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Practicing the One Vehicle

On finding the complementary relationship between different Buddhist teachings

We are in a unique situation in the history of Buddhism. Over the last few generations, a great diversity of teachings become available to us in the West. This has brought real benefit, no doubt, but, at the same time, I think for many people, hearing many different expressions of the Dharma, unfortunately, can be a source of conflict and confusion.

The teachings can be mutually illuminating, and so it's important that we get the most out of this great good fortune that we have, of being alive in these times, with so many profound teachings within our reach. Given our situation, the question for both new and old students who want to get the most out of the study of different Buddhist traditions could be phrased as:

What perspective on the teachings is the most productive?

As I see it now, there are four distinct ways that the different Buddhist teachings we receive can exist together in us:

1. they can be in conflict;
2. they can more or less peacefully co-exist;
3. they can be in harmony with each other; and,
4. they can complement each other

For most of Buddhist history, for most people practicing Buddhist methods there was no need to consider other points of view on their practice. If it was done at all it was often from a perspective of uninformed criticism, and then mostly to disprove the others' position, and assert the superiority of

one's own tradition or lineage's approach. For the most part however, the majority of Buddhists were not even exposed to different Buddhist Traditions, and so the problem never came up as to what to do when the teachings seemed to contradict each other.

Now we are Westerners – questing by nature, not only open to different viewpoints, but actively seeking them out; and this is the 21st century, a time when there is a great variety of approaches to the Dharma available to us. It's inevitable then that we often find them conflicting in us. What to do?

It seems to me that there are hints in the teachings of the Saints that have come down to us. One quote I remember hearing is from Tsong Khapa, who said, 'Upon realization, all teachings prove to be non-contradictory', 'advice for one person's practice'. This has got to be a comfort to anyone who has struggled with what seem to be contradictory points of view on practice, particularly the seeming Theravada/Mahayana split.

The second type of possible relationship – that of peaceful co-existence would be, then, like declaring a truce. Different points of view on practice can work effectively for us, so why have them clash? When, without any doubt there is benefit to be gained from different practices, so, we can think, why cause unnecessary grief? A truce – co-existence is far better than conflict. It can be a huge relief, in fact.

But why stop there? Is that really the best we can do? Harmony and cooperation would be much better. Just a few examples of how practices from different lineages and traditions can go together in a harmonious way:

the extensively developed teachings on the practice of ethics, mindfulness and concentration from the Theravada can go well with philosophical studies from other schools;

the practice of calm abiding meditation as taught in Tibetan lineages can be used to clarify just sitting or koan study, and with investigating things such as the Three Characteristics, or the Four Dharma Seals;

the discipline and strength of a consistent sitting practice, as emphasized in the Zen Tradition, clarifies, and integrates what are learning;

the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind to Dharma – recognizing the value of our precious human life, its impermanence, the nature of suffering, and karma, can inspire and motivate all levels of study and practice;

metta practice goes together smoothly with the teachings on cultivating bodhicitta, and the study and practice of the lojong, or thought transformation teachings;

and bodhicitta can be a foundation for everything else...

there are many more examples of how this can work, I'm sure.

But then, even with this harmony and co-operation, as great as this is when compared to conflict or mere co-existence, there is still some distance. There are still some issues to be resolved before the best kind of cooperation can take effect.

The best way that teachings from different approaches within Buddhism can co-exist in us is in a complementary fashion. In the ideal, complementary relationship between Buddhist Traditions, we see what each approach has developed most extensively and use that to our full advantage.

In the 19th century, in Tibet, this idea of learning from different lineages developed into what became known as the 'Rime' or non-sectarian movement. The purpose of the Rime was not to create a new school of thought. Instead, the idea was to be established in one tradition, while learning from, practicing and benefitting from other teachings, as well as sharing what is of value in one's own tradition that could possibly be helpful to those of other schools.

This non sectarian movement came about precisely because there was a good deal of sectarian conflict, misunderstanding, and worse than that - the loss of the great opportunity to learn from others.

