

## East-West, West-East

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A friend of mine from New York recently sent me an e-mail article titled 'Is Tibetan Buddhism working in the west?' Although my immediate reaction was somewhat defensive, I have to admit that the author made several worthwhile points. It might appear futile for me to add yet another point of view to this seemingly endless debate, but long before modern civilization celebrated free speech, the Buddha stressed respect for reasoning, and emphasized that we should examine a path rather than following it blindly. Yet, one can't help noticing that even in this so called "modern" age, blind faith is not only alive but kicking, even to the extent of people giving up their lives just because some priest has guaranteed their passage to heaven. It is not only important for us to exercise this freedom to examine the path and its authority, but we must also watch out for the cultural baggage that accompanies it. How much of this culture does one have to buy into? Does being a westerner mean that one lacks the attributes to be a Buddhist? Or is it the case that the "gurus" have to compromise their teachings to fit in to the west?



For years, Tibetan lamas have won the hearts and minds of many in the west, mainly because of the sophisticated wisdom of the Buddha that they embody, but also because many of them appear gentle and easily amused. The fact that they are an endangered species helps too, and there is always a handful of genuine masters that can always be put up as window dressing. But the initial infatuation is coming to an end; moreover, some westerners are beginning to realize that there is a big difference between Buddhism and Tibetan culture.

As societal attitudes change, aided by modern media, the scrutiny of public figures and scepticism towards so-called spiritual paths has intensified. For the first time, Tibetans in general and lamas in particular have been forced to savour the bittersweet taste of free society. For some, it's becoming a painful realization that popularity and success come at a price. Also, reluctantly, Tibetans are accepting that attempts to impose what they see as a superior way of living are not working. But like many in the East, Tibetans still clutch firmly to all of their culture as the ultimate answer to everything, including some of it that they could beneficially do without. As if that were not enough, many have insisted that their western followers adopt the whole cultural package along with Buddhism. It is this

hotchpotch of Tibetan culture and Buddhism that many are having a hard time digesting.

Even basic Buddhist teachings such as refuge are now being taken theistically because of inadequate explanation. When we chant prayers like “I take refuge in the Buddha,” we barely mention – and we therefore ignore - its essential meanings such as knowing that one’s ultimate nature is the Buddha. Given this, it is little wonder that the author of the article refers to the Gurus and Sangha as her “captors” instead of her liberators. Because lamas have the role of bringing the Dharma to West, they have a bigger responsibility for the teachings than western students who are interested but unfamiliar with them. However, instead of making the teachings accessible, the Tibetans have created a huge divide with westerners through a combination of their superiority complex, their fundamental lack of “respect” towards Westerners and an inadequate interest in western thinking. The classic Buddhist analogy of patient, doctor and treatment states that for different patients with different problems, doctors should apply the appropriate cures. Yet if Tibetan lamas ridicule the culture and habits of their western students as a “total waste of time,” how will the remedy ever take effect? Are they really suggesting that westerners should be given the same teachings as illiterate Tibetan nomads? This lack of respect towards westerners by Tibetans is not something recent; they have a long-held assumption that westerners are barbaric. Even before 1959, many visitors to Tibet were denied entry simply because they were foreigners. One could even argue that Tibetans themselves are mostly to blame for the loss of their country because of their extreme xenophobia, and their disdain and rejection of everything foreign as unholy. Despite this, many westerners are charmed by Tibetan hospitality, politeness and friendliness, little knowing that they originate more from social obligation than sincerity. Behind most of those smiling faces, there is still the underlying reality that you are a westerner. The few smiles that are sincere could well originate with the hope that you could be a sponsor or, more recently, to help obtain a green card.

Another of the author’s remarks, which can’t be dismissed, is that “the lamas’ complaint is so familiar that it invokes a yawn.” Besides seeing the western pursuit of Dharma as “superficial and fickle,” Tibetans regard it as merely testing the waters, forgetting that this analytical attitude is encouraged by the Buddha himself. The more you examine Buddhism, the more you will discover its greatness.

Moreover, for Tibetans to label westerners as “materialistic” is more than a little ironical, since material pursuit has become one of the top priorities among Tibetans in general and certain lamas in particular. Big Tibetan settlements compete over everything from the largest monasteries to the latest and most prestigious brands of car. If some high lamas were just to sell their gold and silver teacup holders, it could feed hundreds of starving Ethiopians for days.

It is true that Tibetans think that westerners “shop for Dharma,” and they can’t keep the

tantric teachings secret, but are they to blame if the “lamas themselves turned the Dharma into a travelling show,” including performances such as the sand mandala and the lama dances.

It would be better if we could discover all these downfalls of the Tibetans sooner rather than later. Because otherwise we might become disillusioned and that might be a reason for giving up the Dharma. But detecting these downfalls is no easy task. Generations of experience in being hypocritical have left lamas rather subtle and sophisticated. One example is how many westerners fall for the almost annoying theatre of the lamas’ humility, little seeing that behind the curtain is a fierce fight for who gets the highest throne. It has gone to the extent of some lamas being willing to sit at the same level or higher than their own teachers. This manoeuvring becomes especially dramatic when the occasion involves a large crowd, and even more so if there are potential big donors present, especially those from Taiwan who seem to judge the value of lamas solely by their rank or how many letters “H” precede their name.

