



**E-Vam Institute's offering of free teachings by our founder
Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche IX.**

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

This is a series of three talks on the topic of Religion and Spirituality.

“Many people have questions about whether Buddhism is a religion or a spiritual path. These two words, religion and spirituality, are extremely loaded. That is, they have multiple meanings. People may think about religion and spirituality in different ways, so it can be regarded as a complex issue, but I aim in these three talks to make these considerations clearer and more straightforward.” Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche IX



Biography

Traleq Kyabgon Rinpoche IX (1955-2012) was born in Nangchen in Kham, eastern Tibet. He was recognised by His Holiness XVI Gyalwang Karmapa as the ninth Traleg tulku and enthroned at the age of two as the supreme abbot of Thrangu Monastery. Rinpoche was taken to Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim at the age of four where he was educated with other young tulkus in exile by His Holiness Karmapa. Rinpoche studied under the auspices of His Eminence Kyabje Thuksey Rinpoche at Sangngak Choling in Darjeeling. He also studied with a number of other eminent Tibetan teachers during that time and mastered the many Tibetan teachings with the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions in particular.



Rinpoche moved to Melbourne Australia in 1980 and commenced studies in comparative religion and philosophy at LaTrobe University. He established E-Vam Institute in Melbourne in 1982 and went on to establish further Centers in Australia, America, and New Zealand. Throughout his life Rinpoche gave extensive teachings on many aspects of Buddhist psychology and philosophy, as well as comparative religion, and Buddhist and Western thought. He was an active writer and has many titles to his name. Titles include: Lonchengpa's Three Cycles of Natural Freedom: Oral Translation and Commentary; Moonbeams of Mahamudra; Vajrayana: An Essential Guide to Practice; Circle of the Sun: Heart Essence of Dzogchen; Desire: Why It Matters; the best selling Essence of Buddhism; Karma, What It Is, What It Isn't, and Why It Matters; The Practice of Lojong, and many more. Rinpoche's writings are thought provoking, challenging, profound, and highly relevant to today's world and its many challenges.



Talk One of Three Talks on Religion and Spirituality

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Many people have questions about whether Buddhism is a religion or a spiritual path. These two words, religion and spirituality, are extremely loaded. That is, they have multiple meanings. People may think about religion and spirituality in different ways, so it can be regarded as a complex issue, but I aim in these three talks to make these considerations clearer and more straightforward.

Often, when people think about religion, they may refer to following a dogma, external things such as rituals and prayers. If you are praying, that may indicate that you are being religious. But if you are praying, you could be praying to win the lottery. You may not even be concerned who you are praying to—Confucius, the Buddha, or, God, et cetera. Religion means something like this for many people—prayer and ritual practices.

Many religions include such things as feasts and fasts. Feasting and fasting may seem ridiculous from a non-religious point of view! They are feasting and are having so much fun and then they are told, now is the time to fast, so they fast. This is an aspect of all religions, as far as I am aware. These are a few aspects of what we think of as being religious and in many ways, this can be beneficial, something I will address in these talks.

In some contexts, religion says sexuality is to be celebrated. In another context, continence, abstinence is seen as important. This is also considered important in relation to our five senses as well—what we see, smell, hear, taste, and touch. On one level, almost all religions work on our senses. For example, we see iconographic representations such as the pictorial representations of great saints and deities. There are many pictorial representations as well as particular types of music, singing and chanting, incense, and candles, all designed to stimulate the senses. The same religion can promote this idea of indulging in and stimulating sensory impressions, and also promote the idea of abstinence, to cut out or cut down specific sensory input in order to reduce distractions and avoid other types of stimulation. How then, do we make sense of all of this? I cannot fully do justice in terms of other religions, but I will seek to make sense of it from the Buddhist point of view, and particularly from the Tibetan Buddhist point of view.

Let me begin by saying that Buddhism is a religion. The religious aspect can be understood as the external, and the spiritual as the internal aspect of the whole religious phenomenon. Many people who come to Buddhism may see it more as a spiritual path, but the religious aspect does play an important role. Buddhism is seen by many as a way of life or philosophy. Often the people who describe it in this way are still participating in many of the religious aspects despite their view. From a Buddhist point of view, the religious aspect is important because activities such as praying and committing to a belief system, when done skillfully, can be uplifting and sustaining. There is nothing non-spiritual about creating a supportive and uplifting environment.

