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The masters go West:

A story of Buddhism's adaptation to new "fields"

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The reach and appeal of Buddhism are its faculty of adaptation to other cultural backgrounds and languages, and its egalitarian view of sentient beings. Taking a cultural anthropology perspective, this paper would like to illustrate the fact that Buddhism as a globalized and multi-faceted religion is not a new phenomenon, and that Tibetan Buddhism's diffusion in the West is due to different factors.

"Pure" Buddhism, as opposed to "devious" or adulterated forms, does not exist and was a 19th century Western view. Buddhism as it is practised - we are not talking here about dogma - is essentially a polymorphous religion that evolves according to the specific cultural context that it encounters. After briefly reviewing the past geographical trajectory of Buddhism, we will turn to its more recent impact in the West, the causes of this impact, and its adaptation to a different cultural context and way of thinking.

Buddhism has from the very beginning been a religion without borders. Buddha was born in what is today known as Nepal and spent his life in northern India. After his passing away, Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka, South East Asia, China, Korea and Japan before reaching Tibet and then Bhutan in the 8th century AD.

While spreading all over Asia, the basic tenets of Buddhism remained unchanged. However, the way Buddhism was practised and the rules of conduct were adapted according to different socio-economic, historical and ecological conditions. This explains the vast differences in the dress of the clergy, eating habits, and rules regarding celibacy. Different religious traditions emerged and the Buddha's teachings were translated and written in different languages.

In China, for example, "During the tumultuous years after the fall of the Han dynasty, Buddhism's emphasis on personal salvation and its rejection of worldly ties led to its growth in popularity. Many Chinese Buddhist beliefs built upon and adapted Indian Buddhist beliefs that had been shared by missionaries, traders, and diplomats who had traveled the Silk Roads. As an example of how Buddhism

adapted and incorporated local traditions, consider the role of family in practice. While Indian Buddhists had always stressed the renunciation of family ties, Chinese Buddhists actively promoted the doctrine of filial piety in accordance with the Chinese tradition of ancestor worship"¹

In Japan, Buddhism, introduced from China, encountered the existing religion of Shinto which stressed worship of the nature and its spirits (*kami*). As a result, the Buddhism found in Japan developed many aesthetic and ritual practices that were based on worship of nature.

On the Silk road in the 8th century, which was then occupied by the Tibetans, the Buddhist missionaries wrote a manual where pre-Buddhist notions such as bloody sacrifices were adapted and transformed into *gtor ma*, the "offering cakes."² In Central Tibet, the Samye debate which is said to have taken place at the end of the 8th c. is an illustration of the already internationalised Buddhism as two conceptions were in competition, with both the Chinese and Indians vying for influence into Tibet.

In the West, Buddhism began to be known through translations from Pali, and later from Sanskrit and Tibetan by British, French and German scholars. However "after the chronological precedence of Pali Buddhism had been established, most Orientalists soon began to radically oppose southern Hinayana Buddhism (Pali sources), considered "authentic," from northern Mahayana Buddhism (Sanskrit sources), deemed "degraded." The British Pali scholar Rhys Davids (1843-1922), for instance, held up the rationalism and purity of early Buddhism against the "corruption" of Tibetan Buddhism (*Vajrayana*).³ In the same line, the 19th century Christian historian Marcus Dods (1834-1909) explained that it was hard to "spot any real kinship between the superstitious and idolatrous religion of northern Buddhism and the Buddha's original way of thinking."

¹ "Buddhism in China: A Historical Overview" (<http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/ARTH406-Historical-Overview-of-Chinese-Buddhism-FINAL.pdf>) (PDF). Saylor.org. <http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/ARTH406-Historical-Overview-of-Chinese-Buddhism-FINAL.pdf>

² Yoshiro Imaeda, *Histoire du cycle de la naissance et de la mort*, Droz, Genève-Paris, 1981.

³ Tibetan Buddhism is often called Vajrayana Buddhism. As Vajrayana also exist in Japan, for clarity we use here the term Tibetan Buddhism in a strictly religious sense to identify the type of Buddhism practised all over the Himalayas.

For these scholars and their many commentators, this "authentic Buddhism" as revealed in the oldest texts was thus a "totally rational" and "atheistic" message which had little in common with the religiosity observable everywhere in Asia today. For them, "original" Buddhism, the only authentic form, was a philosophy in the current Western sense of the word, not a religion."⁴ This view was typical of times when positivism spread in Europe and this perception of Buddhism did not threaten the supremacy of the monotheist religions such as Judaism and Christianity.

The word "Buddhism" appeared as early as 1820 with the concept of a tree with multiple branches. However it was only with the publication in 1844 of Eugène Burnouf's masterful text, *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien*, only translated and published in English in 2010, that a precise understanding was achieved through a critical confrontation of the most diverse sources. Works by European scholars gave rise to a fascination with Buddhism in Europe. The Buddhist Society of London, established in 1924, is the oldest and one of the largest Buddhist organisations in Europe.

