

(This is a partial transcript of the Theravada/Mahayana conference held at BCBS in March, 1990. This text appeared in edited form in the IMS/BCBS Newsletter, Spring 1993.)

**BUDDHISMS IN DIALOGUE: DIFFERENCES OF THEORY, SAMENESS OF EXPERIENCE?**

The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies grew out of a vision that saw the need to build bridges between study and practice, between scholarly understanding and meditative insight. Buddhism is not one monolithic tradition but many subtraditions, each immensely rich and complex, grounded in the long history of Asian countries where they took root. Centrifugally spreading out of India in ancient times, southwards to Sri Lanka and other countries of South-East Asia, and northwards to Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan, each transmission is a dramatic episode and a challenge to each generation receiving the transmission. The coming of the Buddhhadhamma to the West is no exception. How we shall receive it, what shall we make of it is our challenge, and our inspiration. Since 1975, Insight Meditation Society (IMS) has offered silent meditation retreats and has become perhaps the premier place for Vipassana meditation in the West. At the same time, teachers at IMS who have spent considerable time in Asia have been witness to efforts, mostly by monks, at preservation and transmission of the dhamma from generation to generation, and saw how valuable it was to engage in a similar effort in the West. The nascent dhamma has found itself in the West without its monastic roots; lay teachers and practitioners have been in the vanguard of the dhamma coming to the West. To make the immensely rich tradition of Buddhism available to laypeople is a challenging new paradigm. Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is an inspired effort in that direction. To mark the beginning of the "Study Center", a conference was held here in March, 1990 as an inaugural event. The conference, called Theravada/Mahayana Dialogue was held against a background of unfinished sheetrock and hammering noises from construction workers who were trying to turn the half-finished building into somewhat of a usable space. The conference invited a number of panel speakers and a select audience; it asked the speakers to address themselves to some basic dhamma questions through their own personal experience rather than in conceptual or doctrinal terms. The stated aim of the conference was to see if the different Buddhist traditions are rooted in a common experience but use different language-- a similar experience, for example, of suffering and a similar experience of liberation from it, even though conceptual formulations and articulations of that experience and the path to it may vary a great deal. The invited speakers were:

**MARTINE BATCHELOR** trained for ten years in Korea as a Zen nun under the guidance of Zen Master Ku San Sunim. He presently lives and teaches at Sharpham community in Devon, England with her husband.

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR** trained for ten years as a Buddhist monk both in the Tibetan Gelugpa and Korean Zen traditions. He is the author and translator of several well-known books. He lives and teaches at Sharpham community in Devon, England with his wife Martine.

**JACK ENGLER** was a Trappist monk, briefly, under Thomas Merton and has practiced and taught Vipassana meditation for the last twenty years. He is the co-author, with Ken Wilber and Daniel Brown, of Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development. He is currently a psychologist at Harvard Medical School, at Goddard-Medical East Hospital and The Cambridge Hospital.

**GELEK RINPOCHE** was born into the family of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and was recognized as a reincarnation of Khenpo Tashi Namgyal at the age of four. He holds the highest level of Doctorate of Theology in Tibetan Buddhism. At present, he helps establish Tibetan culture and Mahayana Buddhism out of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

**JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN** is a co-founder of both the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and Insight Meditation Society. He first became interested in Buddhism while serving in the Peace Corps in Thailand in 1962. He has been teaching Vipassana meditation world-wide since 1974. He is the author of The Experience of Insight and co-author of Seeking the Heart of Wisdom.

**BHANTE GUNARATANA** has been a Buddhist monk for more than 50 years. He founded the Buddhsit Vihara Society in Washington D.C. in 1968 and also founded Bhavana Society, a meditation retreat and monastic facility in rural West Virginia. He is the author of a number of books on Theravada Buddhism.

**LARRY ROSENBERG** is the founder and guiding teacher of Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. He holds a Ph.D in Social Psychology and has trained in Zen traditions in Korea and Japan, as well as in the Thai forest tradition and with Thich Naht Hanh.

