

MAGAZINE
SPECIAL SECTION

Buddhism in the Next Generation

By The Editors

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This conversation offers only a sampling of the topics that are up for discussion as Buddhism in the West moves forward. We invite you to share your own thoughts with our panelists Sebene Selassie and Qalvy Grainzvolt in the comments section below: they will be responding to questions from Tricycle readers throughout the month of August. Simply scroll down to the bottom of this page and click “view comments” to begin.

—The Editors

In April, four Buddhist teachers under the age of 45 gathered at New York University to

discuss how Buddhist practices can speak to the lives of younger generations. The conversation, presented as “Buddhism Now: The Next Generation of Teachers,” was hosted by MindfulNYU, the university’s on-campus mindfulness initiative. Moderated by Reka Prasad, assistant director of MindfulNYU, the panel included Lodro Rinzler, a teacher in the Shambhala tradition and cofounder of MNDFL, a drop-in meditation studio; Sebene Selassie, a certified Integral Coach and teacher at New York Insight Meditation Center; Lama Rod Owens, a Master of Divinity student at Harvard Divinity School and core teacher at the Natural Dharma Fellowship in New Hampshire; and Qalvy Grainzvolt, clergy at Shinnyo-en and lead meditation guide at the Shinnyo Center for Meditation and Well-being in New York City. The transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Reka Prasad (RP): The four of you studied with the generation of teachers who were based in the West but who were from Asia or had been to Asia to study. How are you experiencing the difference between your teachers and teachers of your own generation?



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Qalvy Grainzvolt (QG): The dharma is timeless; it is always relevant. But yes, there are definitely generational differences. What I've been trying to do in order to see eye to eye with other practitioners is to recognize that we are, in a way, cooking this meal—Buddhism—that never stops being cooked. I have to figure out what spices I can add that are culturally relevant and that can continue to make the meal nourishing and enjoyable in whatever culture it finds itself.

Lodro Rinzler (LR): There's one story that for me illustrates the difference between the generations. When I was the director of the Boston Shambhala Center, there was one particular senior student with whom I could never see eye to eye. At one point I said, "All right, let's do this thought exercise. Someone new walks into a Shambhala center. What do you think needs to happen?" And she said, "Well, I studied with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who wrote the book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. So I think we have to cut their trip, really just cut through the ego. What about you?" And I said, "I studied with Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, Trungpa's son and heir. And what I learned from him is that we really need to be quite kind to anyone who walks in." All of a sudden something clicked between us, and we understood how we were coming from completely different viewpoints. And then we were able to work together more easily.

I think the reason we couldn't agree for a long time is that the motivation for people to come to, say, a Shambhala center has changed a lot from 40 years ago. Rather than showing an interest in a religious experience, they come with interest in meditation as a tool for genuinely discovering who they are and how to better manage their lives—these days you're less likely to hear "I love the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche" or "I want to become a Buddhist," and more likely to hear "I'm super stressed out and need help." That was my point in my dialogue with the senior student: if you are struggling with crippling anxiety, and you come to the center and are met by someone who tells you that you need to quit your job and give up your ambition, you will walk right out of that place and never attempt to



Photo courtesy of Katie Fischer

meditate. These people need to be met with compassion, not someone drunk on the power of being further along on the path than they are.

My understanding is that back in the '70s, when the Shambhala community was still in the process of forming, there was a heavier emphasis on the absolute Mahayana teachings, as opposed to the relative aspect of compassion. Now we are starting to see people come around to understanding how some of the compassion practices could be very applicable to our time.

Sebene Selassie (SS): I agree. One of the biggest differences I see is that tendency in some of the earlier generation to privilege the absolute side—rather than the relative side—of the equation, looking at the attainment of enlightenment but not wanting to acknowledge the shadow of the psychological messiness and imperfect upbringing that everyone has.