The Tibetan Studies chair at the EPHE (École pratique des hautes études) in Paris was created in 1936 and held by the explorer and scholar Jacques Bacot (1877-1965) followed by the formidable lady Marcelle Lalou (1890-1967), a specialist of the Dunhuang manuscripts. Besides France, the UK and Germany, there was no recognition of Buddhism as a scholarly topic in other Western countries until the mid 20th century. In contrast, Japan, with the Otani Buddhist private university in Kyoto (est.1901), and Kyoto National University (est. in 1897), was already producing scholars such as the great D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966), but Japan, unlike European countries, was largely Buddhist and familiarised with Buddhist concepts.

In Europe, the interest in Buddhism remained confined to scholars and esoteric circles, although the books of the French lady Alexandra David-Neel from the 1930s to the 1960s started to propagate Tibetan Buddhist concepts among a larger public when the theosophic ideas were also in vogue. She was the first person to recognise the importance of meditation techniques and oral transmission by a master, therefore moving away from the then dominant textual approach.

⁴ Frederic Lenoir, "The evolution of Buddhism in the West," *Diogene*, www.fredericlenoir.com/web/content/view/146/103/lang,en/

In the USA, during the second half of the 19th century, Chinese immigrants settled in Hawaii and California. These immigrants brought a number of Mahayana Buddhist practices with them. The Japanese immigrants, who arrived later, invited Japanese monks who represented various Mahayana Buddhist sects. However, until the mid 20th century, Buddhist activities in the USA remained largely confined to these Asian communities.

From the 1960s, because of ease of communication and travel, and, in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, the tragic events in Tibet, Buddhism moved from the confines of scholarly circles, and was actively propagated in the West.

The first masters to reach Australia, North America and Europe were Zen teachers of Japan, who really broke through the Western monotheist religions and obliged the West to rethink faith in totally different terms. A word and concept like karma had to be translated by a sentence in western languages because the semantic field of the word could not be covered by one equivalent word. Nowadays, most of the Western languages use the word Karma as it had become a common and understood word. Likewise, the word Zen has become incorporated in many languages as implication of a tranquil state of mind.

Buddhism gained influence among mainstream Americans only in the 1960s. Zen was propagated in the USA by Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971) of the Soto Zen tradition. He founded the first Buddhist monastery outside Asia (Tassajara Zen Mountain Center) and intellectuals such as Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, or Allen Ginsberg further popularized Zen. Two notable Zen teachers of Vietnamese descent have been influential in Western countries: Thich Thien-An in the USA and Thich Nhat Hanh in France.

After the Zen masters, in the 1970s and 1980s came the Tibetan Buddhism masters, and their popularity in the west grew with time and space.

Although a small part of Buddhism, it won an incredible number of disciples in the West and thousands of centres now exist, further contributing to the spread of Buddhist concepts among the public. Tibetan Buddhist centres are now found in places such as Mexico, Brazil and throughout South America. This is due, no doubt, to the charisma of great masters such as HH the Dalai Lama, and charismatic personalities such as Chogyam Trungpa, Dilgo Khyentse, Dudjom,

Kalu, and Dzongsar Khyentse, to name a few rinpoches. However, the phenomenal growth has also been at least partly attributed to the deep-rooted attraction of the Westerners for all things exotic, especially if they come from Tibet and the Himalayas. The success of James Hilton's novel "Lost Horizon" (1933) which was made as a movie in 1937, made Shangrila a household name, and was a foretaste of the wave which hit in the 2nd half of the 20th century.

Universities in the USA and Canada started to include Tibetan Buddhism courses in their Religious Studies curriculum; they emphasised on the textual aspect of Buddhism and studied it with comparative and critical method. In contrast the approach of the Buddhist centres was quite different stressing on the practice and the lama's spiritual authority.

Buddhism, as a spiritual path of self transformation, appealed to the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture, but several other factors contributed to the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

The first factor is "the lama," which played a tremendous role. The accomplished masters with their charisma, teachings and meditation techniques attracted people who were often wary of traditional Western religions. They also drew a following among those who had seen psychoanalysis as the modern answer to their problems and were disappointed. Therefore masters were in a logic of spiritual demand and supply.

As Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes the oral tradition and the personal link to the lama who holds the authority to deliver the teachings, many Westerners saw their lama as a saviour, a mentor and a remedy to their problems. The exotic image of Tibet and the loss of their country by these masters also played a part in the Western attraction.

The second factor was the ability of the masters to adapt to Western culture and needs. In order to allow students to attain the disciples, while saving them the arduous task of learning classical Tibetan, the masters had basic texts and prayers translated into Western languages and/or words transcribed into Latin alphabet for easy reading; preliminary practices (*ngondro*) were simplified. Teachings were also adapted to the western logic and time frame; some of the aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, such as wrathful rituals and the cult of local deities, were played down. Even if the master was himself not vegetarian as it was often the case, vegetarian

diet was emphasised. Retreats and seminars were organised along Western norms with inclusive fees for accommodation, teaching, and meditation sessions, all laid out in a programme and a timetable.