Secularisation of Buddhism is not a way to improve it, but this does not mean that Buddhism as a religion cannot have problems associated with it. Whenever a particular religious tradition becomes too focused on the external, then dogmatism, fundamentalism, racism, and other forms of fixation and prejudice arise from that, as well we know. Rather than a dogma, in Buddhism, religiousness should be seen as a means; it is a method. Religion is a means to attain enlightenment or spiritual realisations. So often, people can get fixated on the means and forget about the ultimate goal, which is about inner cultivation. It is a journey of the soul, you might say. Even though as Buddhists we do not believe in the notion of the soul, you could still call it a journey of the soul. When you say someone or something lacks soul, this does not refer to a metaphysical soul, but rather some kind of lack of experience, lack of insight and depth.

You become more religious the more you go out from yourself, and the more you go inside, you become spiritual. This is the case. The more you believe in the veracity of your ritual practices and incantations, invocations, and so forth, you become more religious. And the more you go deeper into yourself, and look into yourself, you are becoming spiritual. Without the guidance of the path, one can become lost. We do not have to denounce and renounce the religious aspect, as it will aid our spiritual growth if we give our spiritual practices form, such as prayer and other ritual practices.

For example, even in a secular setting, when you want to go on a date, you normally follow some protocols, such as presentation, showing interest in the other person, and so on. Such procedures as romantic settings, candlelit dinners, et cetera are commonly used secular ritual practices. We practise these types of everyday rituals all the time. Religion can be seen as an extension of that because it has the same effect. That is, when we have a shrine or altar and we wear certain garments, light a candle and incense, it makes us feel differently, it can aid us in going inward naturally. When one chants, one can feel transformed. So we can use all of these things to help us to transform ourselves and become a more spiritual person.

The problem comes if we believe these rituals are the spiritual journey instead of recognising that the practices help us to get to our spiritual destination, to the goal of enlightenment. That is what happens with many religious people—the fixation on dogma and on rituals. It is not a question of “either or”—either Buddhism is a religion or a form of spirituality. It is both.

Religion, particularly in recent times, has been seen as having very negative effects. Often, people who come to Buddhism believe it to have a different approach and I agree in many ways that Buddhism, as a non-theistic religion, does have a different approach, comes to different conclusions, and so on. But we do not then have to say that Buddhism is not a religion. It is a religion that is very rich. It is because of this religious dimension that we have Buddhist architecture, literature, iconography, arts, music, healing practices, and so on. Buddhism has contributed so much to all aspects of many cultures in Tibet, Thailand, China, Japan, India, and so on, all of which is due to this religious element.

Therefore, we need to think of the religious aspect of Buddhism as being an aid, not an end. The end is the spiritual aspect of Buddhism, nirvana, satori, what we wish to attain. If we think in this way, we can then sing and chant, light incense, feast and not feast, fast, or not fast, and there need be no contradiction. That is the Buddhist way. It is all about testing ourselves—Buddhism teaches us to test ourselves.

We can do all of these practices and benefit from doing them but we have to know that this is not the ultimate. Sometimes people believe that because these practices and rituals are not the ultimate goal, we should dispense with them, we should not pray, we should not circumambulate stupas, chant, sing, light incense and candles, set up alters, and so on. This seems to be a wrong view. We can become diminished and negative as human beings by not doing beautiful ritual practices. Even in our own home, we can feel better when we can create a nice atmosphere with simple things such as the basic ritual of lighting a candle. Ritual is a good thing, unless it becomes an obsession.

Part of ritual practice includes conviction, believing in a philosophy of life. When I say, believing in a philosophy of life, I am referring to believing in Buddhist philosophy, if you are a Buddhist. Through using our reasoning capacity, logic, study, and contemplation, we can truly engender a tremendous amount of motivation and conviction. Traditionally, in Buddhism, we usually do this in three different ways. Firstly, there is textual support; we study the texts. That is, we investigate, “Did the Buddha say this?” Secondly, we use our own reasoning capacity to review what is being said. Thirdly, we reference our own experience to check the validity of the philosophy. This is traditionally what we do to in terms of learning and building conviction in Buddhist philosophy. This is an ongoing process. We never immediately come up with the ultimate answers. By using this approach of study, investigation, reasoning, and its application into everyday life, we build belief and conviction in the Buddhist path.

You look at the authoritative literature of the Buddha, who of course, was a special being, so if he said it, you would give him more credence than a random person, a neighbour, for example. It makes sense to look at and study what the Buddha taught. One looks to see if there is coherence and consistency in the argument presented.

For example, the Buddha approached teaching from different perspectives depending on the audience or individual he was teaching, so we can find variation. If we found the Buddha was truly contradicting himself, then that would leave us with a lot of doubt. I have not found any such contradiction. Through practice, we may end up actually having the kind of experiences that the Buddha spoke about, which then reconfirms our own belief in what the Buddha taught.

