

Buddhism in the West

JAY L. GARFIELD

THOSE OF US who are involved with Tibetan Buddhism in places like Germany or the United States are—whether we wished to or not—involved in this process of an interaction between two cultures. Set two and a half century ago in the West a great Western philosopher, Socrates, urged that the most important thing for us to do is to know ourselves and that it's an admonition that of course we encounter in the Buddhist tradition as well, to know the nature of our own minds, to know the nature of the self, to know the nature of the phenomena around us is the fundamental prerequisite to cutting off the root of cyclic existence.

So even though this might seem like a kind of mundane and secular phenomenon that is trying to understand the history of the sociology of the transmission of Buddhism to the West, because we are so intimately involved with it, understanding it is necessary for understanding ourselves, and understanding ourselves is necessary for liberation, and so sometimes we have to pay attention even to mundane, secular phenomena around us.

Buddhism has always been from the very beginning a missionary religion, something that people aren't always explicitly aware of when they enter the Buddhist world, but it has always been an important part of the tradition. When missionaries went out from Sanchi to spread Buddhism throughout India, Missionaries went out as well to Sri Lanka, off to China, to Indonesia, and of course eventually to Tibet, Korea and Japan, and Buddhism has spread through Asia not by accident, not by magic, but by deliberate missionary activity.

In every one of these transmissions within Asia Buddhism has transformed the cultures that it has invaded and has also—this is important to remember—been transformed by the cultures that have adopted it. So to take some small examples, when we examine Buddhism's entry into China we see that Chinese society, Chinese philosophy, including philosophical systems of Daoism and Confucianism, become deeply inflected by Buddhist ideas. We see the growth of Buddhist monasteries changing some of the economic and social organizations of China and we see the debates between Buddhists and Daoists as developing the Daoist and Confucian tradition in ways other than they would have been otherwise.

When we examine the import of Buddhism into Tibet we also see of course that Tibetan society was transformed beyond recognition from its pre-Buddhist nature to its Buddhist nature. But it's also of course instructive to examine the way Buddhism itself was articulated and developed in China and the way it was articulated and developed in Tibet. The schools of Buddhism that developed in China, the Hua Yen tradition, the Chan tradition, the Tian Tai tradition, look very different textually, doctrinally, in the forms of practice that are developed, from those that are developed in Tibet. And very often when Chinese practitioners for instance look at Tibet they scratch their heads and say "And that's Buddhism?" and I once had a wonderful experience with a very close Tibetan colleague when we were teaching together in a Zen center, and after about two days we were in the Zendo and he leaned over to me during the liturgy and whispered "Please explain to me again Jay-la, why do they call this Buddhism?"

Even though we find that in various traditions—not only in the Tibetan tradition, but I’ll take that as our example because that is the one in which we are all familiar—we hear people talking about preserving the stainless Nālandā tradition unchanged and pure through the centuries. We know as Buddhists that nothing gets preserved unchanged and pure even from moment to moment, so that rhetoric of Authenticity has to be subjected to a certain amount of critique. Sometimes, that is, you really have to be a heretic in order to be authentic and orthodox.

Part of what I want to do as we examine what happens when Buddhism moves into the West is to make sure you have this kind of idea in the background: that the transmission of Buddhism to the West is in one sense completely continuous with what has happened throughout the history of Buddhism: that Buddhism has entered cultures, transformed those cultures and been transformed by them, and that when we look at the multiple lineages of Buddhism in Asia, we do not want to be asking the narrow, parochial question: “Which one is authentic?” Rather we want to ask ourselves in which ways has Buddhism developed productively in all of these different directions. That’s a sign of the vitality of the Buddhist tradition, not of its weakness. Imagine that you have a plant. You don’t expect that the whole plant is going to look just like the roots; you hope that on each branch flowers are going to develop, and you don’t see the diversity of form as a sign of decay, but as a sign of good health.

I emphasize this only because very often when we are aware of the ways in which Buddhism transforms Western culture, people smile and nod and are happy to see this transformation and to see a kind of improvement in Western culture, but then when they see respects in which Buddhist practice or Buddhist ideas themselves develop or evolve or transform in interaction with Western culture, they become afraid and they say: “Oh my gosh! It’s no longer authentic! It’s no longer pure! It’s no longer real Buddhism! Something happened to it!” and that is a reaction that I really want you to put aside because that has been happening to Buddhism from the moment the Buddha gained awakening at Bodhgaya. Buddhism has been transforming because fundamentally all compounded things are impermanent and Buddhism is a compounded phenomenon.

