

Ten Years Later—American Buddhism

In the Twenty-first Century

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September 13, 2009

Lenz Conference at Naropa University

Thanks to the Lenz Foundation.

It is very moving to be here with a group of people who have been deeply touched by the dharma, and are so committed to the future of Buddhism in America. I am so happy to be able to speak of some of these things, as I share your care and concern—wishing the dharma to thrive over the next one hundred years, and more. I am also speaking here as a mother who has two college-aged children, 19 and 22, who are emergent Buddhist practitioners. What will they have, and their successive generation of children have, of a profound Buddhist tradition?

Eleven years ago, in a keynote address to a “Buddhism in America” conference held in San Diego, I asked a series of questions designed to assess the success of the durability and sustainability of American Buddhism. Today I want to return to these questions, and to share my personal reflections on how we can answer them. I hope these reflections will serve as the basis for conversation today and in the coming decade of the development of American Buddhism.

I believe this is an important conversation for the survival of Buddhism in our culture. Certainly, as Jan and Bob have said, no one is going to define what makes any of us Buddhist. Thomas Tweed’s point that “if you say you are a Buddhist, you are,” works for me in this particular environment. But Buddhism is experiencing many cultural pressures in America, influencing its manifestation, legitimacy, and indeed its survival as something recognizably Buddhist.

Almost thirty years ago, in graduate school in religion at Columbia University, I was introduced to what seemed arcane then, but have proven to be relevant in an enduring way. They were **four criteria**, developed by Western Buddhologists, that predicted the resilience of Buddhism in a new cultural setting, such as the transmission of Buddhism to China or Tibet. Over the decades, I have found them to be deep and provocative questions that address not just the popularity of Buddhism, but the infrastructure and foundations of Buddhism that might ensure its survival beyond a single generation in a new culture. What factors are necessary for this survival? While these criteria were developed from observation of Buddhism moving through Asia, with certain

adjustments they may be of relevance for an assessment of American Buddhism at this juncture in its history.

These four criteria address the question of what is necessary to assure the continuation of Buddhism in an American setting beyond a single generation.

--the translation of the foundational texts into English;

--the transmission of the central oral instructions to authorized dharma heirs and successors;

--the establishment of appropriate patronage;

--the continuation of monastic ordinations and traditions.

As we will see, these four are interdependent, each impinging on the others.

(Example of Martha Bonzi, great lady and patron, who used these criteria as a way to decide where to give her money to support American Buddhism. Perhaps the Lenz Foundation is doing the same.)

The first criterion--*have the key sutras, commentaries, teachings, practices and liturgies been translated from Asian languages into English?* Previously, I asked, are these translations usable for the practice communities themselves? Excessively scholarly translations will not do--and popularized translations that strip away all tradition dilute the richness of our Asian heritage. Certainly, over the last decade, the number of translated texts of the Asian canons has grown exponentially, as a visit to any good Buddhist academic library can attest. Thirty years ago it was possible to purchase for one's personal library almost every text translation that became available—now it is prohibitive, even for the wealthy. In the last decade, translation series have emerged that have given the western Buddhist a sense of the richness of traditional literature from the vast Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana canons.

Still, as my colleagues, such as canon specialist Phil Stanley, tell me—the current translation work on the Buddhist canon itself is merely piecemeal, with uneven standards of translation and scholarly perspective. The canon and its commentarial traditions are vast, and no one really knows what percentage of it has been translated—certainly less than half for the Kangyur and Tengyur alone. It has become clear that individual translators can have little impact on this, and that the time has come for collaborative translation committees—as in ancient times—to work together to systematically translate the remaining portions. The Pali Text Society did yeomans' tasks beginning in the 19th century,ⁱ with the translation into English of the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism, long before Buddhism became a force in American culture, but its translations were full of WASP projections and mistakes, creating a “Buddhist hybrid English,” in the words of Buddhologist Paul Griffiths, meaning that most America readers are not able to understand them.ⁱⁱ More recently, in Berkeley, California, the Numata Center for Buddhist Text and Translation has, since 1984, devoted itself to the translation of the

100-volume Sino-Japanese Buddhist canon into English, but work is proceeding slowly.ⁱⁱⁱ In just the last year, the Buddhist Heritage Literary Society was launched in Bir, India, to coordinate efforts to systematically translate the vast portions of the Tibetan canon that remain, but funding is uncertain and the task is huge.^{iv} Robert Thurman and the American Institute of Buddhist Studies commitment to translate the remaining portions of the Tenjur will likely be boosted by the Bir project.

