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Tibetan Buddhism in Northern California

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When the Dalai Lama was forced to flee Tibet before a Chinese invasion force in the 1950’s, Tibet became an icon in the eyes of the West as an underdog; albeit an incredibly spiritual and exotic one. Due to a dwindling of the religious followers and resources within the community of Tibet in exile, Tibetan Buddhists ventured out from their self-imposed isolation to spread the teachings to any who would listen, (Coleman, 2001, 72). Buddhism, already a source of fascination in America due to the Beat poets and Zen Buddhism, became a craze between the years 1960-1997, (ibid, 103). California has always been one of the main entry points in North America for the various forms of Buddhism. Therefore it is to Northern California that I will turn my eye in this paper to discover the acculturation and adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism on American soil within the context of one woman’s struggle with it in a mediation center in Northern California, as well as the uses of Tibetan symbolism in advertising. For the teaching and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, I would argue that it is principally the Tibetan Buddhists who adjust their teachings for the Northern Californian audience, rather than Californians acclimating to accept all philosophical and religious teachings as absolute truth. On the other hand, there are some elements of Tibetan Buddhism which have been adapted so completely into California that they are hardly recognizable; one aspect of this can be seen in art and advertising.

A serious problem to the acculturation of Tibetan Buddhism in California was the role and sanctity of the teacher in the religion. In Tibet “students are expected to worship their guru as a higher being,” (Coleman, 2001, 105). This leads to numerous problems,
the most important one being that one is not supposed to question the faults of the teacher. In America, and in California in particular, the tendency is to look askance at a system which doesn’t provide one with a voice and shared democratic power for reform. The reason Europeans came to America in the first place was to escape an oppressive religious force which dictated lives and was not subject to criticism, and this has formed the backbone of how most Americans look at religion to this day. Primarily the earliest converts to Buddhism were intelligentsia and artists, prime candidates for questioning everything, (Tworkov, 1994, 3).

One example of a Tibetan Buddhist who caused a lot of people to look askance at the religion he was touting was Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, one of the first and most famous Tibetan Buddhist monks who came to America in the 1970’s. Chogyam Trungpa escaped from China ahead of the Chinese invasion in 1959. In the 1960’s he went to Oxford where he studied many different topics, including: Western culture and religion, painting, and Japanese flower arrangement, (Coleman, 2001, 74). Following this Chogyam Trungpa came to America, discarded the traditional Tibetan robes, gave up his monastic vows, and traveled around the country giving informal lectures and teachings to all who were interested. He founded Naropa University, the first Tibetan Buddhist inspired college in America, in Boulder, Colorado. Also in Boulder he attracted many followers who “soon developed a reputation for wild parties that stood in stark contrast to the puritanical image of many other Buddhist groups,” (Coleman, 75). Chogyam himself though married and a father, “openly had sex with his students, smoked, and drank heavily enough to be characterized as an alcoholic,” (Coleman, 74). He himself further stated that, “Demands for sexual exclusiveness were not respected. It was understood
that if you went to Seminary that you would probably have an affair with at least one other Seminarian, whether either of you were married or not,” (Coleman, 161). This sort of licentious behavior was scandalous and caused some people to question Chogyam Trungpa’s religious authority and teaching ability.

Another problem related to the teachers, or gurus, in Tibetan Buddhism was that of reincarnation and its reception in America. In his text on Buddhism, James William Coleman lauds the ancient practice of lineage, “Many traditions can boast of colorful costumes and exotic rituals, but no other denomination selects its leaders because of their past lives and goes on to train them from earliest childhood,” (2001, 103). In a first-hand account of life in a Tibetan meditation center in Northern California, Kimberley Snow speaks of the cultural chasm she sees as existing in the American/Tibetan views of reincarnation by illustrating as an example the story of a Tibetan lama’s first disbelieving reaction to hearing about watches and television, “You find the same sort of outraged disbelief—well founded in cultural ignorance—when Westerners hear about reincarnation for the first time,” (Snow, 2003, 86). Coleman seems to think that the system of reincarnation functions perfectly, and in an ideal society it very well might; whereas Snow harbors a heavy skepticism towards the whole thing.