**SHARON SALZBERG** is a co-founder of both the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and Insight Meditation Society. She has been teaching Vipassana meditation world-wide since 1976.

In the opening session of the conference, the speakers spoke in general terms as to what it meant for each one of them to engage in dialogue with practitioners from other Buddhist traditions and how this dialogue, in their opinion, was relevant to the vision of Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Following are excerpts from each speaker's talk:

**JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN:** We had a vision or a dream of a center for Buddhist Studies years ago. I remember sitting at Board meetings at IMS talking about what we thought would be a very important part of the transmission of the Buddhhadhamma to the West. IMS has given a lot of emphasis to the meditation side of things, and that's what it focuses on. A few years ago we (the teachers at IMS) started thinking it

would be tremendously enhancing and enriching to have a study component so that people would have a chance to connect very directly with the teachings of the Buddha. This dream took quite a few years to materialize. It went through a lot of talking about it, trying to visualize what it would be, and so on. In the last couple of years, conditions started coming together for this to actually take place, both the resources for establishing it and the finding of a place. The vision for this center is really to center around the Theravada tradition, since that is the tradition we have all practiced at IMS, but at the same time not to make it a narrowly focused or limited arena. We want to both preserve and investigate the basic teaching, and also to have these avenues of discussion with all the different Buddhist traditions. And the idea of this conference came out of the same thinking. Very early on in my practice, when I was still in the Peace Corps in Thailand, I had quite a transformative experience listening to somebody reading from a Tibetan text. It just changed everything in the way I understood things. I then went back to Asia to try to find a teacher, to develop this understanding. I went to various places looking for teachers, and what was interesting for me to find out was that the understanding which had come to me from the Tibetan text was actually a Burmese style of Vipassana! So, from the very beginning, I felt that this division within Buddhism, and sometimes the sectarianism, which came from that division, didn't resonate with my own experience because different traditions had come together for me. What's special about this conference is that we can really discuss these questions from an experiential place. And only then shall we begin to see if there really are experiences in common and the language is different, or the experiences really are quite different. And I think what's going to make this discussion come alive is if we each bring something that is alive for us rather than a theoretical question, just some issue in the dharma that is puzzling to us or something that we care about in our practice.

LARRY ROSENBERG: In coming to this conference, what was appealing for me was that while the focus of this center is on the suttas and the Tipitaka it is also totally open to all the schools of Buddhism. Here we have a chance to see how rich this Buddhist culture is in terms of the incredible range of meditation techniques and ways of looking at the same problem. We can only gain by being open to each other. All of us who have grown up in America know we're all immigrants. And that's what the American experience is: everything, every different kind of human persuasion gets washed up into America. We are all here and the potential for a tower of Babel and confusion is always here, it always exists. But it's also possible to be open to the uniqueness of this particular time and this particular culture, this modern world. Within our larger American sangha, we have to make the dharma relevant without diluting the classical teachings, and we have to talk to each other. And it's happening whether we plan it or not. At least in the Cambridge area, many people are not different from myself; they have done Tibetan retreats, Zen retreats, Theravada retreats, and it's not strange for them. People are going to go wherever they feel they can learn and grow. So in fact something is happening to the Buddhist culture as it comes to the United States. I don't know what will happen in the long run, but I think we have the choice of guiding it in a good way or not. If we solidify ourselves around distinctions, you know distinguishing ourselves from others, I think it will become just another fad. But if we move away from distinctions and divisions, we could enrich it and find out where it's going. I don't think we are really in control of where it's going to go. So I see this conference as a very beautiful thing to happen, for us to even make a small start in that direction, to be willing to sit together for a weekend and talk to each other. And if there are disagreements, it's all right, it's not fatal.