While it is fortunate that we in the United States have increasing access to excellent, accessible translations of Buddhist texts in English, I must ask, **is anyone reading these texts?** What good are these texts if no one is reading or studying them? The reason that the translation of texts is considered so important in Buddhist history is that the texts could help anchor understanding of the deeper traditions of Buddhism, and nourish the adaptation of those traditions in a new setting. This suggests that what we now need is developed educational programs that support the responsible and careful reading of the important sources of our traditions.

For the first few decades of Buddhism spread in America, the focus has been on meditation practice, thinking that was all that was needed. It has become Buddhist cliché to speak of meditation and direct experience as all that is needed, denigrating study, ritual, and ethics. In the last decade, western Buddhists have begun to learn more ritual, and the protocols of our Asian forebearers. But without a real Buddhist education, much is lost. From my own experience of study of Buddhist texts, it is clear that we have only scratched the surface, and that now we must go more deeply into the subtleties of meaning of these teachings. The way we can do this is to develop educational programs that explore texts and their commentaries, especially while we still have access to the Asian teachers who have transmitted these practices to us. (Note Jules Levinson's presentation and description of the importance of oral commentary.)

There is a tremendous range of what Buddhist educational programs might cover, from debate traditions to doxographies or doctrinal studies. The textual traditions explain philosophical traditions, literature and sacred arts, and complete descriptions of paths of meditation. Buddhist hagiographies and histories of the lineages also shed light on many of the practices we have inherited. Additional topics include ritual studies, cosmology, and soteriological or "path" texts. In any case, it is time for us to more fully utilize the translation work that has been accomplished, and to encourage more.

It is impossible to plumb the depth of this literature casually, without a systematic approach and guidance through the varied materials. Educational programs could be academic ones, located within universities, or they could be monastic-style programs designed for the serious practitioner. More will be said about this later in this address.

The second criterion--*have the essential oral instructions and teachings been transmitted to American dharma heirs and successors?* Are these heirs trusted and respected by their Asian lineages, and have they received everything, with nothing held back? We know our auspicious place in history. To receive these teachings requires

sustained, heartfelt practice, intelligent devotion, and unfailing communication through the many chapters of the transmission of Buddhism to the west. My teacher and root guru, Ven. Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, passed on 22 years ago. I and others have dedicated ourselves to carrying on his heritage, his transmissions, his instructions. Do we all understand the preciousness of human life, that our teachers will not live forever? How might we more fully receive the transmissions that they offer us?

The entire phenomenon of dharma transmission in a new culture is fraught with risks while being pregnant with possibilities. Some Asian Buddhist lineages have generously chosen and empowered American successors to their teachings, while others have been more reticent. I can only imagine the considerations that these teachers bring to their decisions. Certainly they know that American Buddhists cannot practice in exactly the same way that Asian Buddhists practice, so they must consider what is the essential core of the teachings that must be preserved in a new cultural setting? What elements can and must change if the dharma is to flourish on American soil?

Of course, some dharma heirs have taken their transmissions and run with them, to the consternation of their Asian gurus. Having received the treasure of transmission, it may be tempting to break off and become independent dharma teachers, forging new forms and content in order to make the dharma more accessible, appropriate, or even popular for an American setting. Many of us who have been empowered as teachers are discounted by Asian lineages, no matter how faithfully we carry on the traditions of our teachers. However, when the channels of blessings from our Asian teachers are cut by our disregard, what obstacles and dangers will we face that could jeopardize the very integrity of what we are teaching and transmitting?

As a western Acharya in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage of Naropa's founder, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and his son and dharma heir, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, I think about these matters all the time. Of course, it is not that I am a regent or full dharma heir, as it has been rare for Tibetans to anoint westerners for this role. But, as a representative senior teacher of this precious lineage, it is important that I retain my loyalty to my root teachers and their transmissions. Still, it is important to continue to cultivate critical intellect in the way I have received these teachings, doing my best to make the dharma accessible and appropriate in an American context, and endeavoring to avoid the exclusivist excesses of other American religious movements. I see myself as part of a collaborative effort to do this, and appreciate my community of other Acharyas and senior dharma teachers, as we serve as moral supports as well as cautionary commentators in the process in which we are engaged. As Trungpa Rinpoche said to Naropa University's first board chair, "you may prune the branches, but don't cut the root." Considering the meaning of this is probably the most important thing for our dharma heirs and successors, as well as for our communities.

