

What is it to be a Buddhist?

BY Lew Lancaster

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Professor Lewis R. Lancaster started his teaching career at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1967. After his first lecture, in which he gave a summary of the plan for the course on the "History and Development of Buddhism," it dawned on him that he had told the class everything he knew about the topic. In a panic, he had to try to think of what to say for the next ten weeks. He is still trying to think about it in this, his last lecture, thirty-three years later.

MANY PEOPLE HERE IN AMERICA have become involved with Buddhism as, I suppose we could say, converts. Those converts include both Rick Fields' so-called "white Buddhists" as well as what I can call "new Buddhists" among the Chinese and Korean communities who did not grow up as Buddhists, but who have in more recent years become part of it. All of these people have the same issues: What is it to be a Buddhist? How do you act? How can you answer the challenge of Sylvia Boorstein's book *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist*—that is, what does a Buddhist look like? This question is not new to Buddhism.

One of the best ways to make yourself visible is to be different. For monastic Buddhists there has been the shaved head and the robes—these things set them apart, so they were quite visible. Monastics function almost like images or icons of Buddhists. People bow to them and revere them in much the same way that they would an image of a Buddha.

What, then, about a layperson? A layperson looks like everybody else. Therefore, the question for a lot of the "new Buddhists" (non-monastics) is about what it means to be a Buddhist and the behavior of someone who calls himself or herself a Buddhist.

Jack Kerouac's answer was to be a dharma bum. Being a dharma bum meant that you did not enter into a society that engaged in mass purchasing and consumerism. All you asked of a dharma bum was that he or she not settle for playing the establishment game. To be a Buddhist was to step aside from the mainstream of society. But that was not the definition for

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all Buddhists. The long-standing community of Japanese Jodo-Shin-shu (Pure Land School) Buddhists did not step aside from the mainstream of American life. They were firmly placed within it. Most of them became middle class and adopted middle-class values. And they did not in any sense feel that that made them any less Buddhist. The interpretation of what it is to be a Buddhist was quite varied in this country, always has been and perhaps will be in the future.

A great Tibetan lama once said, "Renunciation is the foot of meditation." Renunciation is the basis of meditation. As a society, we are not really very involved with renunciation. Must we renounce the body? Must we renounce sexuality? Must we be somehow otherworldly? If you ask the lamas about renunciation, they will immediately assure you that most Buddhists in the world have not rejected their bodies, have not rejected sexuality and are definitely not otherworldly. You can ask them what we are to renounce and they will answer that we have to renounce our hopes and our dreams for permanence.

We all hope for permanence. About ten years ago, I built a house directly on top of the San Andreas fault. I listened to authorities advise, "You will have to do this and that to make sure it will last when the big shake comes." Eventually one of the builders said, "You know, they don't know anything. This whole thing could fall to the ground. I'm happy to build it for you, but I can't guarantee that it's going to stand here forever. In fact, I very much doubt that it will." Ever since then I have thought, "I had better enjoy this place, because there is not much security." Whenever it starts to shake, I think, "This is it!"

Renunciation is something that has not always been practiced by all Buddhists everywhere and in every place. What I was talking about was an example of a particular kind of teaching from a Tibetan lama who was describing renunciation as the basis for meditation. If you want to practice the form of meditation that he teaches, you must give up the fond notion that you live in a secure, permanent and potentially easeful environment. That is one teaching.

People say, "I am looking for a fantastic community that I will find to be a matrix for enlightenment." And basically what they find is a group of people.

How does one "belong" to this tradition? Some people have never joined it because they were born to it. If you ask somebody in Thailand, "When did you become a Buddhist?" they look at you in a very peculiar way because the question has never even arisen in their mind. From their earliest memories, they have been a Buddhist. But what is it to join? Converts have taken a very deliberate step some time in their life to join a Buddhist practice or group. No one has the authority to say that to be a Buddhist you must agree to a list of beliefs and practices they have drawn up. You may be asked if you would like to take a voluntary vow or to take refuge. But what does it mean to take refuge—in the Buddha, the dharma, the sangha? Buddhists have some vague ideas, but what is it to join a religion if there is no club, no uniform, no distinctive color to wear?

People try to mark themselves as religious by wearing crosses, yin-yang symbols, the star of David or the crescent of Islam. In Buddhism, traditionally, you could wear prayer beads. To be a religious person is somehow to make a statement, "I am thus, and you can see that I am by this mark."