JACK ENGLER (Conference Moderator) : I think it's really an auspicious occasion for all of us from different traditions to come here and talk together. When the dharma spread outwards from India to different cultures, you didn't really have a choice, you took what was there. And what was there was usually either a subtradition or a great tradition. For everyone here, it's a unique time and place. It's not just a matter of bringing dharma to the West, but bringing all these traditions here to mix and talk to each other, to live together and to find out what the dharma is all about. What strikes me about this conference is that it's one thing to try to wrestle with these questions in the abstract, to come in with conscious and unconscious assumptions and views, but quite another when you are talking to another person, a real person in front of you, and they don't live in the abstract. They are right here with their struggles which are not so different from your own. And I think it does create different ways of coming at these questions about traditions and within traditions, and hopefully we can do that with each other, talk with each other, to each other and keep our discussion this weekend as close to our own experience as possible. And we can do that in a kind of playful, exploratory way, to see where it might lead, not that we have to know exactly where we're going when we start talking about something. Not knowing where it might lead or how someone else might respond to it but to really take it as an exploration and follow that as we would in practice itself. For me, this conference is another

way of talking about sangha and the importance of meeting one another on the path in a very direct and real way, not holding back from that kind of encounter, not bumping it up to some kind of intellectual level or some kind of theoretical level where it's much easier to talk about these things, but being willing to stand behind and in what one says and who one is and what one does.

STEPHEN BATCHELOR: As Joseph mentioned earlier, we talked about holding this conference at the Sharpham Community in Devon, England where Martine and I live. Even though we could not hold the conference there, we have in fact initiated during the last two years what we call Colloquia, pretty much the same sort of scale of this conference and pretty much the same kind of brief, namely, to bring people from different traditions together to explore issues of common concern. And that's something close to my heart. I feel that as Buddhism consolidates itself in European and American cultures, there is often a tendency for the groups to become isolated from each other, for people to become very concerned and committed to their own particular brand and forget about the people who may be just a couple of miles down the road doing the same thing with another brand of Buddhism. And I have seen in my dealings through Buddhist journals and just through meeting people from different traditions how each group constructs its respective mythology about all the others and this is not just a hangover from the Asian cast where those mythologies could grow easily just from the sheer geographic isolation. But even within a relative proximity to one another, such fantasies almost readily take root. Perhaps it's a need for people to justify what they are doing to themselves but they need to have some sort of understanding why they're not doing something else. And what I've found through the meetings we have held at Sharpham is that so much of this stuff can be eroded away, almost evaporated instantly by personal contact, by meeting with one another face to face, by actually engaging not with an idea of the other tradition but with a person who actually lives and represents that tradition. And it's in that encounter that I feel we can perhaps have a basis for resisting this almost inevitably tendency of humankind to isolate itself, to lock its way of thinking into a basically isolated and prejudiced mindframe. So I hope very deeply that the aims of the Study Center develop along the lines that Joseph mentioned at the outset, that this could perhaps be a place where that isolationism is never allowed to take hold.

BHANTE GUNARATANA: It seems to me that in the past we have not paid much attention to how much we could have gained from each other's knowledge and understanding of each other's tradition. Although we have been boasting about our not shedding a drop of blood in the name of Buddhism, we continued to live for a very long time without establishing close relationship with one another. However, both Theravada and Mahayana have developed very rich and profound culture and history over the last twenty-five centuries. Although we do not acknowledge and announce in our writings, we have been considerably influenced by each other. It seems that time has come now when we can build a new Buddhist tradition in a new land which is the United States where the knowledge of both traditions is well represented. In coming to America, both traditions have left some of their trappings behind. What we find now in North America is Buddhism imported from different parts of the Buddhist world. None of us can stop the growth of the other. None of us can claim, "This is the country where we have preserved our form of Buddhism for so many centuries. Therefore, you cannot introduce your form of Buddhism here." We are all new to this "Brave New World." Let us learn to spread the message of the Buddha together in friendliness in this American "Melting Pot." Nowhere else can we see so many variety of Buddhism making headway to feed on the new ground without trying to convert one another. Our message is the same: peace and happiness for all. We have come to the realization that it is frivolous for anybody belonging to any sect of Buddhism to praise one's own sect and despise the other, for there has been enough written material for people uncommitted to either tradition to read and understand who we are and what we believe. Therefore, it is time for us to meet more frequently and discuss how to share our understanding not only among ourselves but even with those who are totally unfamiliar with either of these two traditions. Our most abominable enemy is our ignorance of each other's tradition. This is the only stumbling block, and nothing else, to the remarkable work ahead of us. While trying to remove this obstacle through frequent meetings and discussions, let us continue to work for peace and understanding in the world.