As Bob Scharf noted yesterday, currently the legitimation of Western dharma teachers has been put into the dubious hands of the publishers and the market, meaning that the way someone has been found to be an authentic teacher is by the books she has published, the ads she has run, or the numbers of participants she has drawn to her programs while on tour. But, that ties in with the next criterion....

The third criterion is, *has a strong base of American patronage been established?*

In Asian Buddhist history, this was accomplished by royal patronage, for if the king supported the dharma, the people would as well. Obviously, it is somewhat different in 21st century America, but we need financial support and cultural sympathy in order for the dharma to thrive. How do we do this without a widespread constituency of traditional Buddhist laity and infrastructure of Buddhist institutions? How can dharma teachers and institutions be supported financially?

In the contemporary West, longstanding Christian institutions and clergy have relied on donations, estates, and service for their support, and they have successfully established the infrastructure they need. For our relatively newer Buddhist communities, we are still figuring this out. How do we gather the financial resources to stabilize and grow our work? Some communities have developed weekly gatherings on the Sabbath, building on the traditions of Western religion, and collect donations at that time. The more common model is for dharma teaching to occur in “programs” that charge admission, following the “market” approach of product and consumer. There are perils to this approach that I would like to address, for they jeopardize the integrity of our work.

Many times, new American Buddhist practitioners consider their practice to be an individualized pursuit, without regard for community or institution. Gatherings tend to be informal, often leaderless affairs, in borrowed facilities, sometimes enriched by a visiting teacher. As the decades have passed and personal practice has developed into an American Buddhist lifestyle, we are asking the kinds of questions important for sustaining our tradition. How does our practice influence our livelihoods and family life? How do we marry, raise our children, tend the sick, and die? How do we juggle the demands of daily living with our practice? All of these questions relate to the importance of Buddhist leadership, institutions, and infrastructure. **And all of them come back to patronage—how are we to build the institutions and infrastructure that we need for the dharma to infuse every aspect of our lives.**

There are dangers inherent in following the American “market” model of patronage. The market commodifies everything, and forces us as teachers into product considerations. Our dharma magazines are full of ads promoting programs with catchy titles with studio photographs of us, the beaming dharma teachers, hoping to become famous and attract a lot of students. We dharma teachers try to come up with a unique “product” that can serve as the core of our appeal, and indiscriminately borrow from New Age, psychotherapeutic, and self-help markets to enhance our ancestral dharma teachings. Of course, some of this is probably a skillful adaptation of new methods to make the dharma more accessible and appropriate in an American setting, but I wonder if perhaps this is fueled even more by the neurosis of the market economy. Is our success as dharma teachers determined by the number of students we attract, how much money we make as dharma teachers, how many books we sell? Every few years we need to update our product with new features, so that our workshops will grow in popularity and

size. Of course, it helps to write books, published by trendy presses, that feature our unique product, and now with the internet, we all need websites and blogs to promote our work.

While it is pragmatic for us to utilize new methods to propagate the dharma in an American setting, at what cost do we rely on a “market” approach for patronage? How is the “market” co-opting our judgment as dharma teachers, and jeopardizing our practice, integrity, and vision for the future? The Tibetan tradition speaks of the “*eight worldly concerns*” (Tibetan, *jig rten gyi chos brgyad*; Pali, *atḍtḍhalokadhamma*) that can ruin our practice, and we would do well to think of them. We cannot be strong dharma practitioners if we are motivated by--desires for gain or fear of loss; desires for fame or fear of disgrace; desire for praise or fear of blame; desire for pleasure or fear of pain.^v Participating in the market can elicit all eight of these, making it difficult to keep our motivation pure and steady.

For these reasons, it is important that as American Buddhists we begin collaboratively to identify practical methods of financial support for our teachers, our institutions, and our projects. Rather than taking a competitive approach to funding, is there a way we could form foundations that hold the wider benefit of American Buddhism in mind? For this reason, I laud the Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism for sponsoring conferences like this where such conversations can take place in an environment that considers the entire environment of the sustainability and prosperity of American Buddhism. Patronage is an important chance to communicate something fundamental about the dharma, and it is an acknowledgement of the ordinary practicalities of power, influence, and prestige. Without American patronage, there can be no sustained American Buddhism. What are we doing to ensure the future of the dharma through appropriate patronage?