To summarise, the aspect of religiosity in Buddhism is about going outward but if we get lost in that, then we become dogmatic, sectarian, or similar, and then believe, “My school of Buddhism is superior to yours,” or “I’m in this school of Buddhism and you are that school of Buddhism,” or “You’re Hindu or you’re Christian.” That is not very helpful, to say the least. However, if we focus only on the spiritual and ignore the religious aspect, so much is lost. It is a truncated version, because it has no life. When we try to avoid ritual, and choose not to believe in anything, we can still develop our own version of religiousness, whether it is for a football team or a specific cause. These things become like a religious passion which can easily become monofocal and may not be life enhancing. We often don’t even know when the religious zest is creeping into our psyche. Many non-religious organisations or systems have hierarchy, rituals, uniforms, and a bible of beliefs. For members of extreme or radical organisations, non-adherence can lead to great tragedy.

Therefore, the religious aspect is a very good thing because it helps us to work with different aspects of ourselves on the physical level, psychological level, and the spiritual level. Without a more multi-dimensional approach, we would only be thinking about the mind in Buddhism. It is only when we start to think about Buddhism in other ways, in religious terms, that we can think about Buddhism in relation to the body, speech, and mind.

The material element, the material dimension of Buddhism is very important in terms of physical embodiment of what is sacred for example, even in terms of Buddhist statues and religious materials, the Buddhist cannon, and the sacred literature, even Buddhist music—all these things are very important. We use all of that to transform ourselves spiritually. Otherwise, it is easy to get stuck and that is when we can become dogmatic, fundamentalistic, sectarian, et cetera. It is all about personal transformation.



Talk Two of Three Talks on Religion and Spirituality

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Is Buddhism a religion, or a form of spirituality? This question is often asked. This question assumes that there is a clear distinction, that the two can be separate things. The notions of religion and spirituality should go together, they should be in harmony, particularly if we follow our religious traditions properly. That is really the key to this discussion. Religion can be full of contradictions, as we discussed. Religions can appear to promote both violence and peace. Religion says there are times when we should feast, and other times when we should fast. It also says one should be socially engaged, and at other times be socially disengaged, such as, living in isolation, going on retreat or becoming a hermit, and so on. Religion may say to feast on our senses, and then to abstain from sense pleasures.

As Buddhists, we have to work out how to deal with the issue of contradiction, as a religious person and as a spiritual person, and this is something that we can and should do. The religious aspects themselves are not to be blamed for all the bad things that go on in the world. Fundamentalistic beliefs and systems, be they religious or not, can find their followers caught up in extreme views and belief systems. It is not because of the religion as such, but it is because of how religion itself has been incorporated or appropriated by the individuals. They have lost sight of the spiritual aspect. They have lost sight of the main intentions for the guidelines within their religion. When one is becoming too religious—focusing on one aspect too much rather than being more encompassing, they have forgotten their inner self and their inner nature. When the inner nature is forgotten, one becomes too focused on the external, for example, if one only reads one sacred book, or favourite passage in a sacred text. Scriptures and excerpts from religious texts can easily be taken out of context and taken literally. Instead of going further into the meaning of the sacred texts and books, contemplating them, and seeking to understand their essence and meaning, one simply takes some of the words at face value and out of context. As an example, if one takes part of the Bhagavad Gita too literally, you may see it as talking about fighting and violence, which of course, it is not.

A spiritual person would always seek to understand and learn the traditional literature in a deeper way, to go behind the written word. If you really want to understand your own religious tradition, if you are serious, you need to do that. One should not just be satisfied with what one finds in a written book alone, and say, “Well, this is what the holy book says. The holy book says that I must stamp out intruders,” and then go off on a rampage. One should not resort to violence.

Instead, one should contemplate and consider what is actually being said, and ask, what is the deeper meaning? What is the intention? In the Buddhist tradition, for example, the literature often uses metaphorical language, interpretative and symbolic language. I believe metaphorical language is used liberally in all religious literature, perhaps even more so in Buddhism.

This is something that needs to be taken seriously. Then we can develop a deeper understanding of the meaning and intention behind the ritual and other practices. In religion, there are all kinds of rituals. Non-religious rituals form an important part of our everyday life as well, outside the religion context. We cannot avoid ritualistic things. As I spoke about previously, when you take someone out for a romantic candlelight dinner, there are protocols—how one dresses and prepares for the evening, one's behaviour towards the guest, and so on. Ritual is part of everything we do, and there is nothing wrong with that. It can be a good thing. From a spiritual perspective, it helps with transformation, to transform ourselves spiritually. It is only when we use rituals in combination with dogma that serious issues can emerge. Where does the dogma come from? From a religious perspective, dogma comes from taking what is written in our holy scriptures too literally. If we spend some time reading the scriptures properly, and go behind the written words to the deeper inner meaning, we would become richer, having developed a better understanding.

