

The Voice of the Dharma and the Future of Buddhism

Esteemed Conference Organizers, Venerable Members of the Sangha, and Buddhist leaders from all over the world, it is a great privilege for me to be here, and to share a few thoughts on how the Buddha's wisdom and guidance can continue to benefit the world in the decades and generations to come.

We live in remarkable times. The teachings of the Dharma are now known in all parts of the world. They are practiced in new lands, among people with different traditions and concerns. They are contributing to a new global culture.

This is heartening and welcome, and as Buddhists we can be grateful that the healing power of the Buddha's words is being heard by people everywhere. But there is another side to this development. The transmission of the Dharma to a new culture—especially when that culture exercises increasing global dominance—brings with it grave risks.

Let me clear about this risk. The modern world developed without knowledge of the Dharma. Modern practices, values, and views are grounded in a particular set of concepts, convictions, and beliefs that are often in conflict with the teachings of the Buddha. Here is where the danger lies. If Westerners move too quickly to appropriate the Dharma, viewing it through modern eyes, the result could be devastating. Buddhism could be absorbed or swept away: not intentionally, but simply because the modern world lacks the resources to understand and practice its teachings at a deep level.

But the danger is even greater than this. The modern understanding of reality is becoming the global view of reality. It is transforming traditional cultures, including cultures where the teachings of the Buddha have long provided a basis for finding meaning in life. If our understanding of the Dharma reflects these modern developments, instead of the timeless truths of the Buddha, a distorted, limited version of the Dharma could be mistaken for the true teachings of the Enlightened One. If this happens, Buddhism could be lost for all of humanity.

Modern culture is the source of amazing technology and profound scientific knowledge. Its achievements, which we often accept without giving them a second thought, have made it possible for all of us to travel here from every part of the world; they make it possible for this large assembly to hear my words. Yet this same culture is deeply troubled. In every land, people drift without direction in a vast sea of uncertainty and confusion. Conflict and deep antagonisms threaten to engulf the world in strife. Powerful negative forces pose risks for all humanity. They even threaten the earth that shelters and sustains us in our search for meaning and happiness.

It is within this culture, with all its weaknesses, contradictions, and disruptions, that Buddhism will have to make its way. For more than 2,000 years, the Dharma has guided much of humanity. Now, however, it inhabits a strange new world, a world that speaks a different language and sees reality in a different way. In this new landscape, the Dharma will have to learn to speak with a new voice. Somehow, Dharma and modernity must enter into dialog.

As devoted Buddhists, convinced of the value of the Dharma in our own societies and for the world at large, we must help the Dharma find this new voice, so that it can reach out to the modern world and make itself heard in ways that do not distort the teachings. If instead we turn our backs on the trends that are shaping the world today, if we settle for speaking only with other Dharma practitioners in the old ways and old languages, we will end up speaking to no one at all. The world will pass the Dharma by. If we cannot find a voice for the Dharma that sounds out loud and clear, rising above the noisy, agitated buzz and bluster of this noisy and agitated world, the potential for the Dharma to benefit all humanity in this time of great need will never be realized.

The modern world rewards those who speak out. Today a thousand voices shout from every street corner, every computer screen. They always offer "the next new thing." It would be a mistake to try to outshout them, competing for attention in a constantly changing arena of shifting concerns and distraction. The Buddha warned against idle talk, against words that turn the human spirit away from deeper values. That warning is more important than ever today, when the marketplace follows us into our homes and into our heads, invading and pervading space in all the ten directions. If Dharma practitioners consent to using the language of the marketplace, they will end up offering a

simplistic spirituality designed more to make people feel good about themselves than to show a path to liberation. We all know how those possibilities might play out, and the consequences are deeply discouraging. No . . . the voice of the Dharma for modern times must speak in different rhythms and tones. It must express the depth and vision of the Buddha's teachings. That has never been an easy task. Now it is more difficult than ever.