* * *

Now with those kinds of background cautionary remarks I want to talk a little bit about the difference between the transmission of Buddhism to China and the difference in the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet, because I think that that will provide us with a useful way of understanding some of the interesting features of the transmission of Buddhism to the West, and in part what is continuous with past history within Asia, and what is subtly different. In doing this I will necessarily be guilty of a bit of caricature and overstatement because I want to draw big cardboard cut-out characters that will be clearly distinct, and all of the historical details and footnotes to make them accurate I leave to you as an exercise to fill in over the next few decades of your life!

Here is a big difference between the two transmissions: when Buddhism came to, Tibet Buddhism came to a country that had no written language, very little political unity, a religious tradition that was only really practiced by a very few people, and most people did not have any religious practice at all, no written philosophical tradition; so while it would be an exaggeration to say that Tibet was a tabula rasa for Buddhism, it wouldn’t be too much of an exaggeration. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama sometimes puts it: “When we Tibetans decided that we needed a civilization, we decided we needed three things: We needed a religion, we needed clothes and we needed food. We

looked East to China; they had the best food so we took that. We looked North to Mongolia; they had the best clothes, we took those; and we looked South to India; they had the best religion, so we took that.”

Tibet deliberately adopted a high-medieval version of Indian Buddhism, and in particular the Tradition developed in Nālandā University and deliberately set itself about the task of replicating that very tradition and perpetuating and preserving it, creating the strangest museum culture that the world has ever seen—a culture developed to preserving a moment in 10th / 11th century Indian culture forever—and did a remarkably good job. For that we owe Tibet an enormous debt of gratitude, of course.

But in China the situation was very different. When Buddhism came to China, China was already a very old civilization, with a written language, a well-organized government system and educational system, with two well-established philosophical and religious traditions—the Confucian and Daoist Traditions—sophisticated literature, poetry, art...so we had here a very highly developed highly literate civilization, and Buddhism came from outside via missionaries. When Buddhism came to China most literate and sophisticate people in China thought that Buddhism was weird, crazy, possibly dangerous and at least barbarian.

And so the penetration of Buddhism into China was slow, deliberate, and Buddhism was first adopted by what we might call middle-class or A-league people in China who were attracted to the unusual language and were interested in the philology, in the texts, and gradually developed an interest in Buddhist practice. Of course Buddhism penetrated China very thoroughly over time, but it was a gradual and partial penetration: China never became entirely Buddhist. Buddhism always lived alongside the Confucian and Daoist traditions and it proliferated in a number of different schools.

And there is a further difference that we might note: when Buddhism came to Tibet the Tibetan language was basically reconfigured and reinvented in order to translate Sanskrit, and became a highly Sanskritised language as a vehicle for translation. This is because there was no philosophical vocabulary in Tibetan when Buddhism came to Tibet. But when Buddhism came to China, classical Chinese was a highly developed and very subtle philosophical language with an extraordinary vocabulary for expressing philosophical ideas. When Buddhism came to Tibet a massive and systematic program of translation of Buddhist texts into Tibetan was initiated, under careful imperial and scholarly control, achieving a great deal of unity in language and style. When Buddhism came to China whoever wanted to picked up Sanskrit texts and translated them in their own way, using the philosophical language of Daoism and Confucianism to do that, and so creating texts, translations, that often differ dramatically from one another, and using language that already has a range of philosophical meanings that go far beyond the Buddhist meanings.

Now I find this contrast instructive, because when we think about the nature of the transmission of Buddhism to the West and we look for past models, the model is not Tibet. When Buddhism comes to the West it has come to a tradition, it has come to a culture that is already literate, that already has political institutions and religious institutions and sophisticated philosophy and art and literature and ideas. And Buddhism comes as a strange new import. Some people find it weird, some people find it dangerous, and some people even find it barbarian! We should imagine ourselves as in the very state that China was in when Buddhism first came to China.

