

How To Listen To Dharma

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How To Listen To Dharma

It is a long time—more than 2500 years—since the Buddha preached his first sermon at the Deer Park near Benares, and yet his message, the Dharma, has lost nothing of its original vigour and life-giving power. On the contrary, it has attracted and influenced most of the finest thinkers of the modern world, and the Buddha Himself has in spirit, if not entirely in name, won the hearts of more of the earth's inhabitants than any other religious leader. He has won this allegiance by tolerance, and his message is first of all a message of peace, of peace with ourselves and with our fellow-beings. Therefore it may be concluded that the growing interest in Buddhism might be something like a guarantee that fighting, war-mongering, and all those useless and silly tensions with which we make our own lives, as well as those of others, unhappy, will be stopped once and for ever. However, this is surely a vain hope. But can the Dharma be blamed for this shortcoming? Certainly not. The reason that peace does not come to us or to others is so simple that it is overlooked because of this simplicity. Mere listening to the Dharma will not help much, nor does a superficial attraction lead to great results. The attraction only shows that there is something in the Buddhist Dharma which the modern world needs and that people are dimly aware of this fact. This something is scientifically speaking, the phenomenological approach¹ to life and its problems, which in the course of its study, leads to definite knowledge, and the abhorrence of theological dogmas which obfuscate mind, make it believe that there is knowledge where in reality there is utter ignorance. But to have a superficial acquaintance with Buddhist tenets is not enough. In order to understand the Buddha's message intense concentration is needed for which most people have, admittedly, neither time nor strength. But unless we take time to reflect, we shall remain divided against ourselves and continue to oppress others, and unless we listen properly to the Dharma and its meaning we remain defective. This the Buddhist texts stated by way of various similes. In the following I shall give a translation of a 'significant passage for the proper way of listening to the Dharma from a Tibetan handbook for the study of Buddhism called the *Rdzogs. pa. chen. po. klod, chen. snim. thig. gi. snon. 'groi. khrid. yig, kun bzan, bla mai. zal. lun* bearing the Sanskritized subtitle *Samanta-bhadraguror mukhagamana-maha-sandhi-mahadhatu-citta-tilakasya purvagatinam nayakam varnna viharati sma:*

“Three defects comparable with those of a pot are: not to listen is the defect of a pot turned upside down; not to bear in mind what one has heard is the defect of a pot with a leaky bottom; to be affected by emotional instabilities is the defect of a poisonous pot.

“The first simile means: When one listens to the explanation of the Dharma one must listen to the voice of him who explains the Dharma, without allowing the ear to stray to some other sound. When one does not listen in such a way, what happens is like juice being poured on a pot with its opening turned down, and though one's body is present in the teaching room, one actually does not hear a single word of the Dharma.

“The second simile means: When one does not bear in mind the Dharma which one is going to hear, though the words have reached our ears, what happens is like juice being poured into a pot with a leaky bottom—however much one may pour into it, nothing will remain there; and however much of the Dharma one may have heard, one does not know how to instil it into one's mind and how to take it to heart.

“The third simile means: When one hears the explanation of the Dharma, but listens to it while one is concerned with thoughts about a worldly life and the desire for fame or with

¹ That is, seeing things as phenomena, as conditioned processes, and not as substances or entities. (Ed.)

thoughts tainted by the five poisons of indolence, frivolity, distrust, lassitude, and sluggishness, due to the three emotionally disturbing factors of addictedness, aversion, and dullness. Not only will the Dharma not become beneficial to oneself, it will even turn into its opposite, and this is like healthy and nourishing juice being poured into a poisonous pot.

“Therefore the saints of India said:

‘When one listens to the Dharma one must be like deer listening to the sound of music. When one thinks about it one must be like a man from the north shearing sheep. When one makes it a living experience one must be like a man getting drunk. When one establishes its validity one must be like a Yak eating grass hungrily. When one comes to possess the fruit of the Dharma one must be like the sun free from clouds’.

‘When one hears the explanation of the Dharma, like deer enamoured of the sound of the lute and, though shot by a stray hunter with a poisoned arrow, unable to understand or to fathom what has happened, one must listen to the Dharma with the hairs on one’s body rising with joy, with eyes filled with tears, with hands folded, and not being distracted by other thoughts. But when one’s mind is running after its own constructions, when the doors are opened to idle talk, when the mouth gets busy and the eyes roam hither and thither, although one’s body is present in the teaching room, then the listener should at this moment, since such conduct of his is improper, devotedly memorise and count the beads of his rosary. When he listens in this way, he will bear in mind the meaning that is explained, and having made it unforgettable, he will constantly take it to heart. The great Sakyamuni also said:

Although I showed you the means of liberation, You must know that liberation depends upon yourselves.

“Since the teacher who explains the Dharma to the disciple, teaches him the way how to listen properly, how to renounce evil, how to acquire the good and wholesome, and how to take the teaching to heart, the disciple, on the other hand, must bear the teaching unforgettably in his mind and take it to heart and realise it. But if he does not bear it in mind, then, although there may be the mere benefit of listening to the Dharma, because of not understanding a trifle of the meaning of the words of the Dharma there is no difference from not hearing the Dharma at all.

“If one is affected by emotional instabilities, though one bears in mind the teaching, the Dharma does not become pure and effective. As has been said by the incomparable Dvags. po. Iha. rje:

If one does not practise the Dharma as it should be done, The Dharma creates the condition for falling into evil existences.

“Thus he who has unwholesome thoughts such as erroneous conceptions about the Guru and the Dharma, who abuses his friends who do not put any obstacles in his way, and who shows arrogance and contempt, must renounce these unwholesome traits, since they create the condition for evil existences.”

This short account contains also those factors which made Buddhism a cultural and spiritual force: to listen to it, to think about it, and to embody it in one’s life. To embody it in one’s life is the secret of peace and happiness for us and for all others.