How do you define the sangha? It is a community. But what kind of community is it? If I go to the San Francisco Zen Center I will find one kind of community. If I go to the Thai temple in Berkeley I will find another. If I go to the Buddhist Churches of America on Channing Way, I am going to find another. If I go to the Nyingma Institute I will find yet another type of community.

All of these communities look quite different. In some cases they are almost like a club. That is, you join and pay membership dues. In Buddhist Churches of America you make a payment in an amount that the church specifies. At San Francisco Zen Center, you know you are part of it if you become a voting member. When can you make decisions on the community? When can you vote? These are crucial issues.

If we ask the Tibetan lamas, "What is the Buddhist sangha? What is the Buddhist community?" their answer is that a community is a matrix of enlightenment. If it does not have a matrix that produces enlightenment, then it is not a Buddhist community.

"How do you make a matrix for enlightenment?" you may well ask. Is it practice? Meditation? Retreats? Lectures? Reading and study? People say, "I am looking for a fantastic community that I will find to be a matrix for enlightenment." And basically what they find is a group of people. All the issues that we have in society in general are always going to play themselves out. You can never totally escape from that.

Buddhists have always had trouble answering the question, "If I am going to live as a Buddhist, what do I do about my family?" If you are a Buddhist monastic (except in Japan), you 'leave home'. That means you go to a totally different community, you change your name, and you have no further social obligations to your nuclear family. East Asian culture has always resented and looked down on Buddhism because of this. For many people in East Asia, the family is the primary unit, particularly from the Confucian point of view; therefore to turn one's back on the family is to deny the essential element holding together the fabric of society. From their perspective, this is an extremely destructive thing to do.

The world in which we live today is a global environment. We have never before had to live this way. I am amazed at the places from which I receive e-mail. I received an e-mail message from Pokhra in Nepal. I remember trying to reach that very remote place by road. The road completely washes away every year in about eighteen places and has to be rebuilt. Now I can contact Pokhra over the Internet and not have to worry about the washed-out road.

Globalism says something on which Buddhists can agree: The nuclear family is not the basis for Buddhism. Buddhists say that the issue for us in life is to figure out how to live as human beings in a global environment, how to transfer merit to all sentient beings. That is really the challenge of our present time: how much to focus on a family as opposed to those outside. I grew up in an environment in Virginia where things were very localized. My wife is from Los Angeles. When I first took her back to Virginia, she went to buy gasoline at the little store near where I used to go camping in the mountains. She sat, and she waited and waited, and nobody came. Finally, she went in the store, and they were all sitting there chatting away. She asked, "Can I have some gas?" They thought about it and looked her over, and then one of them asked, "Are you Lew's wife?" She said yes. "Oh well! We didn't know who you were! Sure you can have gas."

Localism says, "I have no real obligations to people who are outside. If I don't know them, what obligation should I have to them?" That is true around the world, to a certain degree. It is certainly true in Japan. You must be introduced to somebody before they really have an obligation to you. If you go to Japan and try to get by without an introduction, you will have a great deal of trouble, because people will not quite know what to do with you.

Even though Japan has been very Buddhist, when you begin to talk about an obligation to the entire world, it is a very different matter. I run into this all the time, because I have been trying to make the Buddhist canon freely available to people online. I have gone to several people in Japan to ask them to let me use their data: "There's no reason for somebody else to go to all that effort. Will you allow us to put the data online?" The answer on many occasions has been, "I don't mind having friends read it, but strangers . . ." Where the obligation starts and stops is important to every culture.

So ask yourself: "To whom do I have a real obligation?" To your family? To friends? When Buddhists talk about an obligation to all beings, it is a big issue. It is not just in Virginia, not just in Japan. It is an enormous concept to think that to be a Buddhist is to have an obligation that extends to all beings. It is difficult for all of us. We may think, "I can't take on the whole world. It's too big. I can't take on all the creatures of the world. There are too many."

These considerations arise when people ask "What is it to be a Buddhist?" Sometimes people have felt that to be a Buddhist means that you own the tradition. You are the one who can say what it is. This is one of the most difficult problems in the Buddhist tradition, or with any religious tradition. The Buddhist tradition has never really had an idea of ownership of the tradition itself. At the end of his long life of teaching, Buddha said,

"The bathtub" is a very familiar landmark for those who frequently travel the dirt road from Jamesburg to Tassajara.