And so for that reason, just as in China we find the development of a number of very different Buddhist systems of translation, systems of practice, systems of philosophy, each of them inflected by antecedent Chinese ideas, we should expect as we see Bud-

dhism develop in the West that it will penetrate slowly, that it will penetrate in many diverse forms with many different translational ideas, inflected in very important ways by different ideas from the West. And just as Buddhism is alive and well and thriving in China, Korea and Japan, because it draws nourishment not only from its Indian roots but from its East Asian rain and fertilizers, it's going to be alive and well in the West for years to come because it draws nourishment not only from its Indian roots but from the rain and fertility of Western ideas, and that needs to be a cause for celebration, not for anxiety, as we go forward.

Now, similarities are one thing, but there is also a distinctive feature of the transmission of Buddhism to the West that we are going to be emphasizing as I go forward, and that's this: in Asia, while Buddhism was transmitted from India to other cultures, there was very little or no back-influence from those cultures back into Indian Buddhism. China did not affect Indian Buddhism, Japan did not affect Chinese Buddhism or Korean Buddhism, Sri Lankan Buddhism did not have effects back on Indian, and so forth: it was very much a one-way street. But when we examine the transmission of Buddhism to the West, things look very different because this transmission occurs in the context of globalization and in the context of Asian Diasporas in the West; and as a consequence one of the very important distinctive phenomena that we see is the reflection of Western ideas and Western Buddhisms back into Asia; that is a profound difference that we will also examine.

There is a second major difference between the transmissions of Buddhism classically within Asia and the transmission of Buddhism to the West, because classically in Asia we typically saw the transmission of a single lineage or a single tradition from one place to another at a time. Nālandā went to Tibet, the Chan Tradition comes to South India, the Tian Tai tradition into South China, the Theravādin Tradition into Sri Lanka and into Thailand. But when we look at the transmission into the West, we see simultaneous transmissions of Theravādin Traditions, of Tian Tai traditions, of Zen Traditions, of multiple Tibetan lineages all coming in at once, often to the same places, even to Hamburg! They are all present here. And so we see practitioners picking up not a single tradition or a single lineage, but a long list of practices and ideas and texts from different lineages; and so we are going to see the effect of this multiple simultaneous transmission on the shape of Western Buddhism and on the shape of Asian Buddhism as a consequence.

The complexity was evident right at the very beginning of the transmission of Buddhism to the West when a third feature also enters the picture that we'll also emphasize, and that is the fact that as Buddhism has moved to the West, Buddhism has always been associated in an astonishing and almost paradoxical way with some kind of modernism. I think the founding moment of all of this—this is again a bit of a caricature, and all of the historical footnotes are left to you to work out later—the founding moment is the strange American Henry Steele Olcott's arrival in Sri Lanka and discovering that the Buddhism that he found in Sri Lanka was the most modern version of a secular religion possible. Olcott noticed there is no God; there is an emphasis on reason; people are studying and debating; and he said "This is just wonderful! Now we have a religion that combines all of the elements of modernity with religious practice: I've gotta champion this!"

Now things of course get interesting; because what you might expect is that Olcott then just comes back to America and begins to champion Buddhism. But before he does that, he does what every Buddhist teacher must do first. He finds a disciple. And the disciple he finds is Anagarika Dharmapala. And this narrative is just terribly important,

because often when you go to India or we go to Sri Lanka to the Maha Bodhi Society and we get the biography of Anagarika Dharmapala, we have the biography of this guy who just suddenly realizes that he has to propagate Buddhism and restore the holy sites in India and so forth; and Henry Steele Olcott gets written out of this. But if we look at the actual history and the biography, it is Henry Steele Olcott who convinces the young Anagarika Dharmapala (a) that Buddhism is really cool and that he shouldn't become a Christian, and (b) that it's his job to take the mission to take modernity through Buddhism into Asia; and so Anagarika Dharmapala sets as his mission, to modernize Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka and Asia by suddenly having discovered that Buddhism isn't ancient, Buddhism is modern; and so the inflection of Buddhism by modernity in Asia begins at exactly the same time that Buddhism gets transmitted to the West. That's a really important thing to bear in mind.

And so Western Buddhism and Western-inflected Asian Buddhism are born at the same time and they are born in the same interaction, and that birth gives rise to a history of Asian Buddhism adopting Western ideas in the course of its confrontation with modernity, and the West adopting Buddhist ideas at the same time—and this is the deep tension that runs through modern Buddhism—it must at the same time be ancient wisdom tried and true and passed down through an infallible lineage, and completely modern!

