

Teaching Tibetan Buddhism in the West

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An interview with James Low conducted by Andreas Ruft is published in the 2023/2 edition of Buddhism in the West under the heading Buddhism in the West .

More intimacy and democracy

After many years of training in India, James Low has been teaching Tibetan Buddhism of the Dzogchen tradition in the West since 1980. During a visit to Germany, his student Andreas Ruft was able to conduct an interview with him.

Andreas Ruft: *Why is Buddhism of particular importance for western people and our western culture?*

James Low: The materialistic view that prevails in the west reduces the world and us to the interaction of atoms and molecules. So many people believe that the mind is merely a by-product of the electrochemical activity in the brain. But where should we awaken if it were so? If the cause of myself is something with which I have no direct contact, I am but a shadowy entity brought forth by a mindless spirit, the organic brain.

However, our lived experience tells us something very different: it is very complex and subtle. Just look at our daily experiences, the taste of the tea, how the sky appears early in the morning and late at night, or what our friends look like. Do they seem happy or sad? How does their posture and breathing change when their emotions change? The more we are connected to such nuances of emotional expression, the more we perceive how this affects us, how it changes us, how our new feeling, our new expression then influences others, the more we perceive this complexity. But all this is only revealed to us when our mind is calm and clear. And that brings us to the importance of the basic Buddhist meditation practices of *shamatha* (tranquility) and *vipassana* (insight).



Do western people have to bring something with them or be able to open up in a special way in order to be receptive to the Buddha's teachings?

It is very difficult for people who are heavily projected to see that they are an interactive part of the processes in their lives. We are surrounded by so many projection offerings. "Our economy isn't thriving because we have too many immigrants. That's why we have to get rid of the

immigrants." Such phrases persuade people who think they belong to the good guys, while others cause the problems. We see this in the rise of the far right in the US. Donald Trump's slogan for his supporters is: "We are the good people making America great again." The others are ruining the country." He is trying to undermine people's ability to think complexly. On the one hand, slogans make us blind to complexity, on the other hand, we feel strong and clear, because we know exactly what is right and wrong. This has the effect of self-poisoning, making it very difficult to develop insight.

Developing insight takes work.

A lot of work! I have to look closely and examine my own structures, which eventually leads me to wisdom. Also, I need to actually get to know other people and myself and look at the complex nature of life. This leads me into the realm of compassion.

As a Western teacher, do you teach Buddhism differently than Tibetan teachers?

A hundred years ago, here in the West, teachers were allowed to hit and yell at their students. At university, they sat at a high desk in a robe, feeling superior and looking down on their students. In the meantime, the hierarchies have become much flatter. Teachers try to work collaboratively with the class and encourage them to take responsibility for their learning, not just cramming facts, but forming opinions in order to be able to argue based on beliefs. The teacher has evolved from boss to moderator. He sees it as his task to promote the development and maturation of young people.

In Tibetan culture, when I sit on a high throne as a lama, it means a lot. The number of pillows symbolizes how I master the *yanas*, the paths of spiritual attainment. My golden bell, my high throne, the expensive Chinese teacup are signs of my power and importance. My power is both worldly and spiritual, and the interaction of both levels creates an atmosphere of trust and confidence for others.

Not many people in the West are interested in this kind of patriarchal structure, even as a teacher. The culture that surrounds you must confirm your superior qualities, but our culture no longer accords religious people much status. Today, when people see a pastor in the street, they no longer bow to him, but rush past; they do not care. Such deference has become alien to us in the West and I find that positive. Why? Because it creates greater intimacy between teachers and learners. Students can be sure that one day they too will be able to go where their

teachers are now, if they help them overcome some more obstacles along the way. This rather egalitarian democratic and friendly cooperation I find to be something positive, as long as we are clear about it: We are not a circle of friends or a social club, but we come together to develop wisdom and compassion.

Are there cultural barriers that make it difficult to transmit Buddhism in the West?

We cannot simply pass on the tradition as we did in previous centuries, but today we face the challenge of answering the question: How can Buddhist ideas and practices lead to greater equality, more connectedness and freedom for people on the Dharma path? For example, many Western Buddhist women today have a clear feminist stance. They're tired of all *the mansplaining* - men who sit in front and explain the world.