Ritualistic practices should be seen as a means to an end. The ritual is the boat that takes us to the distant shore of enlightenment. It is not enlightenment itself. When we become too religious, the rituals themselves become the end, and the holy scripture becomes the end, but they are not the end. Even if one can recite certain passages from the holy texts, this does not mean the person also has a deep understanding of their meaning. If we already believe we have the truth in the words alone, there is no journey, there is no journey of the soul, our journey lacks soul. If you believe you have already worked it all out, and believe you know what the truth is because it is written and you read it, then no inner journey has been embarked upon. It remains external. The truth is in what you are doing ritualistically, even in terms of abstinence, indulgence, or whatever it might be.

The question to be discussed is: How do we integrate the essence of the meaning? We become more spiritual when we are not so fixated on the rituals; fixed ideas of ethics, morality, social agendas, and so on. As a spiritual person, to develop, one cannot have fixed ideas or fixed notions about anything. This does not mean that morally, one is not making distinctions between what is good or bad, but rather, it means not getting fixated on what is good or bad. When one becomes fixated, it has nothing to do with whether something is really good or not, it has more to do with one's own psychological state. For example, if you think something is bad, it becomes bad and one locks in around that as a type of ultimate truth. Then you do not want anybody else to do that activity, because you have decided that nobody should do so. If we have more openness—tolerance and patience and so on, one can be more open in terms of what is more beneficial and helpful.

In Buddhism, for example, we talk about what brings more benefit and happiness to people, as the Dalai Lama says, rather than what we think is right or just. Sometimes, what we think is right or just actually brings unhappiness to other people. We may think we are on the side of righteousness and may become moral crusaders, saying, “You should be like this,” such as for example, if a Westerner wants to instruct people in developing countries regarding how they should behave and live their lives.

We can become too preoccupied by what we care about, whether it is religion, social issues, or whatever it might be, and dogmatism can arise. Having a moral code should not mean we stop being open. If we have morality in combination with openness, we can grow. We can never develop or really grow if we believe we have already worked out the solution, if it is already preempted. If we are approaching any type of issue where we believe we have the solution, and all that is needed is for others to follow our instructions, we believe everything will then be wonderful. Everybody will be singing with joy, “What a wonderful world this now is.” Of course, we know that is not how the world works and such thought processes have to do with attempting to control the external circumstances, and have little or nothing to do with openness and inner growth.

Buddhism says that imperfection of the world is the reason we need to develop as individuals—build compassion and love for all beings and so on. We have to be moral, act ethically, and consider our actions. All of that is necessary because of the world we live in and the state of things. If we believe we already have all the answers, we will not see the need to be moral or ethical in relation to caring for others. When people want to implement certain things to make things better, it is approximating what is believed may help. We are essentially guessing. Many causes and conditions come into play with the instigation of any new initiatives. With openness, one will realise they will be learning as they proceed. From a Buddhist perspective, this relates to the wisdom that comes from understanding and contemplating interdependence.

Let us return to the discussion regarding moral issues and social issues. The seeming contradictions within religions including Buddhism of feasting and fasting, abstinence and indulgence, and all of this, can really be reconciled, even in terms of people who we believe are living the lifestyle of total restraint and a renunciant’s life. Even Buddhist renunciants sometimes fast, sometimes feast. Even the retreatants who live in caves have feast days, and then they fast. What is important about these practices, if you really think about it in the spiritual way, is that it is about exercising, about building oneself up in terms of strength. You have to be strong as a person.

Buddhism teaches that it is important to be strong. To develop spiritually, you have to be a strong person; you cannot be a weak-willed person. If you are too weak, then you will suffer from all kinds of malaise, but if you are strong, then you develop more quickly. So feasting and fasting, restraint and indulgence, going back and forth, back and forth, builds up strength and resilience.

If you are behaving in only one particular way, then you become habituated in that way, so then it is not helpful. But if you are going back and forth, it is more dangerous, but it builds you up. If one feasts and then fasts, one can become stronger. Normally, if you are used to eating too much, constantly eating and indulging in that way, or if we fast and do not eat sufficiently and become emaciated, there will be weakness emerging within those two extremes. These practices of working with different situations and circumstances, from a Buddhist perspective, are seen as very helpful. It is the same with social engagement. Buddhism says that politically, we should take interest, we should be engaged, but on the other hand, we should also be disengaged.

