

A Selection of Texts from Sangharakshita

Why I am a Buddhist

Some people say that Buddhism is just an Eastern religion. This is what some Christians in the West say. They say that because Buddhism is an Eastern religion it cannot be understood and practised by people in the West. Such Christians forget that Christianity itself is of Eastern origin.

But Buddhism is, in fact, not an Eastern religion. It is a universal religion. Even though Buddhism originated in India, it spread over the whole earth. Buddhism can be understood and practised anywhere in the world, because Buddhism addresses itself to the individual human being regardless of race, nationality, caste, sex, or age. Buddhism is, therefore, the religion of man.

This is one of the reasons why I am a Buddhist. I believe that humanity is basically one. I believe that it is possible for any human being to communicate with any other human being, to feel for any other human being, to be friends with any other human being.

This is what I truly and deeply believe. This belief is part of my own experience. It is part of my own life. It is part of me. I cannot live without this belief, and I would rather die than give it up. To me, to live means to practice this belief. Therefore this belief is part of my religion. It has nothing to do with the way in which I dress, nothing to do with what I call myself.

It is a matter of the way I am, the way I exist. It is the way I naturally function in the world. This is what religion really is. It is what you most truly and deeply believe. It is what you are prepared to die for. It is your life. It is what makes you what you are. It is what makes you behave in the way that you do. Religion is therefore a very important thing. In fact, it is the most important thing.

Life is King

Hour after hour, day
After day we try
To grasp the Ungraspable, pinpoint
The Unpredictable. Flowers
Wither when touched, ice
Suddenly cracks beneath our feet. Vainly
We try to track birdflight through the sky trace
Dumb fish through deep water, try
To anticipate the earned smile the soft
Reward, even
Try to grasp our own lives. But Life
Slips through our fingers
Like snow. Life
Cannot belong to us. We
Belong to Life. Life
Is King.

From My Relationship to the Order

When I look back on those early days, and think of the difficulties I had to experience (not that I always thought of them as difficulties), I cannot but feel that the coming into existence of the Western Buddhist Order was little short of a miracle. Not only did the lotus bloom from the mud; it had to bloom from the mud contained within a small and inadequate pot. Perhaps it had to bloom just then or not at all, and perhaps this particular pot was the only one available.

Now, hundreds of lotuses are blooming, some of the bigger and more resplendent flowers being surrounded by clusters of half-opened buds. During the last twenty-two years a whole lotus-lake has come into existence, or rather, a whole series of lotus-lakes. Alternatively, during the last twenty-two years the original lotus plant has grown into an enormous lotus-tree not unlike the great four-branched Refuge Tree - has in fact grown into a whole forest of lotus-trees.

...when I see what a great and glorious achievement the Order represents, despite its manifest imperfections, I find it difficult to believe that I could have been its founder ... Nonetheless, there are times when, far from feeling that it was I who took on the responsibility, I feel that it was the responsibility that took on me. There are times when I am dimly aware of a vast, overshadowing Consciousness that has, through me, founded the Order and set in motion our whole Movement.

From Mind Reactive and Creative

The reactive mind is the unaware mind. Whatever it does, it does without any real knowledge of what it is that it is doing. Metaphorically speaking, the reactive mind is asleep. Those in whom it predominates can, therefore, be described as asleep rather than awake. In a state of sleep they live out their lives; in a state of sleep they eat, drink, talk, work, play, vote, make love; in a state of sleep, even, they read books on Buddhism and try to meditate.

It is with this realization — when we become aware of our own unawareness, when we wake up to the fact that we are asleep — that spiritual life begins. One might, indeed, go so far as to say that it marks the beginning of truly human existence, though this would imply, indeed, a far higher conception of human existence than the word usually conveys — a conception nearer what is usually termed spiritual.

This brings us to the second kind of relative mind, to what we have termed the creative mind. The characteristics of the creative mind are the opposite of those of the reactive mind. The creative mind does not re-act. It is not dependent on, or determined by, the stimuli with which it comes into contact. On the contrary, it is active on its own account, functioning spontaneously, out of the depths of its own intrinsic nature.

Even when initially prompted by something external to itself it quickly transcends its original point of departure and starts functioning independently. The creative mind can therefore be said to respond rather than to react. Indeed it is capable of transcending conditions altogether. Hence it can also be said that whereas the reactive mind is

essentially pessimistic, being confined to what is given in immediate experience, the creative mind is profoundly and radically optimistic.

Its optimism is not, however, the superficial optimism of the streets, no mere unthinking reaction to, or rationalization of, pleasurable stimuli. By virtue of the very nature of the creative mind such a reaction would be impossible. On the contrary, the optimism of the creative mind persists despite unpleasant stimuli, despite conditions unfavourable for optimism, or even when there are no conditions for it at all.

The creative mind loves where there is no reason to love, is happy where there is no reason for happiness, creates where there is no possibility of creativity, and in this way builds a heaven in hell's despair.

On Desire, from A Survey of Buddhism

If it were in fact possible to remould this sorry scheme of things 'nearer to the heart's desire', and if the impermanent could by some magic of transmutation be made permanent, then there might not be any harm in our enjoying this or that object of the senses.

But things being constituted as they are, the objects of enjoyment disintegrate in our very grasp, as ice melts when clasped in a warm hand, and the result is suffering. Happiness can be attained either when existence accords with our desires, or when our desires are in harmony with existence. True, the second alternative is difficult; but the first is impossible.

If we cannot gain happiness by refashioning the world we shall have to find it by reforming ourselves. Compound things are indeed painful because they are impermanent; but that impermanency is not so much the cause as the occasion of our suffering. The root cause is desire.

Happiness comes only when we desire and are attached to – nothing. And that happiness is eternal.

Meditation

Here perpetual incense burns;
The heart to meditation turns,
And all delights and passions spurns.
A thousand brilliant hues arise,
More lovely than the evening skies,
And pictures paint before our eyes.
All the spirit's storm and stress
Is stilled into a nothingness,
And healing powers descend and bless.
Refreshed, we rise and turn again
To mingle with this world of pain,
As on roses falls the rain.

On Mindfulness, from *Living with Awareness*

Being truly mindful is like playing a musical instrument, with oneself as both instrument and player. A violinist doesn't give a bit of attention to the score, then a bit of attention to her fingers on the strings, then a bit of attention to the conductor.

To play well, she has to bring about a fusion between herself and what she is doing, a fusion almost between her awareness and its object. Everything must come together in a single, rich experience of energy and expressive skill. She is fully absorbed yet at the same time keenly aware of every movement she makes.

This heightened state of awareness is what we need to aim for, body and mind fully engaged in a state of clarity and positivity that saturates and colours the whole of our experience. And it is surely a state much to be desired – not a duty, but a great pleasure.

This is the aim – everything coming together in a smooth flow.

But just as the violinist needs to work on the details of her technique to achieve the full effect, so we need to pay careful attention to the details of our mindfulness practice – that is, to each of the four foundations and to further details within each of the four.

The Unseen Flower

Compassion is far more than emotion. It is something that springs
Up in the emptiness which is when you yourself are not there,
So that you do not know anything about it.
Nobody, in fact, knows anything about it
(If they knew it, it would not be Compassion);
But they can only smell
The scent of the unseen flower
That blooms in the Heart of the Void.