And the fourth criterion is, *has monastic ordination been fully passed to American monks and nuns?* This category also reflects Buddhism’s Asian history, in which monasteries served as preservers and propagators of the tradition. They were also places where Buddhist ritual life, scholasticism, ethical and theological thinking, and practice transmissions were preserved and fostered from generation to generation. In Asia, where the monastery did not continue, there was no place where dharma could remain powerful outside of the whims and intrigues of cultural and political life. Where the monasteries did not thrive, Buddhism slipped away from prominence.

I join Jan and Bob in supporting the development of monasticism in America—as anyone who has studied Buddhist history would.

- Lofty and inspiring vocations
- Succession issues not influenced by nepotism
- Cleaner financial ethics, training models, etc.

What is the role of the Buddhist monastic institution in America? Some argue that American Buddhism will not have a strong monastic tradition, and while this could lead to vigorous theoretical discussion, I want to be very pragmatic here. Christian monastic institutions in America are disappearing at an alarming rate, and monastic vocations in modern secular societies throughout the world are waning, especially for men. Of course, there will probably always be western monastics in Buddhism, but will they serve as the primary preservers and promoters of stability and strength in American Buddhism?

If monastic life will not be the centerpiece of American Buddhism, we must identify some of the features of traditional monasteries that serve as preservers and innovators of the dharma in the West. I would like to identify three such features, and discuss ways in which they can be found in other Buddhist institutions in America.

1. Education. As I described above, it is wonderful to have developed a tradition of translation in western Buddhism, but who is reading and utilizing these translations in systematic study? Where are the transmissions of lineage teachings being fostered? We need centers of sustained study and practice of Buddhist teachings, centers where appropriate mentorship can occur, and most likely these centers must be outside of the American educational system. The most common such model in the U.S. is the “theological seminary,” where ritual specialists, theologians, ethicists. Currently, most Buddhist lineages are fashioning such centers—Tibetan teachers are creating shedra programs, modeled after the monastic colleges of south and central Asia. For Theravada Buddhism in America, the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies provides support for systematic study of the Pali canon. (Zen?) These centers need our support and attention if Buddhism is to survive through the next century.

2. Practice and ritual training. Thirty-five years ago, when we elders were young dharma students, we committed huge amounts of time to retreats, both group and solitary, and to meditation and ritual training, and still we knew we had just scratched the surface. It is wonderful that our meditation centers are attracting so many new practitioners who wish to become Buddhist. But I witness that many of these practitioners are not willing to sacrifice so much time, effort and money to pursue practice and ritual training. How will these traditions survive? It is possible that the precious transmissions from our Asian teachers could disappear within twenty years.

This is where our Practice Centers need attention, support, and innovation to safeguard their traditions while fostering ways that practice can be more accessible for these new generations.

3. Cultivating mentorship. Because of the individualism and market-driven nature of American life, too often we do not cultivate and rely on mentorship. In my years as a Buddhist practitioner, I find each year a deeper appreciation for my mentors, and how much more I have yet to learn from them. Monastic life is especially endowed with opportunities for longterm relationships with mentors, and so if we do not have the monastery, we need to find ways of sustaining our relationships with mentors, so that we can be sure that we truly, deeply understand the dharma teachings.

Is this depressing information, as my students have feared? No, I truly do not think so. The core teachings of the dharma are about the inherent wakefulness of human beings, which can be accessed by the abandonment of habitual patterns. The way we abandon habitual patterns is through seeing them clearly, and recognizing that we do not have to blindly follow them. The same is true of our Buddhist communities in the west—we have tremendous power and promise as communities of practice. We have the ability to overcome the habitual ways we get caught, and to access the powerful wisdom within.

ⁱ The Pali Text Society (PTS), founded in 1881 by T.W. Rhys Davids "to foster and promote the study of Pali texts." By 1922, when Rhys Davids died, PTS had issued 64 separate texts—most of the Pali canon—in 94 volumes extending over 26,000 pages.

ⁱⁱ *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 4.2 (1981)

ⁱⁱⁱ Founded by Rev. Dr. Yehan Numata, a prominent industrialist and philanthropist, the Numata Center works in close conjunction with Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (BDK) (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism)

^{iv} For more about the Bir project, see.....

^v See the Siddha Naropa's response to Tilopa in Guenther, *The Life and Teachings of Naropa*, 39. These are also called the "eight winds" in Chinese Buddhism, and can be traced back to the earliest teachings of the Buddha.