Unfortunately, once we project projections onto powerful people, be they kings, company bosses, or even lamas, they are difficult to dissipate. The British royal family is infinitely rich, yet the state continues to pay for it. The injustice of the system is right under our noses, yet most are blind to it. Likewise, many lamas use their power to earn lots of money, exploit women, and build huge palaces or monasteries. They do not ask whether palaces or monasteries are really the best way to help sentient beings. They do this for their own sense of identity.

So we must also ask difficult questions of tradition and resolve our projections. Which illusions are particularly common among western students?

The illusion of being immortal. Of course, on a conceptual level, they know they have to die, but they pretend they don't have to. In this way, death becomes something theoretical. After all, most of us are reasonably healthy now, and if not, medical help is available. 70 is the new 60, we strive for a forever fulfilling life, and medicine also predicts that we will be healthy longer than people in previous decades. All this leads to an eternity thinking, an eternity culture. However, the Dharma teachings urge us to be aware of our mortality on a daily basis and to prepare thoroughly for death. How important this is most people don't realize until they are very old.

Another common illusion among Western students is that they have easy access to all knowledge – via the internet, books – and can use it to find their own way, and that they do not need a teacher. You say to yourself, "I'm an adult and I'm tired of being told what to do."

When we put this together with the other illusion, the belief in eternity, we see the importance of a creative fear of dying and death. Because the six realms of samsara are pretty scary. I'll be

reborn, but I don't know where. For a good rebirth in which I can continue to practice the Dharma, I need help; I need a clear path, a teacher to help me. Many people do not know this kind of humility. They place a false belief in their supposed ability to find their own way. What they do looks like freedom, joy, self-confidence - but in fact it masks and represses a fundamental existential fear of serious open questions: Who am I? How am I supposed to live? What is love?

The topic of reincarnation has always raised doubts in me, as it probably does for many western people. But when I hear that now, I understand that we in the West lack long-term thinking. Maybe we should at least pretend to be born again. Or we should remember that our children will live on after us. How do you see it: Is belief in a next life a prerequisite for becoming a Buddhist?

Belief in reincarnation is not necessary if you simply want to use the Dharma teachings to become a better person. Then you develop more patience and diligence, become more reflective and compassionate towards others. But if you want to awaken to mind itself as it is - not the ephemeral content of mind, but mind that never changes, is infinite, has no beginning or end, unborn - then you cannot if you simultaneously have the idea, "When I die, my mind dies, and that's it." If you have the idea of a finite mind whose duration is limited to this one lifetime, then the nondual traditions of mahamudra and dzogchen will remain impenetrable to you.

How can we overcome our illusions?

You have to gain at least some clarity about the fact that everything you experience is not a separate thing and process. There is no real observer observing real things, but rather complex patterns of experience that can *appear* subjective and object-like .

If I think I'm my self, my sense of self, my ego construct - then that doesn't last. It will surely end in my death. The ego pattern ends at death, but then a new pattern forms and emerges. So I can relax because I'm being held in the hand of the Buddha. I don't have to pull myself together because the emptiness won't let me fall, it will support me. But we have to trust it.

The Walt Disney film Dumbo the Flying Elephant was made in the 1940s. Dumbo leads a sad life as a laughing stock in a circus. He would like to fly but doesn't know how to do it. He tries to wag his ears vigorously, but he keeps falling. Finally, his friends give him a "magic feather" and with that he suddenly relaxes - his ears flap faster and he flies.

When you let go of your fear, you can realize the qualities and potentials that were already within you. Sometimes children are very afraid of water and find it difficult to learn to swim. You have to support them until they become comfortable with the water, then they relax. As I fight the water and throw my arms around, I will become more and more anxious and exhausted. But I can learn to work with the water. Then I have the experience: if I am kind to the water, the water is kind to me.

It's the same with emptiness: if you fear and fight emptiness because you see it as annihilation and extinction, you become more and more afraid. You contract and solidify instead of relaxing into openness. As you learn to relax into emptiness, you begin to feel that emptiness will carry you.

In the second part of the interview, which will appear in the upcoming issue, James Low deepens his reflections on consciousness.