Of course there is a ton of detail to fill in here and that would require us to talk about each of the many transmissions of Buddhism to the West and that would take us a long time. We are not going to do that; but what we are going to do is to sketch a big picture, because this transmission of Buddhism to the West and this concomitant transmission of the West and of Western ideas into Buddhist cultures becomes accelerated in the 20th century by the phenomenon of globalization and by the Diaspora of Asian Buddhist communities in the West.

* * *

So now what I want to do is simply review some of the important ways in which Western ideas have inflected Buddhism not only in the West, but also in Asian cultures, and in ways that they continue to do so; and as I talk about this I don't want you to hear this as “pollution of the stainless Nālandā tradition”, but rather as the kind of development and flourishing of Buddhism that has made Buddhism a vital tradition over the past two-and-a-half millennia.

Let us consider the socially-engaged-Buddhist movement which arose initially in South East Asia through the work with people like but not only Thich Nhat Hanh but also Ajahn Sulak Sivaraksa. This tradition is a very new tradition, and it is a tradition of Buddhist organizations engaged in social service; in the development of schools, of hospitals, of social welfare agencies, of hospice care and so forth. This is a feature of Buddhist activity that many of us in the West smile about and we think “Gee, this is a natural outgrowth of teachings of compassion that have been present from the Buddha in the Buddhist teachings for 2500 years”; but if we think that we have a difficult question to ask ourselves. The difficult and embarrassing question that we need to ask is: if this is a natural outgrowth of the teachings of compassion why did it take a little over 2000 years to these things to happen? Of course there are complicated answers to that, but the real answer to why it did finally emerge has to do with the fact that the scholars we are talking about interacted with Christian and Catholic missionaries who were involved in this kind of activity and began to see that a religious organization could indeed be involved in mundane social welfare activities, and that “this was a good thing”:

it was an inflection by Western traditions of Buddhism that brought about the socially-engaged-Buddhist movement.

Eco-Buddhism is another wonderful example, and again I will turn to Thailand as one of the most wonderful examples where we have the institution of ordination of trees as a way of protecting forests, and ordination of waterways and other natural phenomena, in a metaphorical sense of course; but the idea that Buddhism is ecological—and of course His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Holiness the Karmapa have also emphasized that teachings of interdependence as well as compassion make an “ecological sensibility imperative”—and so it would be easy to say yes, these teachers, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, His Holiness the Karmapa bring the teaching of ecology to us. But ask the question: “Where did they get the teaching of ecology?” and it was not from the *Śālistamba sūtra*, right? And it was not from the *Vajracchedikā sūtra*; and it was not from the *Dhammacakkappavattana sūtra*; and it was not from *Mūlamādhyamakārikā*; it was from the Western ecology movement; it was from the Greens. And so this is another way in which Buddhism has been enriched and inflected by Western ideas, and this is not a bad thing.

Institutionally, feminism has done wonderful things for Buddhism. When we see now the restoration of the full ordination lineage for nuns, this has not been something—this is a fact—that has come initially from Asian Buddhists; this came from Sakyadhita, this came from the work of people like Karma Lekshe Tsomo and her colleagues, Western nuns who brought Western feminism into Buddhism and created the impetus for the restoration of the full ordination lineage. So again this is a way in which Buddhism, and when we look at Taiwan—contemporary Taiwan is such an exciting place, because if you look at the Buddhist Sangha in contemporary Taiwan, it is overwhelmingly nuns. Something like 70 or 80 percent of robed people in Taiwan are nuns, and a lot of the reason for that has come from the import of feminism into Taiwan through Western globalization, and so the discovery by women that they can have fully enriched lives in the Sangha; and so this is again a way in which Buddhism has learned from Western ideas; cause I hate to say it: feminism is a Western idea; it’s not a traditionally Asian idea.

There is another kind of intra-buddhist phenomenon that derives from the Western transmission that is less appreciated sometimes, but I think it’s again one of the more interesting phenomena, and has a weird resonance in the life of Henry Steele Olcott. So I want to come back to the strangest thing that Henry Steele Olcott did—and that is saying something because he did lot of strange things—the strangest thing Henry Olcott did was he decided that Buddhism needed a flag, and Henry Steele Olcott designed this Buddhist flag. This is something again, in Asia you ask people “Where did this flag come from?” “Oh, it’s been there from the time of the Buddha”, right? Forget it! It was designed by an American who decided that if you are a real religion you need a flag. Now you might think that’s just a hilarious thing to do and that it has got no relevance, but what was important to Olcott was that if you had a flag you had unity, and Olcott was worried that there was so much difference between Japanese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Sri Lankan Buddhism, if only they had the same flag, people would know that it was the same thing.