SHARON SALZBERG: When we started IMS, it was basically just something that we did (i.e. meditation practice). We had no sense of history. We had very little sense of a connection to a tradition within Asia, although we had all learned and benefited a tremendous amount from our time in Asia. And there was very much a sense of, well, we're here today, we may not be here tomorrow and if we are here tomorrow, we may not be here next week. And things went on like that for many years. The times have changed a lot since and our relationship to the teachings and traditions have changed a lot. Particularly I think about now as we start this place we do have a greater sense of history, and of planting seeds with this center that will be long enduring and have a very great impact on the transmission of those teachings to this country. Part of it is that things

are closing behind us. A lot of the countries where we have spent a great deal of time in, such as Burma, and have practiced and received great blessings in, are all in a lot of danger. And our access to that is endangered in some way. Part of the changes is also that some of our own teachers are dying and so we really feel ourselves to be in a critical time and realize that what we do here is going to be long lasting and we have to really try to do it in as careful a way as we can. And so starting the Study Center is very much in that vein. It's really trying to keep these teachings alive and to have them very relevant in our time and for the sake of history. And I think starting the Study Center with this conference, we are making a statement that this sort of endeavor is what we really care about and what we are going to be very careful about in the future.

LAMA GELEK RINPOCHE: Whether we call ourselves Mahayana or Theravada or whatever, we are all followers of the Buddha. He is the one teacher and we are all his followers. I don't like to call my tradition Tibetan Buddhism because we always use these labels and tomorrow we may be using labels like American Buddhism, New York Buddhism, Yankee Buddhism and all sorts of things! Buddhism is Buddhism. True, we cannot do anything about the labels of Mahayana and Theravada because these names have been going on for a thousand years; this will not change overnight, but we can let Buddhism be Buddhism and not call it Tibetan Buddhism or Indian Buddhism or anything else. When you are in America, you look at other Buddhisms and call them Tibetan Buddhism or Chinese Buddhism or Sri Lanka Buddhism or this and that Buddhism. But when you are on the other side, within Tibetan or Chinese or Sri Lanka Buddhism, what are you going to see? Are you going to see English Buddhism, American Buddhism, Mexican Buddhism and so on?

MARTINE BATCHELOR: I lived as a Buddhist nun in a Zen monastery in Korea for ten years. Just before I left the monastery, we did a retreat and there were all these people from different backgrounds. Some had studied with Tibetan masters, some with Zen masters, Theravada masters and so forth. And there was one young lady who had never sat before really, just one day of sitting. So we sat together for seven days, in complete silence. At the end of it, we talked about our experience of the retreat. This young lady said this was the first time she had any experience in meditation and she said she experienced emptiness. The interesting thing was her earlier understanding of meditation was through Tibetan Buddhism and in this retreat she experienced emptiness. My own practice is of Zen and questioning; so my experience in meditation is of questioning. And if you have a background in Vipassana, you have experience of awareness and so forth. This got me really thinking and I wondered if it's the same or different. Is the fact of the way you are taught makes you have a certain kind of experience? And, is it important to have an experience or not? So it would be important to look at these questions during this conference, as we have all practiced meditation for some time, and have followed a certain teaching, and to see whether our experience are basically the same or different. We don't have to compare ourselves to each other but try to listen to each other and see if we can learn something from each other. I am also glad there is the beginning of a Buddhist study center here. It's important, I think, to integrate study with practice, and also not to make separation between study and practice. In study you have the practice, and in practice you also have the fact of learning of wisdom, and the two are not separate.

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