In other words, to develop spiritually from a Buddhist point of view, engagement and disengagement should go together all the time. So we are engaged and we are disengaged. This may sound peculiar, but it is not because if we get too engaged, we get too upset about something or other and then we lose perspective, and if we are too disengaged, we lose interest. So it makes sense that we should be engaged and disengaged at the same time.

If we look at the hermit in Buddhism or the Sadhu in Hinduism, we can see they live in a somewhat homeless manner, sometimes as hermits, then at other times, mixing with people, and then going off and doing a variety of religious and spiritual practices. They do not shy away from people, they are quite happy to share their life with others. Both isolation and communality are integral in their spiritual and religious journey.

From the moral/ethical perspective and the sensory level, what we smell, taste, touch, feel, and hear, the same principle applies, that of being engaged and disengaged. Not too engrossed nor too distracted, engaged with the senses but not excessively distracted by them. If we do that, then we can grow as a spiritual person. If we do not, then we do not grow, instead we become fixated. We become fixated on whatever it is; “I don’t want this. I don’t want to deal with this. I don’t like this. I don’t like that.” Or, “I like this, I like that.” Buddhism is always talking about how we feel, our likes, dislikes, desires, anger, resentment, jealousy, pride. As spiritual people, we need to deal with all of these aspects—because how we engage with people on the social level, moral and ethical level, and psychological level in every way is based on developing an understanding of what is beneficial and what is helpful. As I mentioned, even with the notion of morality, it often comes down to what we like or do not like, or what we approve of, or do not approve of. There may not be much consideration about what is beneficial and helpful. What is believed to be right may not be beneficial, it depends on the accompanying circumstances. That is the Buddhist view. Often, people tend to think that what is right is right, and that version of “right” should be good for everybody. From a moralistic perspective, what is seen as right is not necessarily beneficial. What is beneficial may not be right from a strictly moralistic perspective, but it can still be beneficial.

As a spiritual person, we need to keep an open mind and keep on learning, rather than feeling we know what we need and then lock down. Buddhism speaks about paths and stages of development. If we believe we can work everything out in advance, then we are saying we do not have to learn anything. Even in the teachings about the path and stages, it says these are just guidelines. You do not take them literally. It is not a description of how the stages will be or exactly how the path is going to pan out. They are important guidelines, but they are just guidelines to follow. We learn on the path, and develop on the path. The inner meaning opens up over time. So we keep on learning, but we have to have some kind of guideline and that is what Buddhist teachings provide.



Talk Three of Three Talks on Religion and Spirituality

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As I have mentioned, religion has the potential to be abused but spirituality in its true essence cannot be subject to abuse, because spirituality is something that occurs inside the person, the living human being. Many aspects of religious practice can be abused if we think our religious activity is the “end” rather than the “means.” For example, if chanting becomes an end in itself, reciting certain passages from the sacred scriptures, praying, circumambulation of stupas and reliquaries become an end in themselves. If all these religious activities become an end in themselves, instead of thinking they are the vehicles for one’s spiritual development, then we cannot flourish spiritually. When we use prayers, circumambulation and recitation, and things of that kind to develop ourselves spiritually, we flourish. Otherwise, we may become too fixated. For example, if we work towards improving reciting the scriptures better but do not delve into their deeper meaning, or circumambulate a stupa more than others but do not take the activity to heart, or light the candle in a better way than others but do not enhance our mindfulness, we are becoming fixated on the act of doing, instead of seeking inner development and transformation.

Invocation and evocation are very important part of religious practice. We invoke and evoke our ancestors, saints, masters and divine beings such as gods and deities. This can seem problematic if we are looking at it as an objective truth. Simply because one may appeal to a divine being, deity, or Master, does not mean one actually believes somebody is out there with all the characteristics and the attributes you are attributing to them. You do not have to actually think about it in that way. We often insist on overconceptualising everything, simply thinking too much. We are always conceptualising but we can ruin things through overconceptualisation. As an example, we can think about when we are falling in love: “Do they love me? Don’t they love me? What does this mean?” or “Why are they not calling me?” or “Why are they calling so much. What is it all about?” We do the same thing when we practise meditation. We either engage in too much conceptuality or sit there and nothing is happening: “I’ve been sitting for seven days, nothing has happened. I’m just sitting there and nothing has happened, this is so boring. I thought something fantastic might happen, but nothing, zero.” But the more you think like this, the less you are going to get any kind of sensation of awakening.

