

Not Becoming Buddhist by Venerable Chang Wen

This article is part of an East/West Buddhist exchange; a series of questions and answers between Taiwanese Buddhists and Ven. Chang Wen. The original Chinese version appeared in Humanity Magazine, a publication of Dharma Drum Mountain, and in Chan Magazine, winter 2013.

Question: Why do we often see Westerners eating vegetarian diets and engage in meditation practice, but not formally become Buddhists?

Answer: According to my observations, this is not only a Western phenomenon. Across the globe, especially in developed countries, people are seeking ways to deal with the stress and anxiety of fast-paced modern lifestyle based on material growth. Many of these people are looking for happiness beyond material wealth; they feel the need for spiritual nourishment. In addition to taking care of their physical health by making lifestyle changes, including exercise and possibly a vegetarian diet, people are turning towards meditation. Even throughout universities and health institutions, meditation is taught and applied in research and treatment of physical and mental illness. More often the term "mindfulness" is used and applied to a specific field of practice, as in "mindfulness and stress reduction," etc.

Even in small towns, at community centers composed mostly of elderly retirees playing bingo and holding book club meetings, you can still find people leading meditation classes. Meditation has permeated almost every stratum of modern society. Therefore, when we see people eating vegetarian diets and meditating, we cannot assume that they have an interest in Buddhism, or in becoming members of any religious community, for that matter. If they are indeed interested in religion, we cannot even be sure that their meditation practice or dietary habits have anything to do with Buddhist practices. Many Eastern and more recently, Western religions use sitting meditation as a practice of centering prayer, or a means to get in touch with their own God. Meditation and health, caring for body and mind, have become the focus of many modern people.

Obstacles to Commitment

However, let's limit our discussion to people who study meditation and eat vegetarian food because of Buddhist influences, and currently engage in the study of Buddhadharma. Why is it that even some of these people do not consider themselves Buddhists, or would not formally commit to the practice by taking the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts? From the people that I have

encountered, I've observed that there are a few obstacles that prevent them from making the commitment to becoming a Buddhist. In some cases, there are people who have had very negative experiences with religious communities, Buddhist or otherwise. They may have initially had a great deal of faith in a particular group or spiritual leader. Later on, they found out shameful things about these people, which completely turned them off to organized religion. We've all heard of cases where the spiritual leader took advantage of the followers, or where the followers themselves completely lost judgment due to an excessive amount of faith in their teacher, and made terrible decisions themselves. Many recent news articles about renowned or much respected teachers, tell stories of years of manipulation, sexual harassment, or sexual misconduct from teachers who abused their power and their disciples' trust.

Going through an experience like this, it may be very difficult to ever trust another spiritual teacher or community again. The scars of such experiences remain deeply cut into the minds of those affected. However, they may still recognize the wisdom of the Buddha's teaching, and wish to continue the practice. As such, they would not consider themselves Buddhists, or join any community, but they still continue to meditate and study the Dharma.

Concepts and doubts

In other circumstances, there are students of the Dharma who have a great deal of confidence in a teacher and community, yet they harbor many doubts about the Dharma itself. They feel that there are some concepts that are too difficult to understand. Other ideas are too difficult for them to accept. Some people think that if they cannot accept everything, then they are unable to have genuine faith in the Dharma. Others are just stuck in doubt regarding a few key ideas. For example, concepts such as non-self can be daunting to grasp, especially if they do not have a proper understanding. "How can I have no-self? Am I not right here? And if there is no self, who will I be in my next life? It just doesn't make sense."

The concept of previous and future lives, the round of rebirths, the cycle of transmigrating from one existence to the next; these ideas are especially hard for most Westerners to have faith in. Even in Western culture, the idea of reincarnation is not common. When they hear that not only is it possible to be reborn as a human being, but that they could also be reborn as an animal, hell-being, hungry ghost, angry god or deva, this becomes all-too-hard to accept. Many people studying Buddhadharma are simply looking for peace in this present life. Yet, with their study they are confronted with the intellectually

daunting task of accepting a description of reality that includes multiple lives. This can be a great obstacle to their genuine faith in the Dharma.

