you are considering or wanting to be of service to the community, train yourself first to do this solely because you are a practitioner—not as an opportunity to express your own agenda.

For example some people say, "I love teaching, so I want to teach." I find this extremely uncomfortable, because it's an expression of what you want. You're

going to teach what you want to teach, rather than being willing to share with others something they may need to hear.

Even in charitable projects, people say things like “I love dogs, so I’m going to work for dogs” – which is very nice. But if the main intention is to fulfill your own sense of good feeling and worth or to have a way to express your own needs, then the self is being given more importance than the needs of others. And then you will only be able to compromise or be flexible if it allows you to accomplish your own agenda. So this approach is very dangerous.

As practitioners, it is very important to keep in mind selflessness and genuine practice. Whatever good you can do for others, do it. If it is accepted, fine; if it is not accepted, that’s also fine. Each day just keep doing good things for others, without expectation and without being stuck on your own ideas. If you think this sounds difficult, it is difficult. But then you would know what it means to help others. You would know what it means to lead others.

In the western culture, some take leadership as a job description. It’s like a coat factory where some people only make sleeves, or pockets, or labels. You may have made thousands of pockets; everyone says how good you are, and you’re really proud of your pockets. You iron them every day, and admire them, and make sure they’re well publicized. But if the sleeves, labels, and the rest of the jackets aren’t done, you have no place to put your pockets.

A lot of mix-ups happen when people bring this kind of mentality into a community of Buddhist practitioners.

HB: We specialize.

JKR: Yes—and then you want that specialty to be “special.” Instead, it’s a question of bigger vision. It’s about seeing yourself as part of the overall bigger vision, as part of the whole. This is very important for people to learn, understand, and speak about.

Transmission and Empowerments

HB: From the point of view of the bigger vision, Rinpoche, would you say something about the importance, in the training of a Buddhist practitioner, of the very large cycles of transmissions and empowerments?

JKR: First I would like to stress how much there is to learn. Many people now think it’s their time to teach others, to show others how to do things and how to

live their lives. But the day you think “I’ve gotten enough, now it’s time to give to others” is the day you stop progressing. Otherwise you’re just trying to paint others with your own colors; you’re just projecting your own thoughts onto others—which is called “brainwashing.”

Now if you are in the capacity to lead and teach others, then do it. Always do it. I’m not saying to stop that—but simultaneously learn more and grow more. Understand that there is a lot to accumulate and a lot to learn.

Buddhism in the West is just a drop, at the moment. No matter how much we say it has “happened”—and a lot has happened—it’s just a drop compared to what is there. You could take that drop and say, “Well for an ant, it’s a pond”; you could stop at a drop, or a spoonful, or a puddle, or a well, or a lake. But you can’t negate the fact that there is an ocean.

It is very important to understand that for dharma to come to the West, it really needs to be sustained and nourished and grown here. There is much to do and much to learn now. There is an immense limitless ocean of wisdom that still needs to be gotten.

Again, if you look at all the older ways that dharma moved from India to Tibet, you will see those traditional forms have a lot of wisdom in them. That wisdom was not born out of an ordinary mind; it was born out of the wisdom mind of the great enlightened bodhisattvas.

Our responsibility now is to take advantage of that and to assure the transference of the teachings in the mode of transmissions. Not just selective transmissions, but entire bodies of teachings and transmissions—beginning with the Tripitaka, then sutra, tantra, kama and terma—must begin to happen in their three modes, or streams: the great bodies of empowerments, the oral transmissions, and the commentaries.

Now culturally speaking, westerners always feel that when they take an empowerment, it’s then up to them to “do it.” And this is extremely good. This is how it should be—but there is one downside. You may be limiting yourself.

You may not be letting your mind—which is very vast and flexible—benefit from this wealth of wisdom. It’s like saying that a child who likes pottery can only concentrate on pottery. Until you excel in making pots, you can never look at the ocean or sky—because what does the sky have to do with making pots?

This again alienates the part from the whole. And that is about not understanding karma. It's about not understanding the enormously intricate and complex ways we work with karma, the elements, and the thousands of interdependent originations.

Now on the face of it, I can understand when people ask, "Why should I receive all these transmissions when I can't even finish my prostrations?" And I agree that you shouldn't take on many things, if you can't finish one thing. On the other hand, there are blessings, there are connections, and there is being part of an empowerment.

We sometimes say that what I am today must be because I was an ant during the time of the great teachers, or the time of the Buddha. If at that time the ant had said, "I'm just an ant. I'm not going to go in that direction," we may never have come to this point.

So it's very good to finish what you start. But to use that to limit yourself or to exclude yourself from transmissions, blessings, and vast teachings — which in the future may enhance what you are doing—may be the wrong way to approach it.

That could be called a "feeble mind," the mind of a coward. Allowing your mind to be so feeble and small is what Patrul Rinpoche called the "frog in the well." If you call your well an ocean, no one can argue with you because you think of it as an ocean. But that doesn't make it an ocean—and when you see the ocean, you'll die of a heart attack. (Laughter.)

Now this feeble heart may assume that what you are doing is sufficient to dispel thousands of lifetimes of karmic habitual tendencies. But this is like going out for a walk and getting so focused on your two feet that you don't see the space in front of you. So there has to be a balance of both.

HB: It seems it would be very timely to study the 9 yantras, back and forth...

JKR: Yes, it is very important to study the nine yantras. But don't just study a subject for a weekend and think that you're done. When people say, "Oh, I've heard the teachings on the Four Noble Truths three times," or "I attended a weekend on the Four Immeasurables in 1982, now I need Dzogchen teachings," one feels very sorry for those people. (Laughs)

HB: On that happy note...

JKR: On that happy note! Having said that, however, I have complete trust that western students are coming of age and can now train themselves more deeply—not in a theoretical way, but in a very direct experiential way.

HB: Thank you so very much, Rinpoche.

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