CHRIS HONFSEIT



Shosan Victoria Austin, who most recently served as head of practice at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, is the new president of Zen Center.

in essence, that you will have to figure out what your path is going to be. "You will have to work at it, and it's not going to be something that I can just tell you. The dharma, the teaching, is not owned by anybody."

Buddhism has been able to spread because there was no idea that it could be owned even by a language. Certain religious languages depend on a sacred language.

Only that language can express that religious tradition. Buddha said, "If it's true, it ought to be able to be expressed in any language, in any place, at any time."

If you start looking at Buddhism from a social or cultural point of view, I can tell you that any statement made to the effect that "This is Buddhism" should cause you to worry a little bit. As a teacher of a class that purports to teach a definition of religion, I have this worry. The very moment that you make a definitive statement about normative Buddhism, you will discover a group or a tradition that teaches something quite different from your assertion. Because there is no ownership it is very difficult for me to imagine a Buddhist group or community that would attack another one for their beliefs. It is not something the doctrine or practices would support. Of course, people are people.

The tradition itself says that anything that we say, even as we say it, is not permanent. I have to say that working with computers has been very good for me in this respect. Before I started working on the database for the Korean canon, I had an idea that there were permanent solutions to the technological problems involved. I thought I could find a way to do something that would always work. And then I came up against the computer, where every answer is absolutely temporary.

When I started out in my graduate studies in Buddhism, the university faculty gave me a list of a hundred books that provided the basic knowledge needed for higher education in the field. This was based on the model of the University of Chicago which trained students by defining a canon of one hundred classics of Western civilization. If you read the hundred great books, you would know everything. I read those hundred books and I thought, "Now I'm educated. I'm ready to take my orals and go on to teach." Today, my poor grad students come to me and say, "What should I read?" I have to ask, "What are you interested in?" If I gave them a list of all the Buddhist books that are good, it would be so long that they probably would not have enough time in their whole life to read them all. I asked one grad student, "How about giving everybody a copy of your dissertation bibliography?" There was this great pause. He said, "Well, it's two hundred and seventy-three pages."

That is the world in which we live! Information is increasing far beyond our ability to memorize or control it. Technology that allows this growth of knowledge shifts and changes every year, so that what one learned last year is no longer valid. Who knows what the future holds with such developments in progress as the quantum computer?

I believe that the ancient Buddhist system can still function well in this contemporary world. In other words, that old message that was posited in India is still functioning, which was, "If you have a fond hope in permanence, forget it." World wars and holocausts and all the things that have happened over the centuries indicate how insecure it is for us as humans. We have a lot of trouble being able to find spiritual ease.

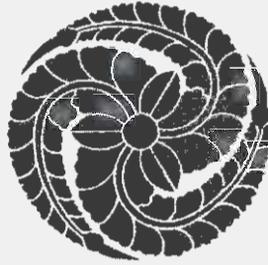
I started out today asking, "What does a Buddhist look like?" Actually, nobody looks Buddhist. That is probably the best answer. Or better yet, "like all beings and all humans," since there is no way you can say that this one looks like a Buddhist and this one does not.

For many people who come to Buddhism, the question is more particularly, "How does a Buddhist act?" Do I live like a dharma bum, believing in some form of renunciation and not using up the things of this world? I would have to give up shopping. Do I have to be a vegetarian and give up meat? Do I have to become a monk or a nun and go into a life of renunciation in that sense?

A frustrating thing, to some people, about the Buddhist tradition is that, at every level, whenever we define it, we have already lost it. It is like the permanent solution in the computer world—it is never there. The minute we have something, all we have is that thing, not the ultimate expression.

I ask myself how people can know that they are Buddhists. The one thing that all forms of Buddhism hold as the highest ideal, in every tradition, is compassion. That seems to be as close to a universal answer as I

*This is the crest of Rinso-in,
Suzuki-roshi's temple in
Japan, where his son Hoitsu
Suzuki is now the abbot.*



can find. Buddhists, when they talk about compassion, say that if you are enlightened, you will have a deeper response to the suffering of others. If insights do not lead to compassion then it is not what the Buddha experienced at his enlightenment.

