

No Need for Too Much Tradition

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Some Western practitioners view Tibetan Buddhism to consist of Dharma practice mixed in part with Tibetan tradition. Often, they cannot distinguish between the two. It is very important to know the difference between tradition and the Dharma.

The biographies of Milarepa, Marpa, and Gampopa relate only the pure Dharma. Everything about these great Kagyu masters from the way they lived to the way they taught was the authentic Dharma. For example, Marpa brought the teachings from India to Tibet to teach the Tibetans. He first studied the Dharma in India according to the Indian tradition. Naropa, his teacher, lived in India. Most of the time Naropa was naked. Sometimes he would wear the ornaments of a Heruka. This was the tradition of some Indian yogis in those days. But Marpa never told the Tibetans to copy Naropa's way of attire. When Marpa taught in Tibet, he did not introduce any Indian customs such as the wearing of sadhu robes. His Tibetan followers continued to wear the chuba, a Tibetan style of clothing. Marpa taught the Dharma in a very pure way.

In the West, people have read a lot about "Tibetan lamas". Some Western scholars traveled to Tibet to seek adventure. Later in America, Lobsang Rampa wrote books full of fantasies, including stories of astral travels: about one mind transmitting messages to another's mind. The result of meditation gained by highly realized Buddhist practitioners is the ability to understand supernatural things and to read thoughts. When a very, very good meditation is attained, the meditator is capable of knowing some unbelievable things. The Buddha, for instance, knows all the thoughts of every single sentient being. Unfortunately, Lobsang Rampa misrepresented these special powers. He made them out to be mystical powers. He created the fictitious notion that a person can send his mind to another in order to read thoughts. His books influenced Western ideas about Tibet in a negative and false way. Later on, when the biographies were translated into the various Western languages, all the "sensational stuff" was of course included. In this way, many erroneous ideas about Tibetan Buddhist saints were developed. One example is the claim that they could all fly in the air.

Most Westerners think that all Tibetan lamas are totally pure. Whatever it is that a lama might do, they would think like this, „Oh, there must be some deep meaning behind it." When a lama seemed a little bit unusual, there must be a reason for it. They assume that the lama must have seen something in their minds. This is my experience with some Westerners.

Another misconception of Westerners is to think that it is important to bring all the Tibetan traditions into the Dharma practice. They think that the system of monasteries in Tibet is somehow related to enlightenment. Nowadays people can travel to Tibet easily. They are often shocked by the reality check when they are there – how different reality is to their own ideas of it. They think, "What is this? The lamas are like us. They have the same problems as we do." Some of them become totally confused. But the truth of the matter is that lamas are just human beings. In Kathmandu, you can see monks going to the casinos. I can say this here because some of you have seen this for yourselves. This is not a secret.

How does the Tibetan system of monasteries work?

A long time ago, a system was introduced in Tibet where very young children were brought to the monastery. They were fed and cared for free of charge. In today's Afghanistan, there was once a "Vajrayana Kingdom" called Oddiyana. A very holy king ruled there. He had achieved enlightenment and taught all his subjects. They too became enlightened and the kingdom disappeared. Then a Tibetan king also wanted to do the same. He wanted to end samsara by letting the kingdom of Tibet disappear. He introduced some new rules. Monasteries for monks and nuns were erected all over the country. All monks and nuns received food for free and the harvest from the farmers went to the monasteries. As a result, the people became monks not only to become enlightened but because there was free food. There were also enlightened monks but they were not the majority, maybe one in a million. Enlightened beings were very rare then because there were so many distractions. There was enough to eat but not much to do. None of them practiced like Milarepa did in the earlier times. Nevertheless, there was a monastery in every valley and all of Tibet was filled with monasteries, which housed big administrations.

In the beginning, there was a Kagyu master who founded a monastery in a right way. He started a study program and a meditation center. His wish was to preserve the teachings and not to let them simply vanish. At that time, there was no Tulku system (the system of recognition of consciously reborn Buddhist masters). It was then up to the master's son to take on the responsibility for the monastery in succession to the father. In this way, many Kagyu monasteries expanded. But as time went by, things deteriorated. Monasteries became little kingdoms with very arrogant administrators. They were often very cunning. They knew that the spiritual leaders were necessary to control the people. They would then introduce a spiritual leader, but tried to keep all the power in their own hands. It was all very political. Beneath the spiritual exterior was a political underside.

Every monastery had land. Sometimes the property was extensive. When the monasteries bordered on one another, each side wanted to protect their own land. If an animal from one side crossed over the border it would be kept there. Sometimes fighting broke out over disputed borders. The peasants worked on the land much like slaves of the monasteries, and the administrators reigned like dictators.

The actual ruler of the country had hardly any power. Each monastery ruled supreme. Between monasteries, there was constant fighting. The government was completely powerless. It was later on that they managed to gain some influence and organized themselves like the monasteries did. Then the country was controlled in a strictly religious manner. Good practitioners were not part of the administration. The good masters and monks mainly practiced in isolation. Nearly nobody reached enlightenment in a monastery. Monks were too strictly organized by the administration. Religion and politics were so intermingled in Tibet. The politicians used religion to control the people. The problem was not the enlightened masters, but the administrators. Unfortunately, Westerners have the idea that everything in the Tibetan monasteries was related to Dharma. They think that a monastery is a big mandala, and that every monk is a certain Buddha aspect and the guru is Dorje Chang.

People also think that the thrones of the lamas are a part of the Dharma practice. Actually they can often be a source of conflict. Take for example that you have prepared a throne for me. I am sitting on it now. If you do not do the same thing for another teacher, then problems may arise. This is the way of politics. If you had provided a beautiful chair instead, nobody would have any problems with it. The older Tibetan lamas, even the good and friendly ones, are used to certain customs based on their culture. When they come to the West, the absence of Tibetan musical accompaniment, or the throne lacking a beautiful brocade cover, might make them feel that something is missing. They will also tell you that you should arrange everything in a certain way. You might then think that this is part of the practice. If you do, you are building up the Tibetan tradition in the West. I do not think that these cultural protocols are going to last. If they do, they will be a source of problems in the future. Who should have a higher throne? Somebody is bound to have a smaller throne. In this way many problems can come up.

You must see the difference between Dharma and tradition. When problems occur, understand that they do not come from the enlightened ones, but from the administrators. Even the Chinese communists who do not believe at all in religion nevertheless use it from time to time for their own political ends. This is because the administration system is so well established and is so powerful. In the West you do not have to adopt the administrative and political aspects. I do not mean that your teachers should now sit somewhere on the floor, or you should point your feet at them when you sit. But there is simply no need for too much tradition.