Buddhism teaches that whatever it is that you need for your own enrichment, you should seek it. It is an expedient method in that way. It is nothing to do with the truth or non-truth. It does not get complicated in that way. If you need something, you then appeal for that skillfully and it will manifest within. So if you appeal to Chenrezig or Avalokiteshvara or Tara or another deity, you will benefit, if you are not overconceptualising. If you are not full of expectation and endlessly thinking different things such as thinking, “I’ve been praying to Tara for seven days and nothing has changed. I’m still single!”

Buddhism is a religion, it is not just spirituality, so this kind of belief system is an important part of Buddhism. Having genuine belief and faith in the path, one can benefit enormously. If you do not believe in these things, then we cannot have depth of experience. One can feel lonely, adrift, feel cut off from other people, and find it difficult to relate to others, and then you have no one to call out to in your darkest moments. When we have some faith and call out to a Deity such as Tara and generate their qualities within, then we can feel protected, connected, enriched, and looked after.

When you become familiar with some chants, and can chant with a focused mind, it can help your spiritual development. If we are overthinking instead of involving ourselves in the activity of chanting, there maybe no benefit. If we involve ourselves fully in what we are chanting, it can be so meaningful and personally transformative. If one is full of thoughts and doubts while chanting, then we cut ourselves off from the benefits. When we chant properly, that in itself, even on the physiological level, brings transformation. From an esoteric perspective, in tantricism, it is said that by chanting with a clear open mind, one activates ones energy centres, the chakras. There are all kinds of benefits associated even with chanting, just using your own voice. Using your voice, using your body, chanting, singing, all of these things can be an aid to spiritual transformation.

With the visualisation of deities, we can see them as beings out there, but they also become part of us, we generate their qualities within ourselves in order to experience them. They represent various aspects of ourselves, so they are outside of us and not outside of us at the same time. This idea is not as bizarre as it sounds, because all these deities have attributes and qualities that individually and collectively can be attributed to certain human beings. What we regard as qualities of a divine beings are human beings at their fullest potential. We can relate to the qualities they are said to possess and have perfected. In that sense, they have some kind of existence or reality, one could say. In other words, they are not just made up by an individual person, one person does not simply think of Tara or Avalokiteshvara. Many human beings think of divine beings having certain attributes, and if we appeal to them, and develop a relationship with their attributes and characteristics, and these attributes and characteristics are understood, we experience the deity as part of oneself. There is a changing developing relationship that occurs.

In contrast, a fanatical religious person always comes into the picture with a preestablished belief system that they believe is right; “This is right, this is wrong, this is what is to be believed, that is not to be believed,” et cetera. A spiritual person on the other hand, does not think in that way. So when that person has a relationship with their divine beings, they are more likely to think of the divine beings as being integrative, rather than objectively existing. With an exclusively objective relationship, the considerations become different and external: “Am I obeying this divine being or not?” “Am I offending this divine being or not?” “Am I going to be punished by this divine being or not?”

From a Buddhist perspective, a spiritual person understands that whatever divine being or deity they have a relationship with is not separate from themselves. So that divine being is an integral part of one's own psyche and one's own being. Even in the most esoteric practices of tantric Buddhism, the whole notion is about bringing the expression of the divine energy into oneself, incorporating the divine being into oneself. It is a self-empowering exercise, as opposed to a disempowering exercise. Disempowerment can occur due to slavish commitment to religiosity, where one just surrenders to the divine image as an objective manifestation, rather than incorporating it into one's psyche. One can think of oneself as nothing: "I'm nothing, please forgive me I have sinned. I am a bad person, I've not yet managed to do things that I want to do, but please forgive me for all the things that I want to do but I have not yet managed to do. Please forgive me, please." We often don't think like that in terms of our relationship to divinity. We can feel so small, and then the divine being or deity is seen as everything, which is an anathema to self-empowerment.

In Buddhist spiritual practice, it is about self-empowerment, so you then become like the deities that you worship and one develops those special qualities, such as immense love, compassion, clarity of mind, and so on. The whole point is to emulate or become like them. However, it is not an isolated journey. There is the moral and ethical dimension and the social dimensions. Even in most esoteric forms of Tibetan Buddhism, we have the notion of mandala that incorporates everything. All the fellow practitioners and everybody, human beings generally, and everybody are part of the mandala circle we are visualising. The idea is that when you become spiritual, that energy spreads through you and starts to influence your moral vision, your social interaction, your dealings with everyday life generally, and that is the goal. When you become a more deeply spiritual person, you can then partake in the religious activities in a proper manner. When we pray, when we interact with other beings, behaving ethically, taking social responsibilities and so on, everything we do is then influenced by our own spiritual vision, our spiritual transformation, and our spiritual insights gained through integrating our religious practices.