This view makes an enormous difference. Most of the Buddhist teachers I have heard have always focused on this level. I told you the story about Suzuki-roshi making the vegetarian eat a Big Mac. Why did he do it? Compassion. What was the compassion? This student had become so fixated on his vegetarianism that he was no longer able to understand that vegetarianism is just a decision. If one becomes fixed on an idea and a concept, then the teachings indicate that there is a serious problem.

The first time I ever went to a Buddhist meditation sesshin, a monk came in and kicked one of the people who was meditating. I was really shocked by this. But the monk acted with compassion. The student really needed that kick. He was not doing it right. He thought he had it. He needed to be jarred out of his old patterns. Get over it! Move on.

How do you know whether what you are doing is compassion? It is a difficult thing. As a parent, I can say that it is extremely difficult to know how to be compassionate to your children. If you think it is exclusively to be kind and sweet to them, that will prove not to be the case. There comes that moment when you have to be honest. It is very hard for parents to be honest. At least it was for me. But compassion means saying, "Here's what I think. I don't blame you, but I believe thus."

If I must judge a Buddhist group poorly, it is when I see a lack of compassion within it. Any time a group starts arming itself, organizing a defense, building a fort, and getting ready to kill in order to defend itself, that is not a Buddhist group. It utterly lacks compassion. It is acting in self-preservation, maybe, but compassion is something else.

Buddhism is a complex tradition; it is a religion that allows for an enormous variety of practices. At the same time, it says, "Don't think that it's permanent. Don't think that it's the only thing that you can do. Don't think that it makes you any more a Buddhist than anybody else. Don't

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think that it always creates ease and a happy experience for you. Don't think that it will give you the security of knowing."

The Three Refuges are in the Buddha, the community, and the teaching. In the world, which is suffering and troubled and is on fire and filled with hindrance, refuge is taken in the Buddha as a teacher and a founder. But you also have to take refuge in the community of people who are involved with Buddhism. You cannot really do it without other people. A lot of people think that in Buddhism you can become a hermit. Buddhist texts say that if you become a hermit, you will get something that is very good, but you will not get it all. The community is crucial. And the other refuge is the teaching. This refuge means that the teaching ought to be about the nature of reality and of our experience.

At this university there has been your experience as a student and mine as a professor. I hope that you have learned that I do not have all the answers. People who have an idea that teaching means simply to impart content are mistaken. I know you can learn, but I have not the slightest idea of what any of you learned from me. I will never know, after thirty-three years of teaching. All those classes! All those hundreds of students! I am shocked sometimes when someone tells me what they have learned in my class. I look at them and I say, "Wow! I didn't know that I had taught that!" It amazes me. But most traditions recognize that without a teacher the potential for going wrong is very high. Therefore, if you see somebody who has what you want, then you should get him or her to teach you how they did it! Buddha himself failed to find a teacher! He said, "I looked and looked, but nobody could teach me. So I finally had to teach myself." But he only did that after a long period of being trained by a number of teachers. Finally he sat under the tree of enlightenment and said, "Okay, I'm going to sit here until I get it." Not having a teacher is what a buddha ultimately says.

In Buddhism, even though teachers may endorse certain practices and help students along, I doubt that accomplished teachers ever feel that what happens to the student is something they caused. They recognize that it is

what the student has done. Maybe they helped them take a certain path. It is very hard to know what happens to another person.

Yet I come to the end of my teaching career with the firm belief that a teacher is important. Suppose you had never seen a computer before and you decide to teach yourself how to use it. How would you teach yourself even what the control key is? That key changes the way every other key functions. Even that would be an incredible discovery if nobody told you how it works. And how would you find out what each of the other keys do? You could eventually do it, but think how long it would take compared to even a half-hour lesson on the ABCs of using a computer. That is what a teacher ought to do—move you so you can do something faster and more efficiently.

I do not have the knowledge that any of you has. When you enter the university, you know things that no professor knows. Each of you in a way is better trained than I am, because you are being taught things that nobody ever taught me. With education, each generation surpasses the one before it. I can research something for two years, yet in two minutes I could tell grad students the gist of what I have found. If they want to work with me, I can tell them, "You might as well accept that this is so. Based on my work, this is what you are going to find. So now, go on from there." I hope I saved them some time, maybe two years. They know what I know, and will eventually know much more than I do. I think that is what teachers do in religious practice as well.

Thank you for being here today to share with me my final official lecture.

Senior Dharma Teacher Reb Anderson's long-awaited book about the precepts is now available in Zen Center bookstores.

