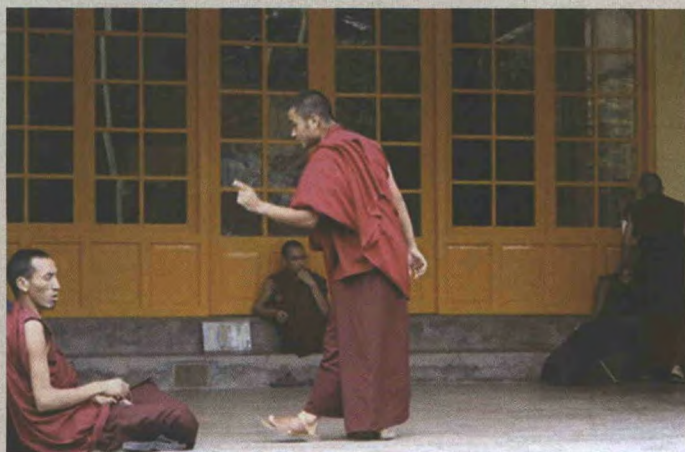


The Soothing of Madness and Sorrow



Monks in Mcleod Ganj sharing the “free-flowing and love-infused Dharma energy” in debating situations.

Sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, the poet Matthew Arnold gave poignant and lyrical vent to his forebodings in his poem, “Dover Beach.” He spoke of the world as providing no certitude, hope, relief, or help from pain. We beings are witnesses on a “darkling plain, swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight, where ignorant armies clash by night.” How close to home that feels nowadays, how sickeningly true, causing pent-up tears to oppress the brain.

India has its own raucous, rabble-raising religious armies that clash by day *and* night and it’s a sad fact that several of our Buddhist brethren have not gone untouched by this virulent virus. It was in continuation of an ongoing process of dialogue, encouraged in part by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, that last week saw groups of Tibetan monks, nuns, and representatives of Indian Buddhists sitting down together at Sara, a branch of the Buddhist Dialectic School, not far from Dharamsala. The Indian side desired understanding, sympathy, and appropriate action from the Tibetans in the task of educating more and more Buddhists in the essentials of the theory and practice of their adopted religion. And they

“What is madness? Madness is the inability to discriminate between what is harmful and what is not. And I think that, in this regard, modern people have gone insane.”

– Ven. Samdhong Rinpoche in “Uncompromising Truth In a Compromised World,” *Tibetan Buddhism and Today’s World* 2006, p.86.

“Deriving from the radiant moon of discipline – the glory of the world, while yet transcending it – the Bodhisattvas, free from stains, are now immaculate. And like the moonlight in the autumn sky, they soothe away the sorrows from the minds of wanderers.”

– Chandrakirti’s *Madhyamakavatara*, 2:10.

received a positive initial response. One Tibetan monk said that in the past the father-India helped the son-Tibet with the gift of the Dharma, and now the son must help the father, and repay the kindness. In addition, the father should again help the son, whose land is tormented by those who would destroy the precious teachings where they have been so painstakingly preserved and nurtured for close on twelve centuries. More meetings and workshops will no doubt follow, and much fruitful activity will no doubt ensue.

All this is essential in another way as well. Some of my misguided Indian Dharma brothers, wisdom-eye tightly shut, I’m afraid, advertised a mass conversion in Mumbai, saying His Holiness would perform the deed, even before the Private Office had given any indication that it could be so, and not aware of the fact that His Holiness very much does *not* approve at all of going around converting people. Sadly, in my country, conversion = vote banks = political power. So instead of free-flowing and love-infused Dharma energy being shared in the open space in which all phenomena manifest, the energy is “solidified, narrowed and directed by the central headquarters of ego to move outward in order to draw the object

of passion into its territory. We extend our tentacles and try to fix our relationship,” as Trungpa Rinpoche puts it. In other words, a vocal and influential minority of Indian “Buddhists” want pliable and vast quantities of sheep-like human beings to manipulate at will, and want to use famous figures to help in the job. How different from my experience in the Tibetan tradition, where together with the tremendous emphasis on lineage there is also the sheer intelligence and confidence that comes from being a participant in a stream of positive study and practice (taught by great bodhisattvas), that emanates from that great source, Lord Buddha himself.

Recently, I was reminded of this very powerfully when, after a meal of pizza at the Namgyal Café in Mcleod Ganj, we were invited to Geshe Dorje Damdul’s room for a chat. Geshe-la is His Holiness’s current English language translator, and he graciously offered tea and time when, as he put it, he would have to work quite late revising some difficult passages from the Guhyasamaja Tantric literature that His Holiness would be racing through the next morning. He was a picture of ease, kindness, and scholarship, unhurried, someone who listened carefully when you spoke, and who gave gentle and appropriate responses devoid of either superfluity or attempt to impress. His room was simple, he worked at ground level, and there were texts and Dharma books in Tibetan and English covering a whole spacious wall. In short, I would describe it as a veritable cockpit of assiduously cultivated culture in its highest degree. Most of all, I was moved by his obvious contentment, not the complacent sort, but the contentment that is a form of confidence possessed by the human being who is making the most of a precious life.

I cannot adequately describe the contrast between the feeling arising from that short visit to Geshe-la’s room, and that aroused by witnessing the almost total lack of deep knowledge and conducive settings that is the lot of my fellow Indian sangha, whose very lineage in any case is in doubt. Indian monks often keep Dharma books at floor level, under the television next to DVDs and books of a questionable nature, and almost always cannot make head or tail of any valid Dharma literature that they might by chance possess, simply because nobody ever gave them any teachings. It’s enough to make one weep, actually, and the

only way ahead is more training for sangha, more trained Geshe-status sangha to teach them, and conducive environments with good board and lodging, so that the presently pervasive and time-consuming quest for food, and a place to stay, that is the hallmark of the modern Indian monk, may cease. Otherwise, in the way of deprivation and neglect lie the very conditions that breed the shoots of frustration and despair that lead to the ignorant armies that clash by night.

I mentioned in a previous article that a retreat would lend depth to my contributions, which were in danger of suffering from the three gross misdemeanors of the true hack: namely, ignoring the reader; being verbose, vague, and pompous; and not bothering to revise one’s work. However, a retreat seems likely to be a week (at most) in beloved Dharamsala, and even then I trust I might experience a Coleridgean shiver of unease ...

“... for it is a melancholy thing for such a man, who would full fain preserve his soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel for all his human brethren ... it weighs upon the heart, that he must think what uproar and what strife may now be stirring this way or that way o’er these silent hills ...”

Not that Mcleod Ganj is exactly silent these days, resembling as it does all shades from Piccadilly Circus to Oxford Street, but you get the drift, gentle reader. Many are the subterfuges which the non-retreatant engages in to maintain his unholy status. Perhaps I should just remember Je Tsongkhapa’s simple words early on in the Lam Rim Chenmo, where he says that up to now we have been under the control of our unruly minds, and it is high time we reversed this most unfortunate situation. If I don’t follow this sage advice, I can expect to be penning future articles from a self-constructed hell, fashioned out of my unique brand of insanity, from which it would be difficult for even the most immaculate Bodhisattva to extricate me. Therefore I take heed, pause, and hope to soon report that the mountain winds most surely wafted waves of bliss from Bodhisattvas throughout my hot and tired Bihar-tossed aggregates. ☉

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