What are the spiritual insights that we are looking for? According to Buddhism, it is to not look at things dualistically, to relate to things more directly, in a more non-conceptual way. Buddhism is not about just going off in a light-hearted manner to become spiritual. Following the Buddhist path is not a trip to "Netherland," when you are not entirely sure where you are. It is about integration. As Mahayana Buddhism says, samsara and nirvana are not seen as essentially different. This does not mean samsara and nirvana are not different. If you are looking at them in a dualistic way, they are different. If you do not look at them in a dualistic fashion, then they are not different. What this indicates is that morality is important, ethics are important, social responsibility is important, all of our normal engagements with life are important. But they are not as defining or as meaningful as we think they are. Just like with religiosity, we think "getting married, having children, feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless—that is all there is." All of these things are important, but there is more. That is not all there is. As a spiritual person, we recognise there is more.

If we see things in a non-dualistic way with wisdom, called having the “wisdom eye” in the Buddhist tradition, we are living the spiritual life. Spiritual life comes from having the wisdom eye, and the creation of merit. We often do not focus enough on the idea of creating merit. We should normally emphasise the importance of creating of merit. Merit comes from activities such as being morally and ethically engaged; doing wholesome things, and mixing with people and being part of one’s own society in a meaningful way, promoting social good, and things of that nature. That is where merit comes from.

Merit and wisdom are called two accumulations in Buddhism. As human beings, and as spiritual practitioners, we advance through and understand more deeply these two accumulations of merit and wisdom. Wisdom is seen as superior to the accumulation of merit, as wisdom teaches how to not get fixated on things tightly; then you are more able to accumulate merit in a proper manner. If we are thinking with absolutistic certainty, even in terms of moral actions, we will be focused on the literal rather the situation and circumstances we are faced with. With moral fixation, the present situation itself is not taken into account. With a fixed view, we are less able to look at all the factors, and every aspect of the situation. Instead, we may be thinking, “I know what is right and what is wrong.” If we make such assumptions, we can just be barging in to a situation and telling people how to behave, what to do, and how they should be feeling and responding. Instead, with a more open and present mind, we can take stock of circumstances and situations more fully and seriously, and include a number of factors so one’s meritorious actions can truly make a substantial difference. This applies to all social interactions.

Therefore, we look at the context of everything. Even when we want to take actions like political or social actions, we take everything into account, all the factors. Then when we look into our own mind, thoughts, feelings, and emotions, they are all interrelated. Our mind is like a network of many, many things, so instead of thinking we have to deal with one thing, we should be thinking about dealing with many things.

Dealing with many things in the mind is actually easier than dealing with one thing because we can look at each aspect individually, one at a time. Otherwise we can become overwhelmed with some things that arise in the mind, such as anger. If you are thinking, “I am an angry person, I have this huge problem with anger,” we begin to believe that, and then the idea of you being an angry person becomes solidified; it can seem insurmountable. Instead, if we look into what is actually occurring to generate an angry state within our mind, we can begin to see the support structures that we have in place that create anger. We can see the thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, feelings that are associated with the arising of anger. Then we can have a different picture of what is occurring. Gradually, we can start working on each aspect, for example, start to look at the kind of thoughts that help create anger, and seek to have less of those types of thoughts repeating so much in our minds. We can ask ourselves, “Why do I have to immediately have those thoughts?” We can decide to ease up and take some kind of a break from those repetitive thought patterns, just to take a break.

In the same way, we can look at the feelings associated with anger, attitudes related to anger and so on. We may feel certain things about how people see us, but only you are feeling that way, everybody else is just getting on with their lives, while you may be ruminating about the idea, such as, “Everybody is against me.” It is about reviewing our attitudes towards life, other people, and so on. We do not have to have such fixed views about everything.

Spiritual transformation then, has to occur on all those levels—social, moral and ethical, psychological, and spiritual levels. This comes from developing a more non-dualistic way of looking at things. In Buddhism, when we say “spiritual,” fundamentally, we mean looking at things in a non-dualistic way. In Buddhism, it is not about achieving union with God, it is about seeing things from a non-dualistic perspective; that is what spiritual realisation amounts to. In that way, nothing is separate from “me,” everything that we experience is not separate. This relates back to what I was saying about deities in Tibetan Buddhism. Since nothing can be totally separate from us and our experience of it, even deities cannot be separate from us. We do not have to think that they are separate or not separate. We do not need to conceptualise about it. We do not need to see deities as completely separate. In the same way, everything we access through our sense is not separate from what we experience.