We can easily see the parallel in our own times – where there is often misunderstanding, and a lack of communication between different Buddhist lineages, but also the great potential for a person to learn from more than one Tradition. We should take what has practical value for our lives and leave the rest.

One more note on a rime for our times: whereas the Rime in Tibet was generally addressing the four or five Schools, in the West in the 21st century, there are many more teachings. We have the Zen, Theravada and Tibetan Buddhist Traditions with all their many subdivisions that we can learn and profit from. In addition, we have our own Western Spiritual Heritage, as well as the insights from science and psychology to draw from.

Whether we refer to what we are doing as non-sectarian, or pan-sectarian, or simply Buddhist, we have many more perspectives to accommodate, and potentially at least, to help us. It's up to us to assess what works for us.

During his own lifetime, the Buddha advised his listeners:

Don't accept something just because it is tradition,
 or because it sounds reasonable,
 or because others are accepting it,
 but apply the teachings to your own life
 and when you see that they bring you greater peace, health and well being,
 then accept them, and share them with others

Right there is the guideline. Whether Buddhist, or Christian, or from therapeutic disciplines, the teachings are meant to help us to live lives of greater freedom, all the way to complete freedom.

The last few months I've been listening to the wonderful and very liberating series of talks available online by Joseph Goldstein, on the Satipattana Sutta. A few times I heard him refer to this clear standard taught by the Buddha, that, 'when we practice, wisdom increases, and when we don't practice, wisdom declines.' I've taken this to mean that this is how we can know if a particular meditation is right for us as well.

How then to practice with such diversity, so that, instead of being a source or confusion and conflict, the range of teachings actually inspires, and supports us? While it's true that Buddhist systems of thought were, and still are complete in themselves, it's also possible for different teachings to be complementary to each other. We can see if it works this way for ourselves by simply practicing within one system for a while, using its terminology and methods alone, and seeing what results we get.

Then we can try introducing elements from other Buddhist lineages, experimenting in an open minded way, and seeing if the result goes deeper and is more complete in our practice-life. When it is, we have reached the fourth and unquestionably the best way of receiving, holding, and practicing with the teachings from different Buddhist lineages. We have found a way for the teachings to be complementary to one another.

I recall a teaching on the Lotus Sutra, where Thich Nhat Hanh said: ‘There is only one vehicle – the Buddhayana’, the vehicle of Awakening. And His Holiness the Dalai Lama expresses this very same thought in the book *Tantra in Tibet*. He explains that, in teaching, the Buddha ‘set forth a path appropriate to trainees’ abilities. The Buddha spoke in terms the situation, and everything that he spoke was a means of eventually attaining the highest enlightenment... Since the purpose of a Buddha’s is others’ realization of the wisdom of Buddhahood, the methods for actualizing this wisdom are one vehicle, not two. A Buddha does not lead beings by a vehicle that does not lead to Buddhahood; he establishes beings in his own level.’

For me, this idea allows us to hold all Buddhist teachings and wisdom traditions as not only non-contradictory, but as existing in a great harmony with each other. Depending on where we are in our lives, and on our character and inclinations, these different teachings and practices exist. They serve the same function, that of awakening.

It is our great fortune to have been born in these times. Compared to other times, we have many more resources to draw from for guidance and inspiration. Many great beings have gone before us, and have left a record pointing the way. When it is handled wisely, surely this is something for us to celebrate every day.

At the heart of why we should use what we can from other traditions when it is more effective for us is that so much depends on this, for ourselves and for all others. Buddhism and contemplative traditions have been born out of the greatest necessity, to address our suffering and to point the way to freedom from suffering. The potential is here now for the teachings from the Zen, Theravada and Tibetan Traditions to be mutually illuminating, and mutually beneficial. Because of the great benefits that can result from this for us all, we should take advantage of this extraordinary opportunity to learn as much as we can, and to practice what helps us the most to accomplish our goals.