

EASTERN HORIZON

Many Traditions, One Wisdom

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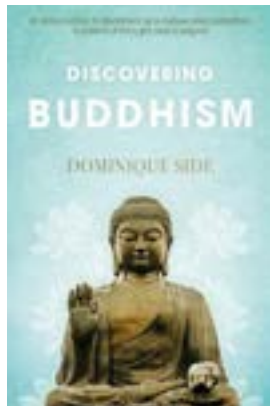
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Discovering Buddhism

By Dr Dominique Side

Dominique encountered Buddhism in the mid-1970s in London, and ever since then, she has studied and practised it, mainly within the Tibetan tradition. She has learned from masters of many different traditions and from Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and Sogyal Rinpoche in particular. She has also studied academically, obtaining a Diploma in Religious Studies from Cambridge University, UK, an M.A. in Indian Religions from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and a Ph.D. in Madhyamaka philosophy from Bristol University.

She taught Buddhism and Critical Thinking in London schools for many years and wrote a textbook for AS and A2 levels (17-18 years) published as Buddhism (Philip Allan Updates, 2005). Her new book, Discovering Buddhism (Matador, March 2022), presents the history and key ideas of all the main traditions of Buddhism in an accessible way for the general public and the education sector.

In one of his recent communications with Dominique, Benny Liow asked Dominique, among others, about her motivations as a Dharma practitioner and Dharma teacher, how her students relate to the Dharma, balance between adaptability and authenticity, and her most recent book Discovering Buddhism.

Benny: Can you tell us how you first came in contact with Buddhism, and what motivates you to be committed to study, teach, and practise it all these years?

Dominique: My first contact with Buddhism was in London in 1975 when I met several Tibetan lamas. I think the experience of actually meeting spiritual masters in person made all the difference. It is so much more powerful and inspiring than reading a book. Of course, in the European context of those days you should be aware there were hardly any spiritual masters at all, and Buddhism was very marginal.

There are so many reasons why I have continued to be a practicing Buddhist all these years. One is karmic of course; I clearly had a karmic connection and that is why I immediately felt connected to the Buddhist teachings with very little effort. Ideas such as karma and rebirth felt familiar and were not challenging for me even though there was nothing in my upbringing that had prepared me for them. Another reason is that I was inspired by the vision of establishing Buddhism in the West, and the idea that me and my friends were a pioneering generation helping to lay the foundations of Buddhism within our communities. And a third reason is the benefits it brought me personally: the clarity I get from the teachings, the confidence I get from meditation practice, the appreciation I have for the various methods used to overcome negative tendencies and emotions. Buddhism has definitely helped me deal with life.

You have taught Buddhism to 17- and 18-year-old students in the London school system for many years. What did the teenagers best relate with Buddhism?

I would say that the way students relate to Buddhism is very diverse. Some of them have no apparent connection with it and find it foreign and difficult to understand while others have a natural curiosity. In the case of the students who were open to Buddhism, the main points of interest

were meditation, rebirth and karma, and the idea of religion without God. They were also impressed by the way Buddhism is so structured and logical, and it gives the sense that everything is coherent and all aspects of Buddhism hang together in a meaningful way.

When a religion tries to adapt to the modern world, it may lose its authenticity. How do we ensure this won't happen to Buddhism today?

This is a very big question and I know many Asian teachers are very concerned that the authenticity will be lost. One of the problems is that Westerners on the whole do not respect tradition and lineage, instead they associate them with the historical past and with patterns of hierarchical authority that suppress individual freedom. That is why they try to 'update' the tradition to make it 'more relevant' to modern times, but they often do this by asserting their own ideas and cultural views without respecting their own teachers and the tradition they learn from, and without sufficient depth of understanding.

I think there are three ways we could ensure authenticity continues. The first is that Asian teachers themselves must ensure they are living and teaching in an authentic way, and they are true role models for others to follow. The modern values of materialism and consumerism unfortunately pervade both East and West, so authenticity is also a problem in Asia today.

The second answer is to find ways of showing modern people what the value of tradition and authenticity is: what they mean, where their power lies and what benefits they bring. In other words, we cannot assume that Westerners, or anyone with a Western-style education, will naturally understand the point of authenticity because there is no equivalent in Western culture in the spiritual domain. If there are authentic Buddhist teachers, however, they will naturally inspire both respect and a heart connection, and practitioners will value authenticity on the basis of personal experience.

