



The Evolution of a Virtual Thangka

Ven. Lhundub Daychen,
a Western nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, enjoys using technology to create art. When the Dalai Lama came to Madison, WI last summer to teach, she managed the stage production, creating something part Tibetan, part Western, and entirely unique. She reports ...

Earlier this year, I was asked to transform a livestock and rock concert arena into sacred space for His Holiness' teachings in Madison, Wisconsin. It was a wonderful opportunity for service and for honoring the Tibetan traditions while also incorporating Western elements. Design parameters included many technical considerations as well as the need for a teaching environment conducive to a multicultural audience ranging from serious students to non-Buddhists. What would all of that look like, exactly? As a design method, I find linear thinking ineffective. Letting these questions float at subliminal level, I returned to daily study and practice. When a practice session morphed into distraction and a visualization of the stage design, I got up from my cushion and started drawing.

Imagine the following: a satin patchwork banner of 144 sections of the five elemental colors, the height of a three-storey building, adorned with gold, prismatic mylar tassels. Centered within is a *virtual thangka*. Instead of traditional painted canvas or applique, the outer brocade surrounds a large screen which displays changing images of projected light. Insubstantial and ephemeral, digital video images of mandalas and deities arise then dissolve into symbolic Dharmakaya blue as students arrive for the teaching. The images are accompanied by ritual chanting – a different type of music video. During the teachings, the projected image switches to live video of His Holiness.

The next step was to present this design concept to Geshe Lhundub Sopa, the Abbot of Deer Park and host of

His Holiness and the Madison teachings. It was rather non-traditional, but appeared to exemplify Buddhist principles. To my delight, he consented. He then described a few important details which I added, even though they would remain unseen by the audience. Sharpa Rinpoche generously acted as a consultant, providing indispensable suggestions and advice for this Western novice. And of course, many others contributed their time and talents as well.

An East/West Dance

Many years ago in Montreal, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was giving an Avalokitesvara initiation. He stopped and chuckled, mentioning that some of the senior Tibetan monks looked puzzled by the tormas he was using for the ritual. His Holiness explained that elaborate tormas were a Tibetan invention which did not exist at the time of the Buddha, and Oreos worked just fine. He then commented that it was Buddhism which Western practitioners should import, and not Tibetan culture.

Buddhism has always adapted to different cultures and the West will be no exception, though we continue to do what we can to help preserve the extraordinary Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Thus we find ourselves transitionally engaged in an East-West cultural ballet with many turning points and leaps of faith, as well as the inevitable stumbles.

A Tibetan translator once told me that when one is fluent in both languages it is easy to translate words, but communicating meaning between two very different

cultures is quite difficult. In addition to the scholars and translators we need to navigate this process of cultural adaptation, we need artists, musicians, poets, and others who can delve deeply into Buddhism and translate their insights into forms that resonate with Western minds. Not a dilution or hybridization of Buddhism, but an evolution of its essence into different forms. Tibetan chanting, for example, is profound and I enjoy listening to it, but participating with my own language and music connects in a different way. At the Bloomington, Indiana Kalachakra initiation, an old anti-war folk song was performed for His Holiness. I knew it well. It spoke to the moment in a familiar vernacular, and touched my heart.

Western artists, writers, musicians, and philosophers reflect evolving cultural trends and paradigms, and in symbiotic relationship, help evoke them at the cutting edge of change.

While Western art traces history, Tibetan art attempts timelessness. The forms are of Buddhist religion and worldview, and have remained relatively unchanged for centuries. They serve primarily as a connection to the sacred – an alchemical agent by which one transforms the mundane into the spiritual, an abstract mapping or coding of transcendent realities beyond direct representation. A consecrated statue or thangka painting becomes the basis of the deity itself, a perfected enlightened being, rendering the quality of the artwork relatively inconsequential.

The complexity of Tibetan iconography is a bit intimidating, and even few Tibetans are well versed in it. Based on strict parameters, it can bear multivalent correspondence to subtle realities: Innovation and creativity are not part of the picture. While watching a monk painting a mural, I was puzzled by the pink islands the directional guardians were standing on. I would have painted them in earth tones. When I inquired, the artist told me that out-lying lands are always pink, although not the reason why this is so. Altering these forms is problematic.

Future Designs

Western popular culture and media surround us with images that generate desire, greed, and rampant consumerism, as well as aggression, hatred, and violence. This provides artists, musicians, and others with great opportunity for socially engaged practice. We can use our creativity to reverse these negative trends and initiate positive change,

which has been within the province of artists for centuries. Drawing on our Buddhist understanding, compassion and wisdom is the message, while the medium is open to imagination and inspiration. For this work to be identifiably “Buddhist” may be unnecessary and even counterproductive at times. While we need to maintain and deepen the pure Buddhist roots established in the West by serious practitioners and scholars, and need to grow and expand availability of the complete Buddhist teachings, we can also branch out to offer the gift of Dharma in non-traditional ways.

It is said that the form which is most beautiful is that of a Buddha. We can benefit sentient beings in many creative ways, but perhaps the greatest work of art after all is sculpting oneself into a Buddha. ☸

Ven. Lhundub Daychen has a university and professional background in art, theatrical design and production, music, dance, sound, and media. She has been a nun in the Tibetan tradition for nine years, and a student at Deer Park Buddhist Center for twenty-one years. She is currently engaged in retreat in a passive solar earth-bermed home which she designed and built for that purpose in rural Wisconsin.

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