Another difference—one I am envious of—is that my teachers Thanissara and Kittisaro [married cofounders of the South Africa-based Dharmagiri Insight Meditation Centre] seemed to have had a lot more direct contact with what I would call much more realized people. Their teacher, Ajahn Chah, was considered realized, and they met many other masters. Here in the West, I think we lack the possibility for that contact. In a way, it's hard to put Western teachers on a pedestal, because they don't seem realized or awakened to me. Do we even know what that would look like here? Do we have an example of that? The previous generation seemed to have had examples, but I'm not sure we do.

Lama Rod Owens (LRO): I keep thinking about that question. My training was extremely orthodox and traditional. I trained regularly with Tibetan masters and Tibetan enlightened beings, and there was a sense that I was getting the whole concentration of Tibetan Buddhism in this unbroken lineage that hadn't passed through a Westerner before it got to me—I was getting it straight from the source.



Photo courtesy of Sebene Selassie

Yet even though I felt like I had received an intense heart-transmission of lineage, I had to deal with a tremendous cultural barrier. I ended up going through a breakdown after my training, because there was a system of thought and practice that was trying to override my sense of who I was as Rod. On one hand there was this lama who had been trained by Tibetan masters. And then on the other hand there was Rod, who was this poly-queer, activist-anarchist, mixed class, brown-



Photo courtesy of Bess Adler

bodied person.

The lama part was taking over, and I was becoming a different person. I started becoming a lie. So I had to start making different choices about how I represented myself, and I started to privilege “Rod” over the “lama.” There was a lot of healing, and the dharma began to live and manifest through my particular body and experience. What my teacher has told me and authorized me to do was to go into the world and to represent dharma in a way that he can’t, because he is not black or a poly-whatever anarchist.

I think this happens to a lot of Western teachers. The tendency is to believe that our teachers’ way of being in the world, in terms of their pedagogy style, personality, and interpersonal etiquette, is what a teacher *is* and the way a teacher *should be*. To a certain extent, we have to model the example of our teachers. I am deeply touched by my teacher’s presence and how he works with others, for instance. But he is an older Tibetan man and so has a cultural location that I cannot emulate and would not choose to emulate. As Western teachers, we have to develop an authentic voice and presence in our work that speak to our own intersectionalities.

QG: One of the biggest “aha” moments I had regarding the intergenerational question was with someone who is not just a generation up but who is actually the head of the Shinnyo-en Buddhist order, Her Holiness Shinso Ito. I had the privilege of assisting her in a very special ritual. Before the ceremony, those of us participating were lined up, and she looked at me and said, “Your robe’s a little bit too short.” It’s true, I’m tall, and there are no robes that ever seem to really cover my ankles. She got off her chair and knelt in front of me, trying to pull my priestly robes down a bit. This vision of her bending down to help me made me realize that the core relationship between teacher and student is a humble, compassionate desire to help and learn, on the part of both—from and with each other.

I realized that the key to the evolving mix of Buddhism across generations is always to be receptive. That's true for both teacher and student: to give something of yourself genuinely—from a place of altruism and sincerity—even when you don't know what it is you're trying to give.

The previous generation of teachers has helped me figure out what it is that I'm giving, helped me figure out the part of me that I can't figure out on my own. On the other hand, seeing what the previous generation of teachers cannot offer sheds light on what I *can* offer and contribute. The foundation of a collaborative relationship is built on mutual respect and gratitude, and allows both parties to become a mirror for each other in which each can see their role and identity more clearly. For me, the process has been trying to find a place of gratitude for the foundation they laid, and then having the confidence that just as America is a very pioneering culture, I can help pioneer something in my own way.

RP: We've talked about what arises for you as teachers. Along those lines, what are you each seeing arise for the people you teach nowadays?

LRO: What arises for us consistently is finding a way to make sense of the insanity in the world—of politics, of how certain kinds of violence continue to happen. We want dharma and practice to help us make sense of race and privilege and power and how certain lives are valued while others are devalued. We want to have the capacity and the support to be able to walk out of our door each day with the willingness to meet the world, however the world arises for us on that day.