Ideas related to the existence of omniscient buddhas and bodhisattvas, seemingly similar to the idea of an all-knowing eternal God, can be equally puzzling. "Doesn't Buddhism say there is no eternally existing God? So how can there be an eternal Buddha?" In fact, when the Buddha talked about the "eternal" Dharma Body, or Body of Reality of all buddhas and all phenomena, it can be mistaken as a concrete entity, or body. Properly understood, the Dharma Body is not a body, rather it is the functioning of awakened awareness as the empty nature of all phenomena. So eternal in this sense does not carry the same meaning as an eternal *thing*. In many cases, such as in *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, the Buddha speaks of the nature of empty phenomena as being impermanent, but emptiness is not an entity. Furthermore, it also says that to think of the nature of awakening as "permanent" or "impermanent" is not in accordance with enlightenment. The reality of "buddha" is beyond concepts. This is another intellectual challenge for people to grasp: that reality cannot be grasped with the intellect!

With regards to buddhas and their Pure lands, it sounds very similar to the idea of heaven in other religions. "So when Buddhists die, they all go to the Pure Land? I don't want to go to the Pure Land, I don't even believe in it."

Those with a practice which is not based on faith or devotion to the buddhas may be turned off by hearing that even Buddhism talks about the idea of buddhas "saving" sentient beings. What they may not know is that buddhas are not creator gods, and Pure Lands are not permanent resting places for sentient beings. A Pure Land can be likened to a retreat center, where people take a break from daily life to cultivate the practice in a serene and ideal environment. When they have rested, healed and cultivated their awareness of their own suffering, they then leave the retreat center and return to their normal daily life. In Pure Land, a place where a buddha is teaching the Dharma, sentient beings cultivate toward enlightenment. After enlightenment, they return to the world of ordinary sentient beings to share the practice and help them liberate themselves. Pure Lands are not eternal resting places, like the idea of heaven in other religions. Not understanding or accepting these and the above concepts can prevent people from considering themselves Buddhist and having genuine faith in the Dharma.

Misunderstanding the Five Precepts

Another big obstacle for many people is taking the Precepts. There are those who have faith and confidence in the Buddha, the teachings, and the community of practitioners (known as the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). Yet these same people may lack confidence in their own ability to uphold the teachings and to practice the precepts, which are the guidelines for daily life. Often, their lack of confidence comes from a misunderstanding of the scope of the precepts.

For example, when people hear about not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying and not taking intoxicants, they think that it's too difficult to uphold. They may think that not killing means they cannot eat meat, or engage in their profession that may involve killing animals or insects, like a butcher or a scientist who does testing on animals. They think that not lying means that they have to tell everyone what is on their minds, and completely reveal their personal feelings, especially when others demand them to share. Or they may assume that, no matter what, they have to reveal the truth about a private matter or sensitive issue to someone who asks. For example, if someone asks them about a third party's private situation, which speaking about may harm that third party, they think they must tell the truth despite endangering others. They may also think that not engaging in sexual misconduct means that they cannot have sexual relations with anyone, unless they have already chosen to marry that person, or that having multiple boy/girlfriend relationships throughout one's life is wrong. Regarding the fifth precept, many people feel that not to drink alcohol would impoverish their social life or obstruct their career. What's more, they may be afraid that they are unable to uphold the precepts purely, and will surely break them. If they broke the precepts, they would feel guilty and unworthy of calling themselves Buddhists, and so feel discouraged from taking the precepts altogether.

