

# THE EVER-CHANGING FORMS OF BUDDHISM

By James Blumenthal, Ph.D.

Among Buddhism's many remarkable qualities has been its ability to adapt across centuries to various cultural and historical situations without compromising its core insights. It has done so to meet the needs of new communities. New cultural forms and practices, as well as innovative ways of teaching to help to maintain the relevance and vitality of the teachings for the aptitudes, predispositions and conditions of living Buddhists, have continually been presented in beneficial ways on the inspiration of great teachers since Buddhism's earliest period. To use a Buddhist term, Buddhism's teachers have employed skillful means (*upaya*) to most effectively communicate the teachings to different disciples in changing circumstances. Whether it was the Taoist-like critique of discursive thought that was adopted by and is so prominent in Ch'an/Zen traditions, or the Bonpo-like shamanistic tendencies in Tibetan forms of Buddhism, including the use of oracles, weather manipulators, divinations, etc., the "clothes" Buddhism has worn in its manifold cultural manifestations to maximize its effectiveness in new environments are fascinating and inspiring.

Of course this means it has also adapted as it has made its way to the West as well. That Buddhism in its multiplicity of forms changes should not be surprising. Impermanence, after all, is one of the most fundamental of Buddhist teachings. Comfort with change, and acceptance of change, however, is sometimes challenging. I often find people in Dharma centers who feel convinced that if their teachers and lineages are authentic, then those lineages must be utterly unchanged and continuous since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. They seem to feel they are blaspheming the tradition if they acknowledge change, an irony that often goes unnoticed. Along these lines, it is presumed that what happens in the Dharma center today is just like what happened in Tibet 300 years ago or in India 2,500 years ago. After all, it is an unbroken lineage.

And yet history and the tradition itself tell us differently. One need only look at the incredible



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diversity of practice, form ritual, and philosophy (not to mention, resistance to dogma) within Buddhism across Asia and now in the West to realize that historical adaptations have taken place. Zen looks and feels and sounds a lot different than Gelugpa Buddhism. I am not just speaking of different cultural aesthetics, though those are important too. The teachings also vary considerably. As mentioned above, for example, Zen tends to be highly critical of many uses of analytic and discursive thought in pursuit of the non-conceptual wisdom that the Buddha realized. Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug tradition, argued that analysis and reasoning were critical dimensions of the path to that wisdom. Both had influences that helped shape their approaches that developed centuries after, or in distinct settings from Shakyamuni Buddha – Taoism for Zen; Dharmakirti for Tsongkhapa. While there may be a



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fundamental Buddhist wisdom at the heart of both traditions, the “clothes” of both traditions were dependently-arisen. Both arose in partial dependence upon historically contingent circumstances. Just as it was the case centuries ago, great teachers today maintain those aspects of the forms of teachings that are effective and shape other aspects in ways that best communicate them to students. I am *not* saying that the wisdom is different, just that the ways of communicating that wisdom change. To quote from *The Flower Ornament Sutra*:

*In this world there are four quadrillion names to express the Four Holy Truths in accord with the mentalities of beings, to cause them all to be harmonized and pacified.*<sup>2</sup>

His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a perfect example of a lama who speaks about the Dharma in a variety of ways to meet the needs and/or predispositions of his various audiences including Buddhists (of all stripes), physicists, psychologists, secular humanists, politicians, Christians, Muslims, etc. The quote above and His Holiness’ activities exemplify the historically/situationally conditioned nature of skillful means.

Buddhism’s current situation is unique in many respects. Lineages from various countries and traditions are coming into contact with one another and influencing one another in profound and subtle ways. In addition, for the first time in Buddhism’s history, I think that the receiving culture is also having a significant impact back onto the Buddhist traditions they are receiving. It is not just that Tibetan Buddhism is affecting the West, but the West is affecting Tibetan Buddhism. In response to intense interest among laity in the West, high lamas are devoting significant proportions of their teaching time to (often novice) lay disciples. The degree to which this is happening is unprecedented. At the protest of many Western disciples, Tibetan lamas are questioning some of the inherited misogyny that has lingered in Buddhism for centuries. Among other effects of this line of questioning has been a move to begin for the first time a full ordination lineage for nuns (*bhikshuni*) in Tibetan traditions.<sup>3</sup> This move has been led by Western nuns who have gone to Taiwan and Hong Kong to receive their full ordination, when only novice ordination was available from their Tibetan teachers. His Holiness the