Coleman further says, “From a sociological standpoint, this unique system not only reduces internal rivalries among those jockeying to be named to high office, but produces leaders who have received intense spiritual training from their earliest years,” (44). Snow wants to agree with this in the abstract:

But then my feminism would kick in and not fail to notice that it [reincarnation] functioned as a way for childless monks to control and perpetuate their lineage without including wives and women. Once I started thinking about this, my mind
would boil and bubble with poison, remembering all the bad things I’d heard about Lamaism and its abuses in Tibet. (86)

On the one hand, there is a scholarly appreciation for the institution of tradition being passed down spiritually through a line of reincarnated teachers, and on the other there is a feminist knee-jerk reaction to a male-dominated tradition which has, on occasion, been abused in power play politics. Donald Lopez, Jr. puts it into perspective by giving a background gloss on how the teachers became the symbols of political power and religious authority in Tibet due to the decline of the monarchy. Due to this transfer, succession became an issue considering that many of the Buddhist monks had taken vows of celibacy. Thus the unique system of incarnate lamas had arisen and been established by the fourteenth century, (Lopez (a), 2002, 469). Indeed, reincarnated lamas provided an evolutionary step to preserve the history and tradition of the race, but they also could provide a method of consolidating power in unscrupulous hands.

In addition, even though the newest emanation could possess the preceding generations’ “authority and charisma, in all of their symbolic and material forms,” they could also be fractious children, (Lopez (a), 2002, 470). Snow has a personal reaction to the *tulkus*—reincarnated teachers—in the embodiment of Tulku Purba who lives at the center as well. He behaves like a brat and is constantly causing problems for the adults who work at the center. Snow and one of the other women have occasion to refer to him as the “Tulku turd,” (Snow, 87). This is in blatant disregard for the reverence one should hold for such beings according to Coleman and even to Snow who says that one of the rules to be followed in conjunction with Tulku Purba’s treatments is to always show “respect” for him, (ibid, 87). Obviously though, sometimes when confronted with the reality of an exotic Asian tradition visceral response wins out of over awe.
In her book, *In Buddha's Kitchen*, Kimberley Snow faces problems in accepting some aspects of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the teachers who pass on the learning. She has this to say, “Sometimes it’s hard to be a Westerner with our habit of doubt and suspicion,” (2003, 178). Then she continues with:

In time I decided that it’s all right that I couldn’t accept everything exactly as it was imported from Tibet. Our transitional generation of Buddhists is supposed to ask questions, probe, examine. That’s our karma. (2003, 178)

Buddhism is an acculturation process, both as it was in Tibet when it came there from India, and as it is now in America. In order to adapt into Tibetan Buddhism and American-Tibetan Buddhism, asking questions, being patient, and testing new waters are the methods by which the philosophy and practice are integrated, modified, and accepted. The same thing occurred with Japanese Zen Buddhism in its metamorphosis into American Zen:

With the Americanization of Zen, the authority of Japanese tradition began losing ground to the American insistence on questioning tradition…these abrasions have sparked an inquisitive approach to the ancient teachings that has infused Zen in American with a vitality that has all but been lost in Japan. (Tworkov, 1994, 4).

The problem with creating “Americanized” versions of these religions, however, is taking the adaptation process too far. Within the challenging of elements which do not stand in accord with pre-established American cultural/social values and morals, or in making certain rules and regulations inherent in the Asian practices of religion negotiable, one might take on the “flesh” of Buddhism and not the “bones” (Kerouac, 1997, iv). On the other hand, without this revitalization of the “flesh,” particularly in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, the “bones” might have dried up and turned to dust. What with the Chinese occupation of Tibet and subsequent escape of monks to India, a lot of cultural knowledge and learning was lost. Through the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in other countries such
as North America, Tibet was seeking in some sense to stay alive. The spread and acculturation of a religion in a new country might raise conflicting ideologies and create changes, but it also equates to a continuation of the tradition.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the “bones” (rules) of the religion suffered from a need to adapt to the American way of life and level of learning ability. Thus, for example, group meditation as opposed to solitary meditation was founded, “Group meditation is not a common practice in Tibet, and ‘formless’ practices such as meditation on the breath or ‘just sitting’ are thought to be beyond the abilities of all but the most advanced students,” (Coleman, 2001, 106). From Snow’s biographical account we have many instances of group meditation, also searching any of the California retreat/meditation centers for Tibetan Buddhism in the Bay area will give you a list of the times in which you can join a group meditation. One example in Snow’s book, in particular, illustrates the benefits on a personal level for her that accrued from group style practices:

My mind expanded beyond self-involvement. I no longer had an individual consciousness but felt deeply embedded in a group experience that transcended the personal altogether…as the group practiced together, I seemed part of something ancient, timeless, rooted. (2003, 29)

