

Buddhism and the natural world – an interview with Ringu Tulku Rinpoche

About the interview

Ringu Tulku is a Tibetan Buddhist master of the Kagyu Order and representative for Europe of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa. He has taught at over 50 universities, institutes and Buddhist centres worldwide and is the founder of Bodhicharya, an international educational and cultural organization, and the Rigul Trust.

About the questions

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Q: Do you think that Buddhism as a whole has the potential to play a positive role in countering the ecological crisis, particularly the human-caused crisis? And if so, what could Buddhists do?

A: There is this scientist who said that he thought this ecological problem was a scientific problem, and that it could be solved through science. But then he said he discovered that it's not any longer a scientific problem, it's a problem of humans' way of acting. It's a bigger problem. Therefore it is more a problem of how you see things, how you look at things. So it's more a religious problem, political problem, all kinds of things. Therefore it has to be dealt with on a human basis.

So people need to understand that it can only be solved if *we* change, and see and react in a different way. Here, I think Buddhism can play an important role, because Buddhism actually is very much based on understanding causes and conditions. Its whole doctrine is based on understanding causes and conditions, called 'dependent origination'. So it's all about that, you know? Therefore it [ecology] fits deeply with Buddhist philosophy.

From a Buddhist point of view, the Buddha talked about four things, the four Noble Truths. These are to see the problem, to understand the causes of the problem, to see that there is a possibility to change them, and then to find a way how to do that. I think we need to apply these four things to the ecological problem also. We need to first really recognize the problem. How intense is it, how bad is it? Then try to find out what are the causes. And then, can we really do something about them? Since this problem is mostly created by ourselves! So *we* need to do something.

There's no other way. And there are things we should *not* do.

Once, a long time ago, some people from Ireland wanted to go and meet Karmapa. So we went there. And they wanted to ask him some questions about ecology, and they said, what is the real cause? He said, does water pollute itself? No, so somebody must be doing it! And so on. So with that kind of understanding, I think Buddhists can do a lot. But not only Buddhists, of course. It can be applied and accepted by anybody, if they want to, because it's not based on a kind of dogma – just Buddhist ethics, say. It's a common kind of thing.

So from this point of view, I think the Buddhist way or philosophy or understanding could make a contribution.

Q: It could be said that the chief concern for Buddhists, as the Buddha taught, is suffering and an end to suffering, and that's as it should be. But that tends to be human suffering. In other words, the kind of suffering that concerns us most is human suffering and its end. So is that an obstacle in terms of developing a compassionate relationship to the rest of the natural world?

A: I think that's not correct, actually. The Buddhist concern is with *all* sentient beings. This is very important. One of the most common prayers that Buddhist people do – the first prayer of the day, when you get up – is 'All beings throughout space, especially the enemies who hate me, obstructors who harm me, and all those who block my liberation, must have happiness, be free from suffering, and quickly attain unsurpassable, complete and perfect awakening. For that purpose, I will employ my body, speech, mind and virtue... All beings throughout the reaches of space

take refuge in the Bhagwan Buddhas...'. All beings!

Q: Another thing that interests me is that there is this difference between theology or theory and practice. I imagine that for Buddhists (as well as Christians, Muslims and so on) they are, understandably, perhaps, mainly concerned with their own salvation, and by extension a few other people, and by extension maybe even all human beings, but it could be a long time before they get to other beings. But I guess we could say, even so: that's not a correct understanding of Buddhist practice.

A: No. Buddhist practice always says may all beings have happiness. This is in every kind of Buddhism, it's there. From a Buddhist point of view, I could be a human being now, and I could be an animal next time. So... [Laughs]

Q: Do you think there are different degrees of emphasis on this in different schools and traditions? For example, I sometimes have the impression that the Theravada tradition is strictly soteriological, it's very concerned with 'extinguishing the flame' and we're out of here. But even there, you have forest monks protecting trees by ordaining them, which is a striking thing to do.

A: The teaching is the same. It may be that you have a certain way of doing things but that's all. In Theravada, the emphasis is on Vinaya, which is mainly about refraining from doing negative things. The monks observe these rules very strictly. Many rules! So sometimes it becomes a little bit too rigid, and especially if you go outside your country it becomes a bit difficult.

Q: But you see a fundamental unity among Buddhists?

A: The main teaching is the same. But in the Mahayana [tradition], the emphasis is on bodhicitta. That is, becoming a bodhisattva and working for the benefit of other beings more. 'Bodhicitta'

means that I want all sentient beings to be free from suffering and the causes of suffering, and bring [themselves] to a vast increase in happiness. And I would like to do that, and will train, step by step, to do it. That is the emphasis. In the Theravada tradition, it's more that I would like to attain nirvana, and I work towards that.

Q: It sometimes seems to me that there's an emphasis on human beings attaining enlightenment or nirvana because we need to. In a sense, animals don't need to do that because they haven't got this peculiar set of problems that we do. To put it another way, the idea of a non-human animal attaining enlightenment doesn't really make sense, does it?

A: From the Tibetan Buddhist point of view, we human beings are very fortunate because we can understand, think, see, so we have the ability to practice, to receive teachings, to meditate. Animals don't have all that, at the moment. Although that doesn't mean they will not attain enlightenment. In the Tathagata tales we have, the Buddha, even when he was a high-level Bodhisattva, many times was born as an animal.

This is the same with human beings, you know. To be able to really work for enlightenment or to work on yourself or to improve yourself is a real opportunity. But not everybody wants to do that!

Q: Concerning Asian Buddhism (say) coming to the West, it's surely not only a question of Buddhist teachings affecting the West, but the West has also had an effect on Buddhism. And that effect, it seems to me, has been twofold: more emphasis on the empowering of women, and an environmental or ecological awareness. My impression is that the latter wasn't particularly important before this process began to happen. So I'm wondering if ecological awareness has something to teach Buddhism, as well?

A: The basic fundamentals of Buddhism, as we said, are about trying to work on yourself, to work on your mind,

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and to try to do whatever you can to make things better, not only for you but for other people and everything. Then it will proceed according to what is necessary, what is needed.

Nobody talked too much about the environment as such, and that is understandable because there was not so much of a problem! And they already had something in place, like 'everything is sacred'. Every mountain, every lake, every river, every forest, every rock is sacred.

So this awareness is not something new. Every monastery had some land, which was protected from hunting and things like that. And in Tibet, nobody fished. Some people did hunt, but lots of places were protected. In Sikkim there were laws about what you could and couldn't do. So it was already there, but it was not seen as environmental protection, it was seen as protection of the beings. The difference is that now, there is a universal problem, which wasn't there before. ■

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