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Dalai Lama’s engagement with Western scientists has had a clear impact on research agendas in Western universities, particularly in the area of neuroscience and research into the effects of meditation on the brain. But this influence has gone in two directions. His Holiness has also initiated the translation of numerous introductory science education materials so that monasteries can begin to educate young monks in the rudiments of Western science. These translations are being carried out at The Institute for Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala. Interestingly, perhaps the first attempt in Tibetan culture at this sort “modernist” response to broadly accepted scientific understandings happened in the early part of the twentieth century when the Drepung-trained rebel monk Gendun Chopel left Tibet and traveled in British-occupied India for 17 years. He began writing articles for the Darjeeling-based Tibetan language paper, *Melong* (*The Mirror*) where he would implore Tibetans to wake up to the knowledge of modern science, including knowledge that the world is round (and not comprised of four continents with Mount Meru in the middle)!

It was not common 100 years ago in Tibet for high lamas to offer highest yoga tantra initiations to largely lay audiences of disciples who mostly do not

<sup>2</sup> Cleary, Thomas. Trans. (1993) *The Flower Ornament Scripture*. Boston: Shambhala.

<sup>3</sup> The same thing is happening in Theravada traditions.



understand what is going on. I have no doubt that there are important, historically contingent reasons why these lamas see great benefits in this today. I have no doubt that it is an example of their skillful means. It is also an example of the change in the “clothes” of the tradition – the type of change that has been happening for more than 2,000 years.

One final change I would like to mention that all of this relates back to is the introduction of a more historical consciousness to forms of Tibetan Buddhism (and Buddhism in general). I have pointed out various changes in the traditions in this article. Explicit consciousness that changes have taken place within the tradition has not always been at the forefront of the self-awareness of many Buddhists or their specific traditions. This is witnessed, as I mentioned earlier, by those in Dharma centers who claim that nothing has changed in the lineages of teachings they practice for 2,500 years. Failure to be aware of the skillful adaptations traditions have made throughout history can result in sectarianism because a potential by-product of thinking that my lineage is the authentic unchanged lineage of the Buddha is the implication that other Buddhist lineages are not.<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally, Tibetans have tended to not be particularly interested in the historical conditions that have effected changes in the ways Buddhism is presented. Appeals to authoritative lines of teaching have been more the order of the day. Although this has resulted in inter-sectarian problems from time to time in Tibet, Tibet’s relative isolation from the rest of the Buddhist world has allowed it to not be tremendously problematic on a pan-Buddhist level. But in the world today, where Buddhists of all stripes are in more regular contact with one another and historical consciousness is a more broadly accepted value, I believe that changes are

probably imminent. For example, Tibetans have traditionally studied the ideas of Buddhist philosophy independent of the historical conditions that contributed to their production. Western scholars and modern academic approaches to Buddhism emphasize understanding ideas in context. I have personally found this approach to Buddhist texts, which consider the author’s intended audiences, competing views the author may be considering, social conditions, and other factors that can influence the specific shape of the presentations, to be incredibly beneficial for deepening my own understanding. Recent discussions I have had with several geshe and lamas affirming the importance of this, the increased presence of lamas and ethnic Tibetans in doctoral programs and faculty positions at academic institutions, along with their historically-minded publications, have led me to believe that we may be at the very early stages of a fundamental rise in historical consciousness in Tibetan Buddhist traditions. How long this takes, the shape(s) it will take, and its implications for future generations of Buddhists remains to be seen. But I think moving forward into the 21st century, it is a change that is not only inevitable, but will be beneficial for Buddhists for generations to come. ☸

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<sup>4</sup> John Makransky has discussed this idea very clearly and in great detail in his article, “Historical Consciousness as an Offering to the Trans-Historical Buddha” in John Makransky and Roger Jackson (eds.) *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*. Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000.

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