In a way, I think that the American approach to practicing meditation en masse is necessary to provide the cultural identity that Tibetan culture already has. In essence, Buddhism in the Tibet already provides a connection to the community/ancestry because it is the religion of the group. In America, Buddhism is a developing religion not a centuries old one and, as such, it needs to provide a basis for a group consciousness at the very beginning of practice. This deviation from the norm of Tibetan teaching from Tibet to America thus provides a new model granting consideration to the needs of a Western audience.
One of the greatest accommodations made by Buddhism in America, though, is the drift away from monasticism and into everyday life. The hectic, and overall secular, lifestyles of Buddhist practitioners in America has made monastic withdrawal next to impossible. Buddhism in Tibet was/is a national institution which created vast temples and centers for study where up to 13,000 monks might live.¹ Ten to fifteen percent of the population were monks in 1959, (Lopez (a), 2001, 468). In America, retreat centers rely on the secular population for the majority of their membership. This causes a shift in the ability of the center to govern all aspects of a person’s religious education, and so an emphasis is consequently placed on daily interaction as a means of enlightenment-practice. In Snow’s book she quotes one of the Lama’s from a lecture, “‘My teacher never gave me the option of going away and becoming holy,’ she says. ‘Life itself had to become my retreat,’” (2003, 160). It’s a different forum wherein one can go on two day, week long, month long, or even year long intensive retreats, but enlightenment is “something that must ultimately be realized right in the heart of the suffering and joy of daily life,” (Coleman, 2001, 219).

A wonderful example in terms of practicing for enlightenment in daily life can also be seen in Snow’s book when she writes about another one of the boarders at the center who causes a lot of problems in the kitchen. Snow demands from the Lama how they can be expected to cook dinner for sixty-five people when this girl is causing such havoc. The Lama says that the experience is “Good practice for bardo.” Bardo is a stage between death and rebirth often filled with “wrathful deities, terrifying sights, [and] loud noises,” wherein one can attain enlightenment if they keep a steady mind, (Snow, 21).

¹Drepung monastery, in 1959, was the largest Buddhist monastery in the world, (Lopez, 467).
death in line with the Buddhist path, (Lopez (b), 2002, 557). If this is done correctly, in the interim *bardo* stage between death and rebirth one should have the enlightened mind which will provide a buffer against the sights described above. By positioning the teaching of such a concept within the realm of a kitchen trying to cook food, one can see immediately the type of ongoing practice demanded in the daily life of a Buddhist.

On a visit to the San Francisco Shambhala Center, some of the students spoke to me about Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and his teaching style. Even though, as I described above, the Rinpoche’s methods might have been extreme, he was also trying to work with people to achieve enlightenment in their daily lives. One student at the center named Brian said, “He worked with people how they were. Not like, ‘We’ve got to set out rules and conform.’ People weren’t going to go for that,” (Brain, 2004, interview). In Coleman’s book there is a quote from Chogyam Trungpa where he states that, “If a husband or wife had an affair, the spouse was more or less expected to regard the triangle as a practice opportunity: a chance to be spacious and accommodating, and to work with the ‘neurosis’ of jealousy,” (Coleman, 2001, 161). Within this framework, Chogyam Trungpa was also working within the experiences of daily life, living with marital infidelity and working through it or using sex as a tool for experience towards enlightenment.

Kimberley Snow also uses personal relationships to work through some aspects of Tibetan Buddhism within her own life. Near the end of her story she talks a lot about a man she names Leo who has joined the retreat center. She falls in love with him, but through a corresponding series of lectures on relationships and their meaning within Tibetan Buddhism she realizes the difference between being in love and loving. One of
her teachers says, “Relationship can be a spiritual path, just as celibacy is a path,” (Snow, 160). This ties in with Chogyam Trungpa’s own teachings of using relationships as a path in and of themselves, though his methods seem a bit more indiscriminate than the teachings at Snow’s center. Later in the text Snow relates the Buddhist ideas of attachment, aversion, and ignorance to relationships:

…we tend to see the other person in terms of our attachment (I love you, stay with me always), as the object of our affections rather than a subject in his or her own right. We can be attached to objects but can love only subjects. (Snow, 2003, 163)

Ultimately Snow realizes and relates to the reader that she has come to the conclusion that loving someone as an object does not equate to real love because it ties you to a present moment and doesn’t allow for personal growth. People are always evolving and learning new things, she claims, and if you love an object than you don’t let that object change because you have objectified it into something which cannot have a separate existence outside your own mind.

In order to really love someone, then, you have to give as well as receive love without attachment. She concludes with, “What is important is loving, without the ‘in’ part. Love. In a vast sort of way. Not that nose-to-nose, toes-to-toes business, but an ever-expanding connection to the universe and all that it contains,” (Snow, 166). The ideal teaching of experiencing Tibetan Buddhism within one’s own life is illustrated here by Snow’s internal working through of how to exist and relate to other people in the world. Her version of “connection” to the universe with love is very much founded in the Shambhala principles which Chogyam Trungpa taught; which is not so surprising, since Snow’s book was published by Shambhala Publications.
Shambhala Buddhism itself as an offshoot of Tibetan Buddhism founded by Chogyam Trungpa was a secular form of the religion devoted to helping a person achieve a sense of power over their own actions within their own lives. It is called the way of the warrior, but in this sense it is the warrior who is “brave enough to face their own tender heart,” not one who kills and maims, (Coleman, 76). Coleman also states that the Shambhala warrior is one who “remains passionately involved in the world” trying to help others,” (ibid, 76). The Shambhala practitioner, then, is most assuredly one who is attempting to find enlightenment within life itself, just as Kimberley Snow was trying to do.

