

Juniper

The Courage To Reason

For many, Buddhism is appealing because it represents a spiritual path that rejects dogma in favor of reason, inner discipline, and insight. As we encounter various forms of Buddhist practice, however, the opposite may seem to be true. We often find an emphasis on worship, a rigid adherence to ritual, and an unwillingness to question old ideas. This dissonance between what we sense Buddhism offers and what we often encounter leads to confusion, even disenchantment. However, we should not be discouraged. Although dogmatic forms of Buddhism are outgrowths of Buddhist ideas, the essence of Buddhist thought calls for the application of reason and inquiry to free us from dogma—even if that dogma belongs to the Buddhist tradition.

Since its inception 2,500 years ago, Buddhist teaching has advocated reason and inquiry over blind faith. Teachings attributed to the Buddha state that one should not believe a proposition simply because it is part of tradition, is popular, or is stated by a respected teacher.¹ Indeed, the very word *Buddha* comes from the sanskrit root *budh*, meaning “to know” or “to be aware.” In his book *Path to Bliss: A Practical Guide to Stages of Meditation*, the Dalai Lama states, “The basic approach of the Buddhist is to subject concepts to rigorous logical processes, and if anything contradicts direct observation and logic, it should not be accepted just because it is taught in the texts.”² The message is consistent: we should submit ideas to reason.

As Buddhism spread, however, it often adopted the very practices it tried to refute. This included the development of a mythology around the Buddha, the worshipping of Buddha images and statues, and the unquestioned adherence to rigid traditions and codes of conduct. The very person who taught humanity the dangers of worshipping others as gods was anointed as one. Resistance to new ideas became common, and efforts to integrate new discovery and social standards often were stymied in favor of the status quo.

To counter the tendency toward dogma, Buddhist teachers throughout history have worked to strengthen the role of inquiry in the Buddhist tradition. In *Introduction to the Middle Way*, for instance, the Indian master Chandrakirti

sets out methods to deconstruct rigid thinking³, and in *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*, Je Tsongkhapa, founder of Tibetan Buddhism's largest school, emphasizes the importance of not taking common ideas as definitive⁴. The message of these works is that if we lock onto a concept or idea as the way things are, then we have probably missed the real meaning. Instead, we should use analysis to deepen our understanding.

Reason and inquiry are the fuel that keeps Buddhist ideas authentic. To shape Buddhist thinking in modern life, we should not be afraid to apply them. Instead of holding theories about karma and the mind as unquestionable truths, we should examine them in light of genetics, neuroscience, and other modern fields of study. Instead of accepting a male-dominated hierarchy, we should put traditions to the test of modern norms. Instead of worshipping Buddha images, we should use such imagery as archetypes to empower our potential. To accomplish this, however, we must not fear upsetting the status quo. Instead, following the original impetus of Buddhist thought, we must have the courage to reason.

¹For example, the *Kalama Sutta*. See

www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html

²Dalai Lama, *Path to Bliss: A Practical Guide to Stages of Meditation*, 2nd ed. (Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 63.

³See *Introduction to the Middle Way, Chandrakirti's Madhyamakavatara with Commentary* by Jamgön Mipham. (Shambhala Publications, 2002)

⁴*Lam Rim Chen Mo, The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment, Volume 3*, Je Tsongkhapa. (Snow Lion Publications, 2002)