According to Buddhism, you cannot experience anything outside of your mind, even logically, and even in principle it is not possible, practically or in principle. How can you step out of your mind and get an independent looking at yourself, having this relationship with God, or deities? Even if we see it that way, we are still using our mind. We cannot step outside of our own mind to experience something separately from ourselves. Even in terms of the rules of logic and mathematics, you cannot step outside of your own mind, and say, “Oh, this is how it is.” You cannot.

With spirituality, it is so important to realise this because everything is dependent on the mind. If everything were not dependent on the mind, spirituality would not mean anything. We could just be religious, do our religious duties, go to the temple or church, and sing our hymns happily without needing to consider things more deeply. If we do not add some kind of soul to these activities, if we are saying that we do not care about whether something is wonderful or not, or meaningful or not, then there is no soul to it. Spirituality is really important, especially for religious people, because without spirituality, just being religious is not helpful and in fact, may be harmful. Being religious can harm us, but if we are religious in a proper manner, then our religious practices can heal us instead of harming us.

If we pray in the right manner, for example, we will feel liberated, we are able to use our vocal chords, it is fantastic, and if we do things in an ethical manner, without thinking, “I have to follow some kind of rules or regulations or whatever,” having ethical considerations and acting ethically becomes freeing and liberating. It becomes something we want to do because we can see it is good, helpful, and of benefit. Instead of thinking, “I have to do this, but I hate it,” with that type of attitude, then being a do-gooder can bring you down. But if you, yourself, feel that it is a beneficial thing to do, a great thing to do, then you will feel liberated and uplifted. It is the same thing with social engagement. Also, it is the same with religious activities such as feasting and fasting. It is experienced as good when you fast and it is good when you feast if you have the right attitude, the spiritual attitude. If you do not have that, then again, it is like a duty of sorts. It will be like meeting your in-laws at Christmas; with the wrong attitude, it will drag you down. We can think of many things like that.

The spiritual perspective that you bring into everyday life is what makes religious practices worthwhile. I do not believe, as some people say, that Buddhism is just a way of life, or a philosophy or something similar. It is not. Buddhism is more than that. Buddhism does put more emphasis on the spiritual aspect than the religious aspect, perhaps more than some other religious traditions. Even though many people in Buddhist countries do not follow Buddhism as a spiritual path, nevertheless, they actually do recognise that they are not following the Buddhist spiritual path. They may see they are doing the religious things to creating good karma, for example, but they still have clear recognition that they are not following the spiritual path. People who are very religious may be thinking, “I’m so spiritual. I’m so religious, and I do everything right. I eat the right food, I eat at the right time of the day, and do not eat at the wrong time of the day.” They may be thinking all kinds of things like such as, “I’m being so spiritual,” but that is not spirituality.

From a Buddhist point of view, spirituality is about integration. Often, people think spirituality is about running away from the world, or even disassociating oneself from one’s religious roots. There are many versions. There are songs and poems found within the Buddhist traditions where certain aspects of religious practices are made fun of, and that is a good thing. The sixth Dalai Lama, for example, has made all kinds of comments about his practices. So when you are spiritually minded, you can see the humour in incorrectly seeing the means as the end. That can be expressed when we have integrated the religious aspects into our spiritual journey.

Basically, what I am saying is that we should use everything that religion has given us in our own tradition, but not take it at face value, or take it to be the ultimate. These things are there to be utilised, to aid us on our spiritual path, they are not an end in themselves. We pray because it makes us feel good, it will transport us, it will engender a certain psychological state which is necessary to see things in a non-dualistic fashion, for example. If we pray, if we meditate, and even if we chant or make music as part of our rituals, doing all those things will transport us into a different mode of being. That is what we should be thinking about, instead of thinking, “Chanting in itself is the thing,” or, “Being able to recite the scriptures in itself is the ultimate.”

All these things are just aids, and if we use them as aids, we become spiritual. If we do not, then we become religious, we become dogmatic, we can become fanatical, even violent; all the problems that we associate with religion these days can arise.

Buddhism is a philosophy, a way of life, and a religion. And there is wonderful advice in Buddhism that can be helpful to non-Buddhists. But I want to say, there is nothing wrong with being religious. It is just a matter of degree; if we are not getting too fixated on the religious practices that we engage in then we can benefit from participating in religious rituals. It all comes down to our approach and our attitude.



Other Books By Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche IX

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**E-Vam Institute hopes you have enjoyed these free teachings
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