One form of aid which can assist the devotee in attaining enlightenment in their lives is art. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was a great believer in art and its connection to, or ability to portray, the dharma. The students at the San Francisco chapter of Shambhala meditation were meeting on Monday, May 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2004, to discuss the Dharma Art and watch a video lecture series given Chogyam Trungpa himself at the Naropa Institute in 1978. When I asked them about the connection they saw between art and the dharma, they had the following to say: “There are things that are not logically understandable or conveyable by words, but imagery can hint at them,” (Brian, 2004, interview), and, “Art is a translation of the phenomenal world, expressing the truth of the world—the visual dharma of the dharma,” (Laura, 2004, interview). In the video, “Space, Sacredness, and Sanity”, Chogyam stated that, “There is an extraordinary opening of self when we eat, when we work, and when we create art,” (Dharma Lecture Series, Naropa Institute, 1978). Not only can art express the intangible and help to explain the mysteries of Buddhism (according to Brian), but it is something which can be accomplished during
one’s own day-to-day life along with eating or sleeping. It becomes, then, something tangible and attainable; something which can be accomplished by anyone with the right tools or mind frame.

One thing which you can say about Chogyam Trungpa was that he managed to give access to Tibetan Buddhism to a wide audience within North America. Another vehicle which is currently spreading Tibetan religious images and language within North America through art is the latest advertising campaign for Jamba Juice. Based on a Tibetan thangka, (religious artwork done on a white cloth scroll), the current ad, which can be seen online at http://www.jambajuice.com, incorporates many elements of Tibetan religious art within its own glorification of a 24oz cup of blended juice. The cup itself rests on a lotus leaf in the middle of the picture which is where, generally, the person or deity being honored in the thangka would be placed. Above the cup is the outline in red of something which looks similar to a doorway or window, which is usually where the Buddha is placed in a thangka; here though he is replaced by some bananas and oranges. On either side of this, where other deities might go, are a garuda (phoenix) and a dragon, two classic Buddhist animals. At the San Francisco Shambhala Center in the meditation room there are four huge cloth wall hangings on the back wall opposite the alters which have on them the lion, tiger, dragon, and garuda. Each of these animals have important attributes relegated to them within the context of Tibetan Buddhism. To find them on the advertisement of a beverage company is an amazing feat of adaptation, while at the same time being completely crass.

I have herein explored only the barest surface differences which have sprung up within some Americanized versions of Tibetan Buddhism. In comparing the ways in
which Tibetan Buddhism has clashed with and made concessions for its North American converts, I wanted to show via examples of one woman’s experience within a Northern California meditation center what the broader cultural implications are for Buddhist practice in North America. Ultimately, it is a story of give and take as America further examines the teachings of Tibetan Buddhists and tests out theories in their own lives.

Hermann Hesse wrote that “the wisdom of East and West…[are] not hostile, conflicting forces but the poles by which life swings in between,” (Hesse, 1982, 217). This is a charming metaphor which lends itself to the building of a swing for the future children of the global world. In a way, then, the interaction between Tibetan Buddhism and the America has provided an international forum of debate on the methods and practice of Buddhism. This is not an isolated example as there are many cases of cross-cultural religious exchange where the emphasis can be placed instead on Christianity, Zen, Islam, etc.

There will always be conflict and acculturation for a new religion in foreign parts, but for Tibetan Buddhism in California, a niche has been carved and it is flourishing. This can be seen in the work of Kimberley Snow who ends her book with gratitude and joy in her religious experiences, and in the uses of Tibetan Buddhist art in advertising. Or even looking around the streets of San Francisco I can name several places where Tibetan prayer flags hang outside the windows of storefronts or apartment buildings. Even at the University of San Francisco’s Lone Mountain Village housing complex one could see the impact of Tibetan Buddhism in the form of these prayer flags hanging from a fourth floor window. The acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism into California is an ongoing process, but it is one in which heavy inroads have already been made and this, as
I have showed in my paper, is reflected in the experiences of individuals who practice Tibetan Buddhism and by the art which is being incorporated into a radically new form of usage.
List of Works Cited


Interviews: