

# The Spiritual Dilemma of Modernisation

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Buddhist values are deeply rooted in our culture. To most Bhutanese, Buddhism and culture are probably inseparable. But times have changed and there is a somewhat obvious discrepancy between the values of Bhutan's young generation and the values of our forefathers who emphasised devotion to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (དོན་ལྡན་མཚོགས་གསུམ་).

Granted, this applies mainly to modern Bhutanese who are dealing with forces of change that we do not fully understand.

Among several reasons, this discrepancy seems to be caused largely by an inability to understand the significance of, say, devotion (དྲན་པ་). Why must we have devotion? We often get the same answers: “because it will lead you to enlightenment”, or an even more vague, “it is the right thing to do”. Growing up, many of us often hear things like, “if you kill a dog you will be reborn as one”.

Then there is the idea of enlightenment. What does that mean? Is it really possible? We should not accuse our elders for not being able to explain things to us sufficiently. Not only are they less skeptical, it also takes a very wise and skilful person to be able to explain such a profound concept.

In order to dispel many of our misconceptions or misgivings, if any, there is an obvious need to explain concepts such as devotion, or cause and effect. Yet this is not a simple task. There is a certain difficulty when it comes to presenting the Buddha's teachings, and this has to do with the fact that the Buddha's teachings are incredibly vast. Because there are so many teachings and so many ways to understand them, it can sometimes seem like many of these teachings contradict each other.

It is understood that some teachings are long-winded whereas others are direct. The Buddha is understood to have taught in this way to meet the needs of students with different capacities. It is widely accepted by many Buddhist thinkers that there are as many as 84,000 different teachings of the Buddha.

The diversity of the teachings is evident in the many different Buddhist practices. Take, for example, the fairly well known discipline of refraining from meat and alcohol. Broadly speaking, such a practice is understood to be done out of compassion, and I have also heard some say that this is a way to enhance one's meditation. However, there is also the discipline within the Vajrayana tradition that requires the consumption of both meat and alcohol as a profound method to shatter our conceptual constructs of right and wrong.

It is important to note that such Vajrayana practices are also based on a foundation of compassion. But some of these practices are difficult to chew for those of us who are bound by our own moralistic attitudes and expectations. The risk that many of these can be misunderstood and misinterpreted is part of the reason why secrecy is emphasised in the Vajrayana tradition.

Somehow I feel a little uneasy even discussing the Vajrayana, especially since I feel that I am not knowledgeable enough to discuss such practices, let alone practice them. But in this unique situation it is worth at least a mention, since many of us in Bhutan are self-proclaimed Vajrayana Buddhists. In the case of aspiring practitioners in Bhutan who are open-minded and are more inclined towards the Vajrayana, I have no doubt that they will ask the right questions and learn to appreciate the need for the secrecy of the tradition. The secrecy of the Vajrayana is actually indispensable and, in order to preserve and maintain our tradition, its secrecy has to be observed and appreciated.

Ironically, such secrecy might prove to be the very reason that Buddhism could be on the decline in our country. As necessary as it may be, the secrecy of the Vajrayana has proven to be a difficulty for many of us in Bhutan who are not devotionally inclined. We are now asking more questions and the explanations we are given are not satisfactory. All we seem to hear are what sound like hasty generalisations that have come to function more like outdated platitudes rather than relevant sources of wisdom.

What many of our educated youth in particular seem to take away from this is a sense of blindness. And rightfully so. Such skepticism is probably justifiable, considering the fact that the Buddha himself encouraged us to question his teachings before accepting them. Yet many conversations I have had have led me to believe that there is often a blindness to our scepticism. Many people seem to be sceptical for the sake of being sceptical. Is our cynicism simply a dismissal of the old as being outdated? Or is it the progressive constructive type of doubt accompanied by a genuine openness to learning?

It would seem that all we see are the ritualistic aspects of our tradition. Not only does this make our tradition seem obscure and difficult to understand for our young people, it has actually become quite distasteful to many. Having spoken to a number of fellow Bhutanese, I get the sense that many of us are stuck with the impression that our tradition is purely ritualistic. As it happens, it is a distinctive custom of our tradition that sitting meditation is not traditionally taught until one has gone through certain preliminary practices.

Would it be helpful to teach some basic meditation without requiring the arduous effort of going through 100,000 prostrations and what not? Perhaps. Many people that I have spoken to recently have expressed an interest in meditation. But based on what I have heard, it sounds as though they would prefer to strip away the ritualistic aspects of our tradition, and instead engage in “pure” unmediated meditation, whatever that means. So it is clear that many harbour the notion that this is possible.

Evidently, some people believe that our tradition does not teach simple meditation. In fact the interest in meditation seems to be strong enough that people go abroad and participate in short meditation retreats hosted by foreign teachers, such as the G.D Goenka Vipasana retreats held in India and Nepal. This points to the unfortunate assumption that our tradition is ritualistic and does not involve meditation. Not to say that we should not go and learn from them. As followers of the Buddha, of course we should acknowledge and practice authentic Buddhist teachings from other traditions. Yet, the fact that our traditional religiosity has left so many of us jaded is worrisome. And to think that all of this is simply due to an unfortunate lack of understanding.