Of course, we cannot give up. We must do our best. Here I want to focus on one particular aspect of this responsibility. At this critical point in the history of the Dharma and the history of the world, we must aim to give voice to the Dharma in the languages of the West, without losing the spirit and meaning of the Dharma as we do so.

Let me be more specific. Now and in the years to come, Buddhism must learn to speak English. Why? Because English is rapidly becoming the shared language of the world. But the English we use now is the language of business and commerce, the language of entertainment and technology, the language designed to tell us the news of "the next new thing." That form of English is simply not up to the task of holding the full meaning of the Buddha's profound teachings. So the job at hand is bigger than we might first imagine. The work of translating the Buddhist texts into English has been underway for more than a century, and much good work has been done. But more is needed—not just more texts translated, but a whole new approach. It is not enough to prepare translations if they do not hold the full meaning of the Dharma. We must be bolder than that. We must make it our goal to turn English itself into a Dharma language.

Why is it so important to take on this task? Why must English become a Dharma language? Because the Dharma languages that have served us down through the centuries are under threat of extinction. How many people today can read Pali? How many know Sanskrit or the other languages of the Mahayana? If we look ahead 20 years, or 50, how many people will still know these languages? The inner logic of an increasingly global society demands that the world's peoples speak the same language. If the Dharma cannot find its voice in that language, if it cannot speak that language with authority, precision, and depth, it will have no place in the emerging global culture.

Someone might reply that Dharma already speaks English. After all, here we are, gathered together from all parts of the world, sharing our views in English. Don't we already have a common Dharma vocabulary? Can't we already present the teachings to the modern world?

There is truth in this claim. Great teachers and masters are slowly learning to present the teachings in English, or to speak through interpreters who themselves are deeply learned in the teachings. Westerners are also studying and practicing in the ancient ways, so that they can share with others the benefits of their realization. And if the efforts to re-establish the Dharma in India, efforts in which I am proud to play a small role, succeed, the outlook will be even brighter, for India is unique in combining strong spiritual traditions with a deep knowledge of English.

Still, to rely on these developments, to think that the problem is already close to being solved, misses a fundamental point. Here is a question to consider: What makes us think that the English words we use today in our Dharma talks and our translations convey the power and truth of the Buddha's teaching? Even for the most basic terms—or especially for the most basic terms—this may be a false assumption.

A great nineteenth century English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, once wrote that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." What he meant was that those who give us our words, who craft our ever-changing language, shape the way we understand reality. So we must ask: what is the reality that today's English translations and terminology legislate? Do the words they use communicate to their audience the truth the Buddha's teachings? If not—if translators simply reach for the nearest Western equivalent to a Buddhist term rich in subtle meanings—how much can really be communicated?

This is not a theoretical or academic concern. All around us we can see Westerners projecting their own limited views onto the sacred truths—the transforming view—that the Buddha made available. For instance, there is a strong tendency to turn Buddhism into one more self-help teaching—just another way for people caught in the traps of modern culture to find some relief from stress, anxiety, and agitation. If the words and language we use for Dharma transmission have their roots in such concerns and goals, how can they ever turn the hearts and minds of their listeners toward liberation from samsara? Even the greatest masters cannot communicate what language will not let them say.

Reduced to this level, the real teaching of the Buddha will be lost. What is worse, future generations may not even realize what has happened. They will never know that the inner meaning of the teachings has melted away.

Let me offer a few examples. We all speak of the Buddha's Enlightenment, the 2600th anniversary of which we celebrate at this gathering. But does the term "enlightenment" do justice to the Buddha's awakening? The English term "enlightenment" has historic overtones that are not well suited to the Dharma. It is linked to science and the material world, to the claim that conventional logic and the five senses can convey the whole range of what is true, and to the authority of each individual to proclaim his or her own truth. None of these overtones of meaning fit well with the Dharma. Can we do better?

Again, the word *smṛti*, or *sati*, is almost always translated as "mindfulness". Nowadays, this idea of "mindfulness" is well-known. The training known as "mindfulness-based stress reduction" has brought benefit to tens of thousands by teaching a practice known as "bare attention". This is surely a positive development. Yet does "mindfulness" understood as "bare attention" lead to *prajñā*, or *paññā*, the knowing that reveals the way things truly are? When we settle for this view, are we letting the Dharma speak with its own voice? Or are we simply clutching at choices made without real understanding and careful study.

I have chosen these two examples because they are basic, and because the English equivalents for Dharma terms in each case are so well established. I have not even touched on the philosophically sophisticated vocabulary of the Abhidharma and the *śāstra* traditions, where true understanding and proper translation depend on subtle and complex considerations. Consider the word *vedanā*, almost always translated as "feeling". The students I teach have a very difficult time with this term, because the English word "feeling" has a far wider range of meaning than *vedanā*. To save them from such confusion, we may want to look with fresh eyes at how this term has been used across a wide range of sacred texts and commentaries. We must look at well at how it was translated into other Dharma languages—Chinese, Tibetan, and so on. Beyond that, we will have to research the English word "feeling" and its range of meaning, trying to clarify and address the limitations it imposes on Western understanding of how the mind truly functions. In the end, we will have to ask if there is a better alternative, one that serves the purpose more fully.

The problem also runs in the opposite direction. Recently I attended a conference at which many of the best Western scholars of Buddhism spoke on the issue of Buddhist ethics. In almost every talk, fundamental questions were raised. Do the terms "ethics" and "morality" really convey the meaning of *śīla* or *sīla*? Do Western concepts of "freedom" and "free will" prepare modern students of the Dharma to understand what is meant by liberation from *samsāra* and the intention to attain enlightenment? No one has answers to these questions. Few people are even asking them. It is a missing link in the transmission of the Dharma into the modern world.

For the past several years, I have been the Director of the Mangalam Research Center for Buddhist Languages. Here, working with leading scholars, we are trying to do something about this missing link. We hope to engage masters of all traditions in this work, and to encourage collaboration, using the digital technology of the West to generate the knowledge that will be needed. We are dedicated to creating an online resource known as the Buddhist Translators Workbench, and in this way we hope to make a modest contribution to the pressing needs I have described.

The more I work, the more I realize how vast this project is and how urgently it is needed. Studying language and the history of ideas to clarify the significance of the teachings is not an academic concern. What we do will help shape the future of the Dharma. It will help determine whether the Dharma even has a future.

All Dharma traditions agree that language can never reveal the highest truth. If that is so, does it really matter what words we use? Yes . . . it does. It matters deeply. The truth of the Dharma goes beyond language, but language points toward the truth, like a map that shows the right direction in which to travel. Language is the voice through which the truth calls out, inviting us on a journey into unknown realms. If our words lead us astray, if they point in the wrong direction or deceive us about the goal, the journey will end in disappointment or deception.

To find an English that can hold the Dharma, we will need the help of the best scholars from the West, scholars trained to respect language in ways that are becoming rare even in the most prestigious Western universities. We will also need the help of Dharma teachers from all traditions, masters who can pour their own insight and realization into the

vessels of the spoken and written word.

This is where the dialog will have to begin. This is how the Dharma will find its voice: with care, commitment, and precision. If this process truly succeeds, English will become a Dharma language, and the Dharma, re-crafted to speak to the modern world, will influence the language of everyday life, shaping it toward realization. The teachings of the Dharma will once more work their transforming magic. As in centuries past, men and women will grow up knowing with all their hearts that liberation from suffering is possible. They will know this because the words they use, the concepts they learn to think with, the reality that words legislate allow for this possibility. If this happens, the teachings of the Buddha will truly have found their voice for the modern world, and we can dare to hope that the Dharma will long endure.

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