

Practicing the Buddha Dharma in the West

Interview with His Eminence Garchen Truptrül Rinpoche
by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

The following interview was conducted by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D., founder-president of Yoga Research and Education Center (Santa Rosa, California) at the Garchen Buddhist Institute, Chino Valley, Arizona on December 10, 2001. [Garchen Rinpoche](#) is a [Drikung Kagyu](#) lama who was known in the thirteenth century as the Siddha Gar Chodingpa, a heart disciple of Kyobpa Jigten Sumgon, founder of the Drikung Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. In ancient India, he had incarnated as Mahasiddha Aryadeva, the lotus-born disciple of the great Nagarjuna. In the seventh century, he was known as Lonpo Gar, the minister of the Tibetan Dharma King Songsten Gampo.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: First of all, I want to thank you very much for these two incredible retreat days. I feel I came empty-handed as a beggar and was given so much. When waking up this morning, I felt that I should not even bother you with an interview, but then I thought that other people will no doubt benefit from it.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: It's no trouble at all, because as long as whatever we do benefits others, I am very happy to do anything, anytime.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: Thank you. When the Buddha Dharma migrated from India to China, to Tibet, to Burma, and so on, it was each time adapted to the local culture. So, I believe, Buddhism has two dimensions to it: the Dharma teachings themselves and the cultural aspects. Buddhism has arrived in the Western world as well, which in many ways is very different from the East, and I would like to ask you, Rinpoche, what this means for us.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: It's true that when Buddhism was adapted in different Eastern countries, such as China and Tibet, there were certain cultural influences. But that doesn't contradict the Buddha Dharma, which has never been diluted. Also, keeping our own culture intact and then adopting Buddhism will prove much more useful. Dharma can be practiced in many different ways, depending on a culture's style and also the level of understanding of individuals. But the essence of the whole teaching is loving-kindness and compassion. So long as we have that, culture, race, or gender do not matter. Then we are on the right path.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: Eastern cultures have many things in common, including a tremendous respect for tradition, while Western culture, as you know, is almost the opposite. There is so little regard for tradition that I perceive this to be a genuine difficulty in the transmission of Buddhism to the West.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: The basic distinction between Western people and Eastern people is that in the West people are taught to have high self-esteem, which is really a feature of the ego allowing you to stand on your own two feet.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: Individualism.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: Individualism, a desire for individual freedom, and pride are taught as an antidote to failure: If I'm proud of myself and my achievements and have self-esteem, then I will be successful. But success in the West is rather temporary, because people aim at fulfilling their desires, which relate only to this life. This orientation is therefore limited. But again there is no intrinsic contradiction in the West's orientation, so long as everything is done with loving-kindness and compassion. With that in mind, we change the whole mood of our being. If we have high self-esteem, maybe we can later on transform that into an appreciation that human life is very precious, that we have a life that is fully equipped with the eighteen qualities, and that we are "proud" of having a Buddha Nature and are potential Buddhas. This is not self-cherishing, or the ego, but an attitude rooted in real understanding.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: The two major traditions in the West are Judaism and Christianity, and often when people come to Buddhism, they come because they feel frustrated with their own traditions. But then often they become frustrated with Buddhism as well. What is being done wrong here?