But sometimes history imitates insanity, and in this case we have a beautiful example because what has happened if we look back at the Buddhist world in Asia now, one of the consequences of the multiple simultaneous transmission of Buddhist traditions to the West is that in the West Zen practitioners started talking to Tibetan Lamas who started talking to Goenka meditators who also started talking to Korean Zen practitio-

ners and then sometimes we bring in a couple of Theravāda monks into the conversation, and all of a sudden sitting around the table some place in Hamburg or in Chicago you've got people with red robes, grey robes, yellow robes and brown robes all talking about ideas together, and then you see back in India Tibetans going on Goenka retreats or sitting in Zen meditation. Or you see in Japan Tibetan Lamas giving Mahāmudrā instruction in Zendo. Or in New Mexico, you see some white guy and a Tibetan teaching together in a Japanese Zendo. And so all of a sudden you start seeing this interaction of Buddhists in the West, who in Asia would have said "I am a practitioner of *this* lineage, *that's* not actually Buddhism", all of a sudden saying: "See that flag? Same flag all around here. Must be somehow the same Buddhadharmā."

And if you would ask me what the most profound effect of the transmission of Buddhism to the West has been on Buddhism it would be this one. It would be the fact that Buddhists in different traditions are learning from each other because the insights that are available in the Tibetan tradition are often needed by people in the Zen tradition but the insights of the people in the Zen tradition are often equally needed by people in the Tibetan tradition and all across the Buddhist traditions. People have been doing good work in Buddhism in every one of these lineages. But they have been hermetically sealed from one another for a long time. And it has been this reflection through the West that has broken down those walls.

Part of the mechanism that has generated this interaction has been the institution of Western Buddhist scholarship, often in the context of universities and colleges, but sometimes in the context of Dharma centres where Western people begin the systematic Western-style scholarly study of Buddhism and Buddhist texts.

And that has also caused a very interesting reflective influence on Asian Buddhism because in the West we tend to approach studies differently from the way people in many Tibetan, traditionally Asian cultures approach study. And one respect is that we tend to focus on a kind of philological and historical completeness. We like to read a lot of different texts, and we like to read primary texts as well as commentaries. We have this kind of drive to try to excavate texts, edit them, read them and read lots of them.

* * *

By contrast many of the traditionally Asian centers of Buddhist learning have fairly rigid, narrow historical curricula where very often students study primarily secondary literature, monastic textbooks or commentaries and not root texts. And in particular even when they do study root texts, study only one or two root texts in a tradition. And when they study commentaries, tend not to study rival commentaries from other schools, but only the commentary of their own school. So for instance if you were to be studying Mādhyamaka in most monastic colleges in Tibet or in Indian Tibet, you would not read *Mūlamādhyamaka-kārikā* you would read *Mādhyamakavatara* but you would only read *Mādhyamakavatara* with, say, Tsonkhapa's commentary, certainly not with Gorampa's commentary as well for instance, that would be heretical!

But if you were to study Mādhyamaka in most Western colleges or universities you would be reading Nagarjuna's *Mūlamādhyamaka-kārikā*, you would be reading several other texts by Nagarjuna, you would read Aryadeva's *Catuhśataka*, you would read several Indian commentaries by those and then you would compare several Tibetan commentaries, and perhaps a Chinese commentary or two because that would be regarded as the *right way* to study the texts. That approach is now beginning to appear in Asian universities as well, not only Asian secular universities but also Asian monastic univer-

sities. and that is very much a reflection of Western approaches to study that I think is having a very salutary effect on Buddhist study in Asia.

Perhaps even more interesting and maybe more puzzling is that we also start seeing strange things appearing on book shelves of Asian scholars. So when I go into student hostels in Sarnath I very often see translations by Jeffrey Hopkins, by Jay Garfield, by Bob Thurman, by Don Lopez sitting on students desks, and when students are supposed to be studying a particular text in Tibetan they are very often—these are Tibetan students—reading English translations and English commentaries because they find the English much more accessible than the classical Tibetan, and they find the scholarly approach of the Westerners, who are bringing in lots of other texts, more illuminating than the classical scholars who are often in a *tikka* or *vārtikka* mode of word glosses. And so you begin now to also see this strange phenomenon that Western readings inflected by Western philosophical ideas are now moving back into Asia and so Students who are studying these, are studying them in part through Western eyes.