But what is it about modern Bhutan that has resulted in this lack of understanding? To even begin answering this question, perhaps it is necessary to address the broader question: what is modernisation? This might help us understand the implications of modernisation on Buddhism in Bhutan.

Firstly, though it may be impertinent to equate modernisation with westernisation, I have decided to use the terms interchangeably. After all, the process of modernisation in Bhutan has by and large been influenced by a “western education” of sorts. It is no secret that our process of modernisation in Bhutan is very much a consequence of a form of “western education”, a system that continues to mould our nation. While there are an increasing number of students actually studying in the west, the vast majority of us have come through our own education system and have undoubtedly been influenced by it.

Although we have never been colonised, modern Bhutan has been and continues to be shaped by an education system that is fundamentally a colonial residue that we adopted via India. This is in no way intended to be a criticism of our education system. At least not by design. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the strengths and shortcomings of our education system. The point is that even educated Bhutanese who have not left the country have, in some way, been exposed to western influence. Given the broad implications of the terms “modernised” and “westernised”, I thought it would be important to explain these terms because it occurred to me that my use of the term “western education” might be read as a criticism of modernisation as a whole which would be quite tactless on my part.

However, at the risk of being too outspoken, I wish to address a particular assumption that seems to be a consequence of our modern education. It would seem that something about our education has instilled in us the arrogance of thinking that, as “rational” thinkers—who may sometimes claim to be “non believers”—we are less blind than our “religious colleagues”. The very use of the term “religious” seems to imply some kind of blindness.

In my limited study of Buddhism I have come to learn that Buddhist thinking is not so naive. Buddhist philosophy is vast and there are extensive commentaries and teachings on logic and the limitations of logic. Much of Buddhist philosophy deals with perception and, broadly speaking, the study of logic deals with how we perceive things. But not only am I not learned enough to get into the details of Buddhist thinking, it is beyond the purposes of this paper to get into the minutiae of Buddhist philosophy. Perhaps it is sufficient to quote Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, who often emphasises that there is no such thing as a non-believer: one’s reason for not believing in something is, ironically, because that person blindly believes in his reason for not believing.

To dismiss Buddhist thinking as illogical would be incredibly shortsighted. Those who are able to appreciate the sound reasoning of Buddhist philosophy are slowly introduced to the notion that Buddhism is not just about logic. It is beyond the mind-made duality of logical and illogical. A more traditional way to express this is to say that the truth is beyond both extremes. But then again, such an expression is risky, seeing as such statements are easily dismissed as vague generalisations when introduced without proper context. Such a statement is not a simple answer that Buddhists use to conveniently refute logic. It is an understanding that comes from intensive study that involves analysing and deconstructing our conventional logic.

While the extent to which our Buddhist institutions may have changed over time is unclear, it is quite obvious that our way of understanding these establishments has changed. It is not so much that Buddhism in Bhutan has changed. In fact, one might say that our Buddhist institutions and traditions have remained largely intact, thanks to our efforts to preserve them. However, how we understand Buddhism has changed. Unfortunately, as we have become more learned in the ways of science and literature, it seems that there is a lack of knowledge of our own Buddhist tradition.

It is quite clear to me that the feeling of alienation from our tradition is due to a lack of understanding. So what can be done about this? For those of us who are concerned that this a problem, it is an important question to consider. In this day and age, the need to have a theoretical understanding of Buddhism is becoming increasingly clear. Having a good understanding, or the “correct view”, is strongly emphasised by many teachers and establishing this view is the whole point of Buddhist study.

Devotion is actually based on a very broad understanding. In fact, having the “right view” is almost synonymous with having devotion. Simply put, devotion is understanding and trust. According to many Buddhist masters, having certainty in the infallible and unpredictable truth of *karma* is the very essence of devotion. Many masters describe a process of hearing, contemplation and meditation that supposedly gives rise to a genuine trust in cause and effect (ལས་རྒྱ་འབྲས་). It is important for us to understand that devotion is much more than the touchy-feely, tear-jerking, feel good stuff that we might see on the surface. Without a deeper understanding, there is a very real danger that our own people will come to see our tradition as a cult and our *Lamas* as cult leaders.

If more of us are willing to try and understand Buddhism on a deeper level we might discover that the question of old versus new applies more to culture than Buddhism. In other words, culture and Buddhism, while profoundly connected, are not inseparable. I fear that we are losing Buddhism to culture as our profound rituals now function as more of a spectacle than a means to enlightenment. If we genuinely care about the future of both our country and Buddhism, I feel it is imperative that we try to understand how to differentiate Buddhism from culture. Only then can we start working on how to preserve both.