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: What is important is not our comprehension of Buddhist philosophy but our understanding of how to practice the Dharma. We need to understand the essence of the teachings. If we understand the essence of all the teachings, then we find that there is no difference between Christianity and Buddhism. As Buddhists we highly value compassion and loving-kindness toward all sentient beings. Especially in the Drikung lineage, we have the aspiration prayer in which we put our enemy first and then our parents. In the same way, Christians admonish, "Love thy neighbor," or "Love thy enemy." We must practice compassion, generosity, patience, and so on. In the same way, Westerners say that charity begins at home. There are so many things that are the same. For instance, the seven branches of practice have a lot of similarity to the seven deadly sins. What really matters is that we understand the deeper meaning, the essence of the teaching, and then put it into practice. Just having an intellectual grasp of the Dharma isn't enough. We must have experiential knowledge, and that can come only by meditating on the deeper meaning and applying it.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: One of the difficulties is that when Westerners approach the Buddha Dharma, they are imprinted with our Western education, which encourages intellectual rather than experiential learning. It seems built into our system for people not to have the right approach. I know many people who after many years give up because they have a certain handicap. Then the question is: What can we do in order to convey to people early on that what matters is something else. After all, there are not even very many teachers who have the right approach. Many Westerners end up spending a lot of time studying the Dharma teachings, which I think tends to play into our whole Western tendency of intellectualizing everything. Then years later they ask themselves, "What am I doing?"

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: The most important thing is learning to learn. There are so many books, so many original Buddhist teachings, so many commentaries on them, and so many arguments. In the past, doctrinal conflict was settled by argument and debate. At the end, there was always a winner and a loser. All that is unnecessary practice, because anything we define as

the truth is simply intellectual fabrication. We are just putting on more labels, more words. The most important thing is really to study the law of karma. With that, if we have a very good understanding of the complexities of the law of karma, Buddhism becomes very easy. Buddhism has very elaborate empowerments, rituals, prayers—none of them is needed. If you want to understand karma, then become like a lawyer who is well trained and knows the consequence of breaking the law. Keeping the law of karma in mind, we should cultivate loving-kindness and compassion in order to develop relative and ultimate bodhicitta. That's all that is needed.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: Karma and rebirth are an integral part of Eastern belief systems. Nobody questions these two teachings. In the West, they are relatively new ideas, because Christianity, which used to incorporate them, no longer does so. Judaism apparently knows of karma and rebirth, but who really believes in these teachings today? The difficulty now is that Westerners always want proof before they accept something. They might argue that the Buddha himself instructed his disciples not just to believe in something but to find proof. How can we convey to Westerners that karma and rebirth are in fact a central part of Dharma practice, without asking them to merely believe?

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: You can remind people that sometimes they experience suffering that comes as a total surprise and for which there is no logical explanation. Sometimes we have some understanding of why we are suffering; at other times we simply presume that there is a reason for it. Sometimes we can take a direct approach based on an analysis of the situation: If we are compassionate and have a good heart, we can expect our friendships, associations, relationships to be positive. If we have a bad heart and are egotistic, then people want to stay away from us. If we have a really sharp temper, we are bound to also have a lot of problems—nobody likes to mingle with an angry person for long. Or, for example, there may be two brothers who are equally well educated, but their success in life is totally different because of their different attitudes. Also, people—and not only Buddhists—remember their past lives, which has been studied scientifically. In Buddhism, the belief in karma and rebirth is very strong. If these ideas are not presently found in Christianity and Judaism, that doesn't mean they have vanished from the original teachings but rather that people have not properly understood them.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: Perhaps these teachings were just inconvenient, and so people chose to ignore and forget them.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: People don't want to look at the bad side of life. But karma is working even when we ignore it. Everything that we do has some consequence, and that is the law of karma.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: The challenge is to convey to people that karma applies not just in one lifetime, but life after life after life. This notion is not generally accepted. One of the problems I see is that there are not many teachers who are willing or able to give this kind of step-by-step introductory education for Westerners. Often we go to, say, lam rim teachings and get lost in all the doctrinal minutiae. These details were developed by and for monastics, and they make very little sense for Westerners.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: We don't need all this philosophical studying unless we are preparing for a big debate or seeking to convert others. There are basically three stages of learning. First, we either read a book or listen to a teacher, so that we have a general grasp of the teachings. Second, we acquire personal experience, where the puzzle is coming together and everything begins to make sense. Third, we attain realization, and then everything really falls into place. Then we go beyond doubt.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: Still, Westerners tend to approach Buddhism with all sorts of preconceptions. They may even think that they are practicing, and then ten years later come to the realization that they did not gain very much from all their study and practice.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: The most important thing is to have a really good understanding of karma. Once we have understood the law of karma, half of our misconceptions about suffering are gone. Then we need to understand the cause of suffering. We need to know that suffering is nothing more than our own creation. No one is inflicting suffering on us. We need to look at ourselves rather than point a finger at others. Don't expect to be able to transform the whole Western society. Western civilization is based on a lot of karmic propensities, a lot of ego.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: For me, one of the saddest aspects of Buddhism in the West is the failing of so many teachers. His Holiness the Dalai Lama advised that we should check our teachers carefully. The difficulty is that most teachers don't give students the kind of access that would allow them to do that. Do you, Rinpoche, view this as a difficulty, and if so what can we do about it?