SS: My students seem burdened. People seem really afraid—we probably all know statistics around antidepressant use and anxiety and depression. I think it's coming from the dissipation of family and connection with others. It just seems really hard to sustain that in the kind of society we have. I see a lot of young people who come to the teachings looking for something. It's a wise thing that's drawing them there for some sense of ease, a feeling of freedom, a reconnection to joy.

I also think technology is a huge issue that a lot of dharma teachers don't talk and

teach enough about. It has swooped into our lives. It's in every part of our day. People aren't always given the tools to set limits so that they have enough time spent offline. I'm not rejecting technology outright. But, like other things, we shouldn't necessarily partake of it all the time. We may be casual drinkers, yet we don't wake up and take a shot of vodka first thing in the morning. But so many people wake up and the first thing they do is look at their email or their Instagram feed or whatever—which seems to me to be getting away from life.

LR: In our tech-driven era, I'm also seeing many people walk into MNDFL worrying about ways to authentically connect sans iPhone. I see people looking for a community where they can feel at home and safe, where they can explore really difficult things, connect with peers, form real relationships, and talk about things that are actually meaningful in terms of how we create society.

QG: I want to share something that relates to this feeling of fear we're seeing in our students. An image often comes to my mind: a suit of armor. This is the suit of armor that a lot of us wear all the time. I think it comes from a place of fear, a need to protect ourselves. And when it comes to meditation, the very act of taking off our armor makes us stronger, and it allows us to become better able to respond rather than react as if for battle. A different strength comes out.

RP: This is also related to the discussion of fear: nowadays we hear so much about people who are scared to show up to meditation or dharma centers because they don't feel included in these spaces or are worried that they won't feel included. Could you talk about that?

LR: Maybe I'll stir the pot a little right now. Can I get a show of hands of people who have walked into a dharma or meditation center and felt uncomfortable based on your body? [*Many hands raised.*] By that I mean your age, your ethnicity, your sexual orientation, your gender identity, anything at all. I've felt it even in my white male body, because I was often the youngest: that feeling of "there's no one like me here."

To go back to what I was talking about in terms of our creating society, I want to say that it is not that just the people on this panel go out and make changes in our respective communities. It's all of us together, collectively, creating inclusivity. My own personal definition of compassionate leadership is someone who steps up in a given situation to try to give benefit to others. In a sangha, it doesn't have to be the teacher, it doesn't have to be the executive director, it doesn't have to be anyone in an official capacity. It's just someone who steps up and says, "Hey, are you new here? Do you want to be shown around?"

SS: That resonates a lot for me. When I started practicing, I was almost always the youngest person in the room and the only person of color besides the Buddha. It was not the most comfortable space for me, but there was something in the teachings that kept calling me back.

Here's an interesting story I've heard about the first people of color retreat that Insight Meditation Society [in Barre, Massachusetts] did 12 years ago. They thought *some* people might register. But over 100 people emerged from the woodwork and registered for that retreat. And they had a waiting list almost as long.

Clearly there are folks out there who are hungry for the liberating message of the Buddha, but the spaces might not necessarily be welcoming or accessible. So in my teaching I'm really interested in trying to understand and adapt the way we express the dharma. It's the same dharma, but how we express it can be welcoming or not.

When I first came to New York Insight, there was a phenomenon I called the "back-of-the-head sangha." Everyone comes in, you stare at the back of someone's head for two hours while someone gives a talk, a few bold people ask questions, and then everybody leaves. As Lodro said, how do you make sure that someone who is scared feels welcomed when they come in? How do you encourage that tendency in the group itself so that the group becomes welcoming to new people?

If you can create an opportunity for people to show up exactly as they are and for others to welcome that, I think that's the dharma right there.