I suggest the third answer is to ensure that people study Buddhist thought and have a good understanding of the Buddhist approach. In particular, they should know what the core ideas of Buddhism are, without which one is no longer talking of Buddhism as such. If people

were well informed, they would be able to tell what adaptations are authentic and which ones are simply the display of a few people's personal opinion. This point was made by Chagdud Khadro, an American lady who is a very respected Buddhist teacher in the Tibetan tradition and based in Brazil. When commenting on my recent book she wrote:

»Dominique Side's book is beyond excellent. It is so clear and well written. She gives a good survey of how positive modernisation of Buddhism has occurred, from the Theravada to the Mahayana - the Pure Land schools, Zen - and Vajrayana. She shows how modernisation can occur when it's anchored in the truth of the Buddha's words.«

So, is your latest book *Discovering Buddhism* targeted at academic specialists or the laymen new to the religion?

Discovering Buddhism is intended for the general public and it is written in an accessible way for people who are not familiar with the subject. It is also very useful for school teachers who teach Buddhism as part of the World Faiths or Ethics programs in secondary school (11-18 years old).

There are so many books now on Buddhism. In what ways would you say *Discovering Buddhism* is different?

Discovering Buddhism stands out as distinct from the many other books on Buddhism in English in the following ways.

The target audience is broad and includes:

1. the general public including family and friends of Western Buddhists,
2. Buddhist practitioners, and
3. teachers and students engaged in courses on Buddhism in schools.
 - It is written in a clear and accessible way and is suitable for the non-specialist even though it is thoroughly researched and there are ample footnotes.
 - It includes critical assessments of key points, connecting traditional accounts with contemporary scholarship.
 - It incorporates the Buddhist approach to study. This is achieved by including a question for personal reflection at the end of most chapters

and prompting readers to question their own views as they consider Buddhist ideas.

- It is complemented by online resources through the *Windows into Buddhism* website.

You mentioned that your aspiration for the book is to clarify myths and misunderstandings about what the Buddha said. What are these you are referring to?

There are so many mistaken assumptions about Buddhism in the West associated with a general lack of awareness that the Buddhist way of seeing things is very different. Most people imagine that Western thinking provides a universal paradigm into which all other cultures fit, but this is not the case. There are genuine differences in perspective between Indian thought and Western thought, and unless we demystify these, Buddhism will not be understood correctly.

I will give you some examples. ~~Dukkha~~ Dukkha, karma, rebirth, the mind, the afflictions, wisdom, no self, *shunyata*: all of these ideas require detailed and careful explanation to avoid misunderstandings. ~~Dukkha~~ Dukkha is translated as suffering but it is so much more than that; you could say it refers to the whole of our (*saṃsāric*) life. The notion of rebirth is strange and foreign because Western thought understands human life – and human history - in linear time, not in cyclical time. Furthermore, the very possibility that the human mind can cultivate transcendental wisdom systematically and come to know the very nature of things is something that is beyond many people's imagination and there is no real equivalent in European culture.

You can see that Buddhism is quite challenging for the modern mind! Our cultural assumptions run so deep it takes years for many people to really change the way they see the world, and until then even practising Buddhists retain numerous dark corners of unexamined views that prevent them from fully embodying the teaching.

Can you tell us briefly about *Windows into Buddhism*, a new website that brings together a range of freely accessible educational resources on Buddhism?

This new website will make resources on Buddhism available free of charge and serve as a platform for short courses and webinars. At present, there is no website

that brings together in one place a range of resources on Buddhism from all traditions in a lively and engaging way. Materials will be organised by topic and by age group, and will include videos, audios, powerpoints and downloadable pdfs. A special feature of the site will be personal testimonies by Buddhists living in the West who say what it means to them to be a Buddhist in the modern world.

Windows into Buddhism is a project of the European Buddhist Union and its creation is funded by Khyentse Foundation. It will be launched in September 2022.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing Buddhism as it continues to spread in the West?

Already in my lifetime it has become more difficult to practise Buddhism in certain respects. Forty years ago, people could more easily take time off to follow teachings or do retreats or go on pilgrimage, but these days it is very difficult for the majority of Buddhists. If they take time off like this, they might lose their job and find it impossible to get another one, or their spouse might abandon them! So, one of the biggest challenges is lack of time. And we all know that it's necessary to dedicate quality time to Dharma practice if one wishes to see results.

Another challenge is that the modern mindset has particular difficulties connecting with Dharma. Attention spans are short, distraction is a very strong habit, and few people have the clarity or confidence to envision the long term. These are hurdles that are characteristic of the modern mind. Yet Dharma practice requires patience and diligence, trust and commitment, so this means that such qualities need to be deliberately cultivated to counteract our cultural norms. In other words, the Dharma is not easy! And that alone is a problem for some people!

On the other hand, I think life itself is full of challenges and in the future, this may be even more true than it is now. When circumstances are hard people will turn to spirituality because they are acutely aware it has something to offer them that they desperately need. Then Buddhism will naturally come into its own, and will be seen to have an invaluable contribution to make to society and to the happiness of every one of us. **EH**