The image of Gautama with a begging bowl and bare feet walking humbly on the streets of Maghada seems to have become a mere myth. The lamas’ influence and dominance in Tibet have not only “weakened” many secular aspects of Tibetan life such as art, music and literature, in which the lamas have little interest, but in some cases degraded the Dharma as well. If it were not for Buddhism’s fundamental view of non-theism, the rule of the more narrow-minded lamas could be as tyrannical as that of the Taliban.

Despite their emphasis on an ecumenical attitude, many lamas encourage sectarianism by guarding their Tibetan disciples possessively and discouraging them from studying teachings from other traditions. Of course, they have a convenient excuse: their students will become too confused if they do this. Thus many Tibetan students from one school have absolutely no idea of the other traditions; but that doesn’t seem to stop them slandering the others. As if it were not enough that they are doing this with Tibetans, the lamas have also coached westerners in this sectarian game and they have been shockingly successful. They have also jealously guarded their Dharma centres in the west, although many are merely vehicles to generate financial support for the lamas and their Monasteries back home. Supporting those westerners who are genuinely pursuing the Dharma, or facilitating their studies, is not their primary interest.

So, is Tibetan Buddhism ever going to “work” in the “barbaric” west? Of course it will. The fact that Buddhism could be imported and flourish in then - barbaric Tibet proves that despite the many misdemeanours of its personalities and its alien culture, Buddhism can and does still work for all kinds of nationalities, genders and cultural backgrounds. Discarding Buddhism, as the author seems to have done, merely because of the misbehaviour of a few Tibetans or their seemingly “complex and colourful way of life” does not seem wise.

It is important to remember that it took many decades and generations of courage and devotion to firmly establish Buddhism among Tibetans. Why should we expect that it would be any different in the west?

Moreover, measuring the value of Dharma from a materialist perspective or judging it with the arrogance of a so-called objective view is dangerous. It may be obvious that planes fly and boats don't sink, but who is to say whether a person is enlightened or not? Similarly, we should be cautious when comparing social systems. The author's comment that the "social governance of the U.S." is "far superior to that of King Trisong Detsun's" is ill judged. During his reign, the U.S. had yet to massacre thousands of Native Americans, let alone have a sense of "social governance." By contrast, King Trisong had the vision to see the social value of Buddhism. He brought it to Tibet from India, a country with which Tibet has little in common, and despite countless hardships such as hostility from the sacrifice loving Bon religion. Were it not for his initiative, Tibet might have adopted the bloodthirsty life style of the local tribes or the so-called civilisation of sycophantic Confucianism from neighbouring China.

Furthermore, by asserting that the West has "a very good understanding of what it means to be a Bodhisattva" and comparing this with concepts such as "humanitarianism" or "social activism," the author is completely missing the point. The aspiration of a Bodhisattva transcends mere sympathy for "needy" or "helpless" beings. Having that kind of compassion invariably leads one to become co-dependent, insecure and eventually egoistic, because one ends up defining oneself by the extent to which one has helped. By contrast, Bodhisattvas are not attached to their acts of help or the result. Their aim is to liberate beings from the traps of life and the myth of freedom.



So one might wonder how should a Bodhisattva behave? Gentle? Serene? Humble? Ascetic? It may be easy to condemn the lamas' materialistic misdemeanours but, believe it or not, it is even easier to fall prey to their seemingly wholesome simplicity. Such hypocrisy is a universal masquerade. I can't help but feeling utterly hypocritical on many occasions, as I can easily see myself as the type of lama the author was disillusioned by. Despite having written this, I know that I will not give up any of my perks, whether high thrones, branded shoes, or even 49 Rolls Royce automobiles if someone gave them to me.

It may appear sacrilegious and corrupt to see supposedly renunciant lamas dwelling in luxury and enjoying every imaginable privilege. Similarly it doesn't look right when a supposedly compassionate and skilful master manifests as tyrannical and narrow-

mindful. But one must be aware that an appearance of simple living can be deceptive. It may sound ironical but just as some would find it hard to give up worldly goods, others could be frantically worried about losing their carefully constructed image of being a simple, renunciant and couldn't care less crazy wisdom guy. Isn't it fruitless and painful if one forgoes worldly pleasures just to keep up an image of humility and simplicity? Not only is one not advancing on the spiritual path, but also in the process, one is missing out on a lot of worldly delight. Given this, we should not condemn the few lamas or practitioners who are seemingly worldly, if when it comes to benefiting beings, they display little or no selfishness. We should venerate and emulate their absolute indifference towards others' opinions, such as praise for their simplicity or scandal at their worldliness, and their lack of concern about gaining disciples by being humble or losing them for misbehaviour. At least we should admire them for not being hypocritical. Unlike them I feel that I am far from overcoming this hypocrisy of false humility and attaining a genuine indifference. For me, renunciation, humility and non-worldliness are still the guiding principles for my path, but not because I have seen the futility of worldly life. It is only because I am a "Tibetan Buddhist lama", and this is what the masses think it is right for a lama to do. And what people think still seems to matter to me. Yet, no matter how often we judge, it is always in vain. This is not to say that being judgmental is morally or politically incorrect, but simply that subjectivity is at the very core of all judgement.

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