And this phenomenon of course is also opening Buddhist scholars' eyes to the presence of actually a sophisticated Western philosophical tradition that underlies a lot of these translations that they are reading. And so we see Tibetan, Japanese, Chinese Buddhist scholars beginning to turn to the study of Western philosophy as a second way in to the ideas of Buddhist philosophy sometimes as a *pūrvāpaksha*, as an opponent to be refuted, but sometimes as a different way of putting some of the same points. And so again we are going to see just as in China we saw Buddhism inflected by Daoism and Confucianism, in the West and in Asia we are going to see Buddhism inflected by the history of Western philosophy.

And Henry Steele Olcott's modernism of course is still alive and well; and we see that in the very rich and ongoing engagement with Buddhism and the sciences, in particular of course theoretical physics and neuroscience and cognitive science have been of enormous interest to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and to many other Buddhist scholars; and Buddhism as a reservoir of techniques has been of great interest for instance to people in theory of pain reduction, stress reduction and so forth.

And so again we find this kind of dialectic that reflects Buddhism as being relevant to physics and to neuroscience keeping its modernism going but also the openness of Buddhism to developments in physics and psychology reflects this kind of ideology of Buddhism as essentially a modern phenomenon, a phenomenon that is open to empirical science and to reason. And when we see this interaction, we don't only see Buddhism contributing to Western science but we see Western science contributing to Buddhism. So when His Holiness teaches about emptiness very often he'll mention quantum mechanics. When His Holiness is talking about the nature of mind he'll very often mention phenomena in consciousness studies or in neuroscience. And these aren't coming out of the sūtras, right? These are coming out of the laboratory. So these are ways in which Buddhism and its language are being inflected by interaction with the West.

* * *

Now when we look at this kind of panoply of changes wrought in the Buddhist tradition in the West and in Asia as a result of Buddhism's interaction with the West, we might panic. We might say: "My God, It's no longer authentic. It's changed." When we do that, we must remember to go back to ask the question: "What is Buddhism anyway? What makes a doctrine Buddhism?" Buddhism is fundamentally about solving a problem, and the problem is suffering. It's fundamentally about a diagnosis of the cause of that prob-

lem, and the cause of that problem is attraction and aversion grounded in confusion. It's grounded in the conviction that once we recognize that, the elimination of that confusion can solve the problem, and in a path to that solution. None of that has been abandoned; none of that has been fundamentally transformed, even though its articulation is transformed in countless ways.

And in the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* the very first teaching that Śākyamuni Buddha gave upon gaining awakening... Śākyamuni Buddha said "I teach you a path by the middle. It is not a path of annihilation, and it's not a path of permanence." And the path of annihilation when we think about the personal continuum is the path that says that continuum is cut; that there is no identity and no continuity between successive stages of the individual. And the extreme of permanence is the extreme that suggests that there is something that persists unchanged through transformation, a self that is the basis of that transformation. The Path of the Middle is the path that says that even though the continuum is constantly changing the continuation is never terminated.

Similarly with respect to the continuum of Buddhist teachings, Buddhist transmissions and Buddhist practices, we have a continuum that is constantly changing and never cut. We do not have to be bothered by the fact that there is nothing permanent that persists through that change, so long as the continuum continues to develop and to provide a path to the alleviation of suffering.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: I understood that you said that there was no religion in Tibet before Buddhism came to Tibet, but there was this Bön religion. The question is what is the difference of Bön to Buddhism?

A: All right. That's a very good question, and as I said I was giving cardboard cut-out caricatures with a lot of footnotes to qualify them, and one of those is a kind of long footnote on the history of Bön. Now scholars disagree among themselves dramatically about the details of the history of Bön, but one thing seems clear: that while Bön was certainly practiced in Tibet, Bön was not an articulated written tradition before Buddhism arrived, and Bön was not a widely organized and systematized tradition before Buddhism arrived. It was more like a loose affiliation of local practices without a kind of systematic ideology underlying it. When we look at Bön scriptures, they refer back to a pre-Buddhist Era and claim a kind of ancient history, but there is no serious evidence that Bön was actually what we might call an organized system of thought before Buddhism, and so if anything Buddhism created Bön as an organized systematic religion which is weirdly similar to Buddhism in many ways, rather than was (sic) itself inflected by Bön.

