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Six things that Westerners need, that Buddhism can offer

Recently, a friend of mine asked what I thought a Dharma center could offer to engage people who are new to Buddhism. The first few items came to mind right away, and within the week the list had grown to six things that I think are especially needed at this time, in this culture.

For me, the first item on this list belongs first and foremost. After that, they are just set down as they occurred to me. Any of these can be the most important thing for a person, depending on what they need.

From my point of view, then, here are the six most helpful things Buddhist books, teachers, and Dharma Centers can offer to people these days, in this culture:

1. A Buddhist world view
 2. ways to quiet and direct the mind, along with a clear presentation of why this is so important
 3. teachings on how and why to be kind to ourselves
 4. teachings on the importance of altruism
 5. teachings on how to discover our own inner richness,
- and,
6. a clear explanation of the value of devotion

I have placed A Buddhist world view first because I think people are hungry for some alternative to the materialistic, hedonistic, short sighted, nihilistic culture we find ourselves in. And Buddhism does offer a beautiful alternative.

Another reason the Buddhist world view goes first, for me, is that this view helps the rest of the teachings to make much more sense. They will all have their place in our lives so much more clearly if some meaningful overview of our lives is seen.

Just as with Buddhist prayer, there are as many ways of thinking about what could be called a Buddhist world view as there are Traditions, and individuals. The following is what works for me. The Buddhist world view I'll try to describe here is not intended to stir debate (though debate has its place), or to prove something to scholars, although it is scripturally sound. More importantly, these ideas from Buddhism about the larger context of our lives are both illuminating and empowering.

Most Buddhist schools take the approach that the ideas they set forward should be tested before being accepted or rejected. This non-dogmatic approach works well for most modern educated people.

Here are the propositions of a Buddhist world view – in four points:

that, in every moment of our lives, we are all connected to each other, to past and future generations, and to the world we live in.

This interdependence means that everything we think and do, every action we take, matters. It effects the larger whole. We don't realize that we are connected because of our ego-centricity, the false ideas we've been taught, and that we hold onto, of ourselves as separate. This, notion, that we are fundamentally isolated, needs to be radically *unlearned*, or disproven, for the sake of healthy relationships with each other and our planet. How to actually go about realizing our interconnectedness with all life is taught most extensively in the branch of Buddhist study that deals with developing wisdom.

A Buddhist world view also includes the realization that all life is precious

When this aspect is not seen it is because we are obscured by the afflictive emotions. Difficult emotions, such as anger, sadness, fear, or craving don't just upset the mind temporarily, they also 'color' the mind so that what is here, right in front of us, is then seen through the filter of that obscured mind. This is perhaps the easiest proposition to prove for ourselves: if we

work on lessening the afflictive emotions in our lives, doesn't the world appear to us as more beautiful? more interesting? more precious? Methods for lessening the negative emotions and increasing the positive states, such as gratitude, joy, wonder, humility, patience, gentleness and so on, are found in all of the great World Religions, including Buddhism;

seeing life as precious, therefore, leads to the understanding

that we all have an intrinsic need to live a responsible life, in relation to one another, supporting each others' happiness and well being in whatever way we can. This need to live ethically and compassionately doesn't have to be imposed from the outside – that's why I say it is an intrinsic. It is there naturally.

and, finally, perhaps the most easily agreed on point across the spectrum of Buddhist Lineages and World religions, is

that we all have great resources within us to do this: We can all make progress on the path of greater freedom from suffering, and can realize more of our true nature

All of these points can be proven, in fact have to be proven, thought over and tested, for them to become more than a theory, but there, at least are the essential factors of a life affirming a Buddhist world view. This is what I think should be offered at the outset to everyone who listens to a Dharma teacher, opens a book on Buddhism, or visits a Buddhist Center. These propositions don't need to be accepted with blind faith, but they are inviting people to think differently about their lives, the lives of others, and this worlds we live in. They are inspiring to even just think about, let alone prove for oneself, and they provide a meaningful framework for everything else that is heard or read about in Buddhism. 'nuff said.

Five more jewels that Buddhism can offer:

2. ways to quiet and direct the mind, along with a clear presentation of why this is so important

We live increasingly in an ADHD society – an 'attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder society. Most people are up in their heads, swept away by their thoughts, with little or no control. We lose sleep because we

can't stop or even slow down our thinking, and so we take sleeping pills. Over the course of our lives, our own mind runs roughshod over us and causes us so much distress. Think of all the grief people could be spared if they were taught from an early age how to quiet down their mind. That we are never even introduced to this possibility in school, and taught methods to do this, tells me that something essential to our happiness has become almost unknown in modern society. But this is not rocket science. It is achievable by each and every person, if clear instruction were offered, and the effort made.

3. teachings on how to be kind to ourselves

This is also something essential that 21st century Americans need. For some reason, even the most kind people have a hard time being gentle, forgiving and compassionate towards themselves. If self knowledge is to flourish in a person, however, we need to be able to be with ourselves, especially with our difficult emotions. This is so important, and not just because it is more comfortable, more accommodating of our mistakes and struggle. Being kind towards ourselves is something that bears its fullest fruit in our relationship with others. We can know for ourselves just how longed for and how necessary kindness is. Buddhist loving kindness practice starts with ourselves.

4. teachings on the importance of altruism

The notion of self giving is far from self centeredness that leads nowhere except to isolation, envy and competitiveness. Buddhism is rich with teachings on how to cultivate the most positive motivation we can towards others, and how this brings our own life to genuine fulfillment. Again, this is not suggested here, or anywhere else in Buddhism, as a dogma. We each have to see if this is so for ourself.

5. teachings on how to discover their own inner richness,

through meditation,

and,

6. a clear explanation of the value of devotion

Devotion is seldom appreciated in our culture, and it can only be that we are not taught its great importance. Respect and devotion brings with it humility, the capacity to receive blessings, and joy. Instead, especially with young people, we have jaded, sarcastic, shallow and arrogant 'been there done that' attitudes. Perhaps devotion is best demonstrated, but the idea that a greater receptivity to profound truth is important for our whole lives can be a direct challenge to dissatisfied, small thinking. The notion that there is another way to think may be able to take root. Having greater respect, and even reverence can prove its value for any open minded person.

When it comes to Buddhism in particular, in Centers, respect extends not only to the average person, but also to our Tradition and to our teachers because of the great value of what they offer. This is where deep respect becomes devotion, which is clearly a love and dedication to these virtues.

I'd be interested to hear the ideas other people have on the subject of what Buddhism has to offer that can reach and benefit people in this place and time. Not all of teachings from the Buddhist Tradition may be immediately suitable, given our circumstances. I like to think that we are all writing this book together, of Buddhism coming to the West, day by day, and encounter by encounter, always holding the thought 'may all beings benefit' ...