

# IBS GRADUATION SPEECH

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I HAVE TO ADMIT THAT, when Richard Payne asked me speak to you today, I was quite reluctant. It was not because I was not honored to be asked and happy to be given the opportunity to make at least a small gesture toward paying back the great debt I have built up to the IBS over my years as a student at Berkeley and teacher at Stanford. It was just that I did not know what I should say at an event such as this. To tell you the truth, I never attended any of my own graduation ceremonies. Since coming to Stanford, I have been obliged to attend its graduations, but I do not think they provide me with quite the right model here.

Stanford has two kinds of ceremonies at graduation. One is a big, general affair for the entire school, to which they usually invite a famous person to speak on some global issue. As far as I can tell, this is a kind of exercise in institutional self-congratulation—a celebration of, and advertisement for, the university as a world-class place that can serve as an appropriate platform for famous people to say important things. It probably has as much to do with fundraising among the alumni as it does with marking the event of graduation.

The other type of ceremony is done at the departmental level, where someone makes a short speech to the graduating students and their assembled families. Here the emphasis is typically on the value of a Stanford education: the parents are congratulated for their wisdom in choosing the university and assured of the high return on their investment in the hefty tuition; the students are congratulated on completing a program that has prepared them for successful careers and leading roles in the society.

I trust you will agree that neither of these ceremonies serves as a very good model for us here today. Obviously the first type is wrong; otherwise I would not be here. Even if I were a famous person with important things to say about the world, somehow I cannot see the IBS watching the mail for the ensuing large donations from its alumni. More to the point, whatever congratulations are in order here today, they are not, I think, of the sort that focus on investment and gain or the training for success. In my experience, IBS is not about getting ahead in the world, and the people who choose to

study at IBS do not come here looking for careers. They come simply to study the buddhadharma. To this extent, IBS students are not going anywhere: studying the buddhadharma is not a stepping stone to something better: this is about as good as it gets.

Some people may say that we study the dharma as a kind of spiritual investment, to get good karma, perhaps, or to get enlightenment. But most people that I know willing to invest years in studying the dharma do not seem to think of it as an investment for the future; they seem to think of it more as a reward in the present, a rare and precious chance to explore a rare and precious world. In this sense, graduation from IBS might look more like a loss than a gain—getting kicked out of the “dharma realm,” so to speak, back into the matter-of-fact world of gain and loss, investment and profit. But I do not think we need to worry too much on this score (or turn this graduation into a kind of wake). Surely we do not escape the dharma realm so easily.

One of my favorite Buddhists, the Japanese Zen master Dōgen, has something to say that may help us here. In talking about what it is like to study the dharma, he says, “You only get it when you are still half-way there. So when you are all the way there, do not stop; keep going.” According to this, as I understand it, studying the dharma may be an end in itself, but there is no end to the study: it just keeps going on indefinitely. We never really graduate and get kicked out of the dharma realm. We never really become masters of dharma studies (let alone doctors) and then go on to the next phase of our lives. There are no limits to the dharma realm and no phases to dharma study—no degrees, no rites of passage; there is just more of the same, in every direction, forever.

But before we sink too deeply into some Zen-style “non-dual dharma realm” and dismiss this day as just more of the same, I would like to remember a couple of specific things for which I think we can congratulate the students and faculty of the IBS today.

Dharma study may go on forever, but it only goes on when people like us do it. The dharma may be true, as the sutras say, whether or not buddhas appear in the world, but that does not matter unless buddhas continue to appear in the world to tell us, and people like us continue to listen to them. In this sense, it is not just that we students of the dharma take refuge in the dharma; the dharma also takes refuge in us. We are, to mix the metaphor, the vessels, into which the dharma is poured and by which it is carried.

We often tend to think of ourselves as poor vessels. We are just beginners, just laymen. We know little of Buddhism and understand less. We are just moderns, far from the Buddha and the great masters of the past; just Westerners, unable to read the languages or share the depths of Asian Buddhist cultures. But we may be underestimating ourselves. After all, wherever Buddhism has gone in its two-and-a-half-millennia journey across the globe, it has always been carried by poor vessels. It has always had to start all over

again in each new place, among beginners like us, with little knowledge and less understanding. Surely, at the time, these people too must have felt about themselves as we do now. But, with the benefit of hindsight, we can now see them as pioneering heroes of the faith (bodhisattvas, if you like), without whom the dharma would never have moved across Asia or come down to us today.

The dharma may be eternal, but we also know that it is mortal. We know how it died in its homeland of India; and, if we are honest about it, we have to admit that we may be witnessing its death throes today in some of the cultures of Asia. The life of Buddhism seems to rest on its continued rebirth, again and again, in new settings, among beginners like us. We need not get too puffed up here and begin imagining ourselves as heroes of the faith in the hindsight of future generations; but the fact of people like the students of IBS, coming together on the West Coast of North America at the end of the twentieth century to begin the study of the dharma, is no small matter. We can take their graduation as a symbol of our small beginnings, and we can congratulate our graduates as new members of an ancient and noble fraternity of beginners.

The other thing I would like to remember before I quit today is this institute itself. Buddhism may be used to starting all over again in each new place, but it is not used to a place like the IBS. We may think of this place simply as a small, quiet spot in Berkeley, but in the history of the dharma, it is a bold experiment in a new style of institution, combining in one the traditional and the modern—or, we might say, the sacred and the secular—approaches to dharma study.

In my experience, too many centers of American Buddhism tend to be stuck in the sacred: narrowly parochial, focusing closely on their own sectarian traditions and insider communities, with little regard for the larger Buddhist tradition and little concern for the outside world of contemporary society. On the other hand, most centers of American academic Buddhist studies (Stanford included) tend to belong only to the outside world, treating the dharma from a safe, secular distance, simply as the object of modern historical, philological, or philosophical investigation, with little regard for the values of living Buddhist traditions and communities.

IBS is somehow in between these two worlds (a “middle way,” if you will), built on the base of a particular Buddhist tradition but reaching beyond to embrace the study of all Buddhism; grounded in the traditional values of the dharma but not shy about testing these values against the norms and needs of modern society and the findings of modern academic scholarship. Being such a bold experiment in between two worlds, IBS inevitably has its stresses and strains, and will always be subject to the push and pull of both camps—both those who might favor a narrower focus on a particular tradition and a more immediate community, and those who prefer a more secular, more purely academic style.

I think we need to have both these camps. Without particular traditions and communities of the dharma, we have only the books and ideas of a dead religion, and our academic study becomes purely academic indeed; without modern academic study and reflection on the dharma, we are left with only past habits and old answers—in its own way, equally a dead (or at least moribund) religion. But to my mind, if the buddhadharma is to continue as a healthy, living religion in the modern world, we also need places in between the two worlds, places that can serve both camps and mediate between them. IBS is one such place, one of the very few we have; and I, for one, am deeply thankful not only for the many concrete ways it has helped me but for its ongoing commitment to finding some middle way that will keep the dharma alive and well in the modern world.

In the end, then (and this is the end), perhaps today we can all congratulate not only the students and faculty of IBS but also ourselves, for having the good fortune to know such special people and such a special place in the history of the dharma. I hope you will join me in a round of applause for all of us.