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: I acknowledge this problem. In the West there is no continuity of instruction, which makes it difficult to establish a spiritual bond between the student and the lama. The lama comes from somewhere out of the blue, maybe gives one public talk or initiation or a weekend seminar, and then he's gone again. Too many people are getting too many bits and pieces of the teachings. That is one problem. The other problem is that there is a certain lack of highly qualified teachers—the senior teachers have already passed away. The younger teachers are now in big demand, often before they themselves have gone through all the training. They may have studied the scriptures . . .

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: . . . but do not yet have the realization.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: There are many aspects to this problem. When studying under a lama, we should not be concerned with the quality of the lama. The quality of our understanding after all derives from our understanding of the teaching, not of the person. The most important thing is that we understand karma and do not accumulate further karmic propensities. The moment we judge someone, we stain the mirror of our own mind. We actually gain nothing from this exercise. On the contrary, we lose out.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: Yesterday, Rinpoche, you said that some teachers may look very nice but have no spiritual substance. And then some may have a not-so-nice personality but are endowed with spiritual substance. What about the teachers who have a bad personality and also no substance? [Laughter.]

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: With the right view, we can always transform; we can always accumulate merit and purify our karmic propensities. Even someone like that, we can remind ourselves, must have a Buddha nature. Even a dog has a Buddha nature. We don't necessarily have to become involved with such a person. It may be enough to remember his Buddha nature. The simplest teaching that Marpa taught his disciple Milarepa is to develop neither attachment nor aversion. Don't eulogize people and also don't look down on them. Keep polishing the mirror.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: An excellent teaching.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: The whole point of keeping the mirror clean and free from incidental stain is that we can develop wisdom. The nature of wisdom has the Buddha quality of knowingness. And with that knowingness, we overcome all the ignorance that is responsible for all our afflictive emotions.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: And we will also be able to transform our circumstance.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: There is an old Buddhist saying that there is nothing in the samsaric world that does not have both faults and good qualities. That means everything has a good side and a bad side. If we have wisdom, we have the ability to discern between them and the desire to simply help people. Ordinarily, we are blind to the bad sides in our friends, while our enemies have no good qualities whatsoever. We must develop the ability to discern and judge impartially and maintain equanimity.

GEORG FEUERSTEIN: That is the challenge. I want to thank you, Rinpoche. If there is anything that you would like to say in addition, I would be grateful to record it.

GARCHEN RINPOCHE: The most important thing is to explain to people not to be too concerned about the amount of suffering that's already in effect but to focus on finding the root cause of suffering as well as the cause for happiness. The cause for happiness is the mirror without stains, which is wisdom. A stained mirror doesn't bring about wisdom, and in that case everything is influenced by ignorance. From ignorance stem all these karmic propensities and afflictive emotions. We also need to know that every sentient being wants to achieve happiness, but what kind of happiness? Temporary happiness? A lot of the time, temporary relief or pleasure is confused with ultimate happiness. Therefore we need to understand the cause for ultimate happiness. These are the things that should be emphasized more. When we truly understand the Dharma, there is confidence and rejoicing.

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