

Trans – Sectarianism

Written by Andy Wistreich, from IKN Newsletter: Volume 1, Number 2, 2001.

The International Kalachakra Network (IKN) is evolving an identity which could be described as ‘trans-sectarian’. I would like to clarify what I mean by this.

Firstly, the word ‘sect’ in this context is neutral. It refers to a tradition with its own institutions, such as Nyingma or Sakya. The term ‘sectarian’ on the other hand implies putting down other traditions in order to elevate one’s own, and is therefore negative. It is good to try to be non-sectarian, but it is not easy, because most of us feel that if it’s best for us, it’s best for everyone. This is, in retrospect, a somewhat childish attitude, and is usually rejected by the Tibetan lamas. The Tibetan tradition called Ri-me, meaning non-sectarian, mainly represents lineages from the Nyingma and Kargyu traditions. In practice, it is not really possible to set up a tradition-less tradition, although it is excellent to promote a non-sectarian attitude.

There are several living lineages of Kalachakra coming from India and Tibet. I believe that the KPG (Kalachakra Practice Group - London) and IKN can respect and represent them all. I feel that whilst we can acknowledge their differences, we are frequently aware of their overwhelming similarity to one another. In practice, when a group of Kalachakra practitioners get together to study and practise Kalachakra, they seem to have more in common than they have differences. On the other hand, within their own traditional groups, or sects, the Kalachakra practitioners in some way feel apart from practitioners of other tantras, because of the highly distinctive features of Kalachakra. This distinctiveness is the case across all the traditions, and for that reason I find the term ‘trans-sectarianism’ useful in characterising the identity of the IKN.

All the Tibetan traditions respect the Kalachakra, but within their ranks, very few people actually seem to practice it. I hope that our getting together through KPG and IKN may help in a small way to preserve the Kalachakra as a living practice. In the post-modern world it seems to me to be increasingly ridiculous to shore up sectarian boundaries which, in the past, were often the product of geographical or socio-political circumstances, rather than deep doctrinal differences. This does not mean to say that I do not want to protect zealously the purity of the initiation and practice lineages; I don’t think we should try to marry the lineages. Where there are variations in method I think we should distinguish and identify them separately to the best of our ability.

Furthermore, I believe that we must recognise the philosophical differences between the Tibetan traditions, and, like the Tibetans, should debate these issues openly and vigorously to help sharpen the sword of wisdom. In particular, I think we should be aware that the differences between the Gelug and Jonang schools on the question of the nature of ultimate truth are intricately associated with the deep experiences of two great Kalachakra yogis, Tsong Khapa and Dolpopa. However, I suggest that when we look at the way that these masters and their followers presented the Kalachakra practices, they seem to be broadly in agreement.

It is important today that the different Tibetan traditions have their own dharma centres, and that Kalachakra practitioners follow teachings with lamas and dharma friends from these centres. The Kalachakra practice cannot be isolated from the rest of Buddha’s teachings and practices. It is only for the study and practice of Kalachakra that it is helpful to have a special group and network.

I use the term trans-sectarian to suggest that we maintain the integrity of the practice lineages and the philosophical schools under the umbrella of the Kalacakra teachings. I believe that we should accept as valid, all authentic lineages, but, as a group and a network, should not be the property of any individual tradition, any Buddhist centre or dharma organisation. I believe that we should endeavour to act harmoniously and not make waves between the traditions. If, in the process we manage to promote a non-sectarian spirit, this in itself will have been very positive. If we trace back all the lineages, they come from but one source – Lord Buddha, manifesting as Sri Kalacakra.