One of the most successful masters in this transformation of Tibetan Buddhism for a Western audience was Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and his creation of the Shambhala community. Toning down the paraphernalia of Tibetan Buddhism, incorporating Japanese Buddhist aesthetics, organising his disciples in different levels of duties and privileges, especially the access to the lama, he created a new brand of Tibetan Buddhism and catered to the needs of a different cultural context. While rituals and rigorous practices are very important in Tibetan Buddhism as practised in Asia, they are not given so much importance in the Western context. Therefore, I would argue that Tibetan Buddhism, as it is perceived by many Westerners, is now a new different brand of Buddhism, a Western Tibetan Buddhism, another incarnation suited to the time and place.

The third factor is that Buddhism filled a gap which had seemed to have been left vacant by institutional Western religions, often perceived as too prescriptive.

Buddhism is perceived as a "science of the individual" and a method for personal growth for many Western Buddhists. Their inner experience enhanced through Buddhist meditation and integrating body and mind, is now perceived as a science. Matthieu Ricard, a former scientist who became a Buddhist monk, contrasts "the inner science" of Buddhism, which helps individuals in their quest for happiness, with Western science only interested in outer phenomena. In the West, this individual search for happiness is now the focus of the Buddhist approach. It shifts from the emotional and subjective sphere of religion to the rationality and objectiveness of science, an approach which is deeply ingrained in the Western psyche.

However one may ask with the French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin (b. 1921) whether there is such a "science of the individual," and if opposing Western science and Buddhism is really a necessary debate. I will argue here that if Buddhism in the West provides answers to the individual, it is not due to its scientific approach, it is because, as a faith it provides a holistic view of an individual and stresses the individual's willingness to improve without depending on a higher being.

This idea was in vogue amongst the Western intellectuals thanks to the work of the influential thinker Edgar Morin who wrote in 1973 about the "uniduality" of the human being "who is at the same time biological, natural, doted of a brain on one side, and cultural, social and spiritual on the other side, both being inseparable." (My translation).⁵

This exemple illustrates that when Buddhism arrived in the West, similar Western philosophical ideas about the human being were taking root.

The fourth factor which favored Buddhism in the West was the emergence, from the early 1990s, of a planetary conscience regarding the environment and sustainable development which coincides with the respect of nature, all sentient beings and non attachment to material possession which are two Buddhist concepts. The notion that modern civilisation and the supremacy of economy created a deep "mal de vivre" was debated in Europe in the late 1980s by the economist Henri Bartoli (1918-2008) who advocated that man should be at the centre of economic decisions, and not the contrary. The economic thought should contribute to the management of social transformation and herald policies to end poverty (*Rethinking Development: Putting an end to poverty*, Unesco, 1999). At the same time, in the USA, American economists like Joseph Stiglitz were criticizing the forces of the markets and the race for more wealth.

In Bhutan, the GNH concept with the four pillars, which among others include protection of the environment and sustainable development, was conceived in the 1980s by His Majesty the 4th Druk Gyalpo. Therefore in different parts of the word, there were movements, not always connected, to rethink the economic and growth models which had been applied to policies until the 1990s. Intellectuals all over the world envisaged the place of man in a different economic and environmental paradigm which happened to coincide with the basic concepts of Buddhism and its emphasis on interdependence of all phenomena. Buddhist ideas found in this Western intellectual movement a space for dialogue, which contributed to its influence.

While it is interesting to observe the evolution of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, a debate is taking place in some quarters in Bhutan. In a recent popular BBS TV show called *People's Voice* (April 22nd, 2012), one question was asked: Can Dharma

⁵ Christoph Wulf, *Synergies Monde* n° 4 - 2008:263-266.

(*chos*) be taught in English? Is it not losing its meaning? To which Dasho Sangay Wangchuk replied that Dharma has always been translated and taught in different languages and this is not a problem as long as the essence is transmitted correctly. The question itself is a reminder of the gap existing between the perceptions of Buddhism in Bhutan and in the West. This brings us in conclusion back to our first point.

Buddhism has always been a transnational religion, and the origin of a person did not matter as long as the person had the authority and recognition. Bhutanese, Kinauri, Mongolian lamas in the West often pass for Tibetan, and this is in keeping with the long-held tradition of Buddhism: Masters did not belong to one country or to an ethnic group, they belonged to Buddhism. Notable examples include Padmasambhava, who was from the north-west of the Indian sub-continent, the great translator Rinchen Zangpo who was from Kinnaur, the master Atisha who was from Bengal and the 4th Dalai Lama who was Mongolian. Buddhist Universities in India were opened to all, irrespective of their origin. The determining criteria was the lineage and the teachings that one belonged to. However for centuries, Buddhism remained an Asian affair. Western scholars were accepted, but they did not enter the religious stream. The propagation to the West in the 2nd half of the 20th century has been a milestone in the history of Buddhism. We now observe that Western monks and nuns who have become teachers and masters in their own right. The reincarnation process (*tulku*) which is the Tibetan Buddhism feature "par excellence" has gone beyond Asia as American, English, French or Spanish Tulkus have been recognized.

The faculty of adaptation to different cultures and the transnational outlook characterize Buddhism, and makes it a globalized and universal faith, a faith "without borders."