And of course the situation is very different in China. In China we have this long literary history and we see Buddhism very much inflected by the translations of Buddhism and the interpretations of Buddhism against the background of that history.

Q: Doesn't suffering always belong to the process of transformation?

A: Yes. Part of the ground of suffering is the phenomenon of change, that's for sure. And we can see that because very little change is not attended by suffering, and indeed if we were to continue this discussion in a great deal of detail, we would see that the

transformation of Buddhism not only in its contemporary form but classically has also been attended by a great deal of suffering and anxiety. I think that it's almost a natural phenomenon for each of us to think that our task is to preserve in a permanent and unstained way what's been handed to us by our tradition or by our teachers. And so when we see transformation or change, we instinctively think of degeneration, and that's also part of Buddhist rhetoric.

When you think about history from a Buddhist point of view it's often thought of as degeneration from an omniscient teacher through more and more fallible human beings, and a kind of decline of the dharma. That's part of the internal rhetoric of Buddhism. Whereas when we think in a Western context we think the other way around about history. We think about progress from a primitive to a more enlightened view, and when we think about Kant and his discussion of the *Aufklärung*, he was really talking about a progress and an emergence from darkness. Now those are two very different understandings of history.

I must say that my own view is that even... especially in the Buddhist tradition we see progress; and that the Buddhist tradition is a deeply progressive tradition that is beset by anxiety about that progress. So you always see any Buddhist commentary begin by saying: "I'm not saying anything new. All I'm doing is repeating what's been said before", but if that was true nobody would read the commentary. If it's all been said before, then why bother wasting a palm leaf? So we get this kind of self-deprecation of originality; but the people we value the most—people like Je Rinpoche, people like Gopampa, people like Mipham Rinpoche—are the most theoretically innovative and creative teachers in the Tibetan tradition; and the people to whose texts we return in the Indian tradition—people like Candrakīrti or Śāntarakṣita or Śāntideva—we turn to precisely because they are building on what went before and they are innovating, even though given the internal rhetoric they have to talk about the decline of the dharma and how there is nothing original.

Q: What do you think about Buddhisms that don't refer back to Buddha, like for example stress reduction programs: they work, they fulfill all criteria, but there is not referred back to tradition.

A: There is certainly nothing wrong with extracting technical ideas from Buddhism and using them outside of a Buddhist context. I mean His Holiness the Dalai Lama for instance has often been asked about this, and he says: "It's wonderful. If you can find something in Buddhism that relieves suffering, then relieve suffering using it!" So if you go to a stress reduction clinic and somebody is using Vipassana techniques to reduce stress or to reduce pain, that doesn't need to be "Buddhist" any more than if you discovered a medicine in a Christian hospital, the use of that medication would necessarily be Christian. And I think that's really the right analogy, that Buddhism has given us a number of things: it's given us insights, it's given us teachings, it's given us an understanding of reality, and if somebody wants to take something that comes to us as a fruit from the Buddha's tree, and serve it in a non-Buddhist context, then you just don't pretend that it's Buddhism, but you can acknowledge that it's something that came out of a Buddhist tradition: no problem.

Q: We have such a richness in the West, but for us as individual practitioners it's also so tempting to try to do everything, to do a little bit of Vipassana and Dzogchen and every-

thing so it almost becomes a distraction. It's not so easy. It's really something that attracts me, but how to deal with it.

A: Every silver cloud has a dark lining! I agree that the downside—the negative side of richness—is a difficulty in choice, and it can lead to a distraction of flitting from one thing to another and that's one extreme. Another extreme is to say: "I'll only take this insight and shut everything else out." But another is to choose a practice—choose an approach that makes sense—but to draw insight and illumination from other places, and that can be a very, very useful thing. I don't think that that needs to be a cause for too much anxiety.

Hamburg 30th June 2010,
Tibetisches Zentrum Hamburg

© Jay Garfield & Tibetisches Zentrum Hamburg

With kind permission from Jay Garfield and Tibetisches Zentrum.

www.info-buddhism.com