



# Board of Directors Meeting

## September 24-25, 2021

### Rinpoche's address

*Edited, October 2021*

Thank you for your splendid ongoing effort, dedication, contribution, concern, and good heart in all you are doing to help protect and strengthen the Buddhadharma in the world. Today is Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's anniversary, so it is a most auspicious occasion for this gathering.

I want to remind us of who we are, and to suggest how we might see ourselves going forward. Khyentse Foundation's only vision and mission, as we all know, is to help preserve and propagate the dharma. But what do we mean by that, and how do we do that effectively in today's world?

In the past, when lamas spoke of preserving, spreading, and propagating the dharma, they always talked about two things – study and practice. That makes sense, because you can't apply the path without knowing the theory. At the same time, it's not enough to know the theory. To reap any benefit, you have to apply what you learn. So in order to rethink what we mean by propagating and preserving the dharma, we also need to rethink what studying and practicing the dharma really means today.

In the past, when Tibetan lamas spoke of studying, practicing, and propagating the dharma, they assumed that people were already interested in the dharma. In ancient India, and more recently in places like Tibet, Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan, many people considered themselves Buddhists. So, they could relate to remarks like "First you must study, and then you practice."

But we are now in an age where I'm not sure people are even interested in studying Buddhism, including in traditional Buddhist countries. And outside those traditional Buddhist places, I'm not convinced people are even that curious about Buddhism.

So, coming at people right away to prescribe that they should first study and then practice Buddhism is asking a lot when they may not even be interested in Buddhism or in any spiritual path. In fact, any interest they do have may not be the kind we want them to have in the way we define it. For instance, people might want to use the dharma to get calm, reduce stress, or become efficient and successful in their job. Of course, I suppose that any little interest in the dharma is already a blessing.

When Tibetan lamas and other traditional Buddhist teachers, like Thai and Sri Lankan Theravadins, Chinese Mahayanists, and others, use their old-style language, I often feel they just don't understand modernity or even know what it is. Sometimes they seem so unconscious of modernity that they don't

even acknowledge it exists. And if they are conscious of modernity, they may deny or disparage it, or else just give up on it, thinking “we’ll never be able to cope with all these changes, so we’ll just do our own thing.”

This is ironic because the Buddha was an extraordinarily modern person during his time, profoundly challenging the old, traditional ways, and his thoughts were real modernization on the largest imaginable scale. So when we followers of the Buddha aren’t able to glide with modernity and even deny the reality of modernization, that is quite mind-boggling, to say the least.

Modernization is not just going to stop. It will keep going, with things being modernized even faster and more viciously than at present. We need to pay attention to this reality and incorporate it into our thinking and actions if we genuinely want to preserve and propagate the dharma.

Unfortunately, too many of us have this notion that modern human beings are not interested in a spiritual path or in the Buddhadharma. That shows we really don’t understand modern people. Modern or not, anyone who has dukkha always needs some way out of dukkha. We all need liberation. So modernity and its speed should never be rejected or cause for concern, especially for Buddhists.

I’m always frustrated that Buddhism is the most avant-garde and progressive of all religions, yet we have managed to put ourselves into the shoes of something completely archaic. I don’t know how this happened. The core teachings of religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are actually not that modern, considering that they are based in more fixed systems of thought and belief and are even rooted in a particular geography. Yet Christians have somehow managed to make themselves *the* modern religion.

In short, I feel that we really need to be aware of the ways that modernity is constantly creating different situations and environments, and therefore that preserving and propagating the dharma means working with those new conditions and circumstances. This means that Khyentse Foundation as an organization must aspire to protect and spread the dharma with full awareness of modernity and the changes it brings. We should also help our lineage holders, masters, teachers, and other stakeholders to be aware of what the current time and situation require. Khyentse Foundation should think about how to do this.

For example, when we talk about stakeholders of the dharma, we automatically think about lamas, rinpoches, monks, or masters. I also have this habit. That shows how stuck we are in archaic thinking. It shouldn’t be that way now, and it never should have been. In fact, one of our biggest mistakes as Buddhists has been to make the authority of the spiritual path totally rely on lamas, khenpos, rinpoches, monks, and nuns. In actual fact, the genuine holder of the dharma can be anyone – layperson, man, woman, transgender, businessman, farmer, blogger, influencer, dancer, fashion designer, or cook.

Another example of the way we ignore modern needs is that, broadly speaking, lamas like myself right now put most of our effort into working with already converted Buddhists. Almost no effort is going into helping those who are not converted – those who are totally new to Buddhism. I am not saying we should be like Christian missionaries and go knocking on people’s doors to convert them. Buddhists just don’t have a knack for that kind of action or organization. But perhaps we could at least let go of a bit of our

smug pride that “oh we Buddhists don’t convert people.”

Of course, converting people by force or deception would totally defeat our purpose. But there are a lot of people out there, all with dukkha, pain, and anxiety, who don’t know what to do or even how to look for information. As a Buddhist and bodhisattva, it is not only wrong to ignore or neglect these people, but surely we also have a duty to make ourselves available and at least offer useful information to those who are suffering.

A third example of how we subtly avoid modern conditions is the confusion between quantity and quality. Most of us current dharma stakeholders don't have a clear strategy for how to make *many* Buddhists (the question of quantity) and at the same time to make *good* Buddhists (quality). So totally new people are often immediately bombarded with things like Vipassana or Ngöndro, as we try to create quality among people who may not have time to sit and practice for hours on end. In fact, they may not even be interested in taking refuge, let alone doing 100,000 prostrations. What happens is that we lose many genuine seekers.

I ask my lama friends these same questions: “Shouldn’t we worry that Buddhism is the only major religion in decline? Do we really not care about quantity, about having lots of Buddhists in the world?” You sometimes hear scholarly Buddhists criticize or disparage “popular Buddhists.” But I don’t know if we should laugh at or look down on those so-called popular Buddhists. We really need to think carefully and recognize that, at the end of the day, we won’t get quality Buddhists unless we have a sufficient quantity of Buddhists to produce the really good ones.

I recently met a young Chinese woman in Canada who has several million followers on Instagram. She doesn’t have much knowledge of Buddhism, but she told me she has read my books and Mingyur Rinpoche’s books. She’s made a kind of chow mein out of the bits and pieces she’s picked up here and there, and from that she talks with her millions of followers about dharma, Buddha, love, compassion, and bodhicitta, along with fashion, food, and nail polish. This is the kind of thing that we should, if not encourage, definitely not discourage, because a lot of people resonate far more with people like her than with people like me who have some sort of religious appearance.

In short, we need to think about whether we have a strategy for how to reach a large quantity of potential Buddhists. Presently, every time we supposedly reach out for quantity, we end up giving out what is appropriate for quality. On the other hand, every time we supposedly reach out for quality, we end up giving out what is good for quantity. Those who facilitate and support the preservation and propagation of the dharma, like Khyentse Foundation, should think about these issues and experiment with new strategies.

One last example of how we Buddhists have failed to come to terms with modern times is that we seem to think only about our generation. We don’t think about Buddhists fifty or a hundred years from now. Khyentse Foundation has four schools going on now – in Singapore, New York, India, and Bhutan. We should now look at these projects in light of all I have said here about producing a new generation of dharma stakeholders and lineage holders, and even producing a generation that basically appreciates Buddhadharma. So it’s important to look at all our work in light of this next generation.

There are many other examples, but I'm sure you get the basic point about seeing our vision and mission in the context of these modern times. In a nutshell, we must recognize that we can properly protect and disseminate the true dharma only if we relate effectively to the people and needs of our present fast-changing era.