Repentance and Reform

What many do not know is that not killing refers mainly to not killing people. Of course Buddhists are encouraged to eat vegetarian food and refrain from killing insects when not necessary, for the sake of being compassionate to these living beings who fear death and love life. Not lying refers to not telling falsities for the sake of personal gain or to harm others. Sexual misconduct refers to unhealthy sexual relations, such as changing partners often because of a craving for sexual stimulation, or engaging in adulterous relations that damage the stability of family life. Not taking intoxicants is surely recommended, as they make the mind unclear, which often leads to one doing harmful things such as

that outlined by the first four precepts. What these people do not recognize is that precepts are a code of conduct designed to safeguard us from causing harm. Their main principle is to encourage us to protect ourselves and others.

Even if one were to break the precepts due to weakness of mind amidst a challenging situation, one needs only to repent and reform one's actions (with the exception of the first precept that, once broken, cannot be taken again). With repentance we recognize our faults and take responsibility for our actions. With reform, we vow not to make the same mistake again. Practicing in this way one's mind becomes purified and free from guilt. The momentum of harmful thoughts, speech and action is weakened. But many people contemplating taking the precepts do not know this. Due to this lack of knowledge, although they are dedicated to the practice and have faith in the Three Jewels, they shy away from formally becoming a Buddhist and taking the Three Refuges and Five Precepts.

Non Buddhist Meditation

With respect to the practice of meditation, some people do not see the difference between Buddhist meditation and non –Buddhist meditation. ""It's all the same thing; all religions are doing the same practice and going toward the same goal", they say. However, this is not entirely true. Yes, there are a lot of similarities. Religions have similar ethical principles, meditations, and ideals. However, if one were to look deeply into each religion and its practices, you would find that the goals, methods, and principles are quite different. For example, with basic meditation that is taught in self-help books and medical fields, the practice is to simply relax the body and mind, and achieve concentration and clarity. The goal is good health and mental stability.

With some yogic practices, the goal is a bit deeper, where the meditator seeks to stabilize the mind to the point of reaching samadhi, or meditative absorption. In deep states of samadhi normal functions of mind cease. Seeing, hearing, feeling and thinking all stop, and one is left with a sense of great liberation and ease of mind. The sense of body and mind may have vanished to the point that one feels that nothing exists at all, there is just a feeling of "liberation".

Other religious practices may emphasize that the goal of meditation is to cultivate immortality or a union with the basic unchanging source of life, an eternal being that lies underneath the superficial changes of phenomenal reality.

Buddhist Meditation

If we compare these to Buddhist meditation, we can clearly see that it's not the same. The basic principle of Buddhist meditation contains some of the above aspects, such as cultivating a healthy body and mind, and developing meditative concentration and clarity. Some Buddhist traditions emphasize the necessity to cultivate deep samadhi as well. However, Buddhist meditation is different from all these other, non-Buddhist practices in that the most important task is for the practitioner to cultivate the liberating wisdom of observation.

With observation, or *vipashyana*, the mind is directed toward insight into the empty nature of things. Through specific or general observation, either through analysis or direct observation, one cultivates a practice of mindfulness of body, mind and environment. With this wisdom of observation, the insight into the impermanent, non-self, and empty nature of things arises. With further observation, the state of enlightenment itself is seen as empty. There is no mind, body, world, or anything called "enlightenment", or "nirvana". This doesn't mean that everything disappears; rather, self-attachment and the confusion of clinging to ideas disappear. This is true liberation.

Due to the lack of knowledge of this unique quality of Buddhist meditation, many people don't seek to immerse themselves in this practice and become Buddhist, but stick to the simplicity of concentration or the ordinary mindfulness commonly talked about in various circles today. To them, it all seems the same anyway. "Why become a member of a religion?"

There are various reasons that people interested in meditation and overall healthy living do not become Buddhists. Every individual has their own causes and conditions and direction of mind. The above are merely a few possibilities and examples of what I've observed. Maybe the next question is: What obstacles keep someone from either becoming Buddhist, or from having firm confidence in the practice of Buddhadharma?

This you have to look into for yourself.
