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Tibetan Buddhism

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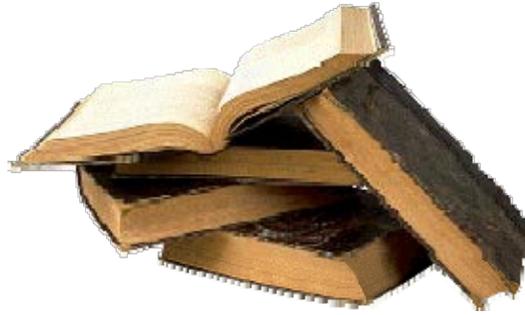
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Tibetan Buddhism

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Upon entering the Amitabha Foundation for the Sunday gathering at ten o'clock in the morning I noticed colorful prayer flags from the facade on the front of the house that distinguish it is a center of Tibetan Buddhism culture in Rochester's east side. Entering the house I was greeted by the director of the center, Frank Howard. My first instructions were to take off my shoes and place them in a closet. He gave me two books titled "The Thirty- Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas" and a "Prayer Book". He directed me to a closet where pillows are located and indicated that members usually take two, one to sit on and one to place the books on in front of them."



Research Papers



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+++ **Tibetan Buddhism**

Upon entering the Amitabha Foundation for the Sunday gathering at ten o'clock in the morning I noticed colorful prayer flags from the facade on the front of the house that distinguish it is a center of Tibetan Buddhism culture in Rochester's east side. Entering the house I was greeted by the director of the center, Frank Howard. My first instructions were to take off my shoes and place them in a closet. He gave me two books titled "The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas" and a "Prayer Book". He directed me to a closet where pillows are located and indicated that members usually take two, one to sit on and one to place the books on in front of them.

Frank then led me into the shrine room where the service was actually held. I entered the room sat on one pillow, while placing the other in front of me with my reading material on it. I sat facing the shrine as the other members did. The shrine has a large idol of the Buddha surrounded by colorful drapes and flags hanging from the ceiling and flowers. Around the Buddha were smaller versions of pictures and statues of less significant Buddhas and lamas.

Against the right wall there was a colorful throne that was made specifically for visiting lamas, teachers, and special visitors. There were many musical instruments such as; a drum (damaru), cymbals, a conch, maracas, and bells used for meditation. Hanging from the left wall were decorative thangkas that depict myriad bodhisattvas and deities. The Buddhists meditate to a different thangka each week.

As members entered the room they found a spot on the floor and then stood up and faced the shrine in the front of the room. They then began to perform some sort of bowing to the Buddha. They placed their hands together in front of their face, moved them down towards their knees bending their body at the same time, and then fell to the floor face first until their forehead touched the ground (in a crouching forward like manner). They

performed this act of acknowledgement to the Buddha three times. Then they returned to their places on the floor sitting “Indian style” for the entire service.

The first half of the service was dedicated to a Dharma teaching offered by Frank. Frank spoke to us about the importance to hear information, think or ponder about the information heard, and to then meditate. He told us that meditation is the most important part of the Buddhist tradition because it is where each person is able to experience their own idolization of Buddhas before they become a Buddha themselves (inner experience) and to achieve an experience of the pure land (outer experience) and ultimately achieve Nirvana. He also spoke about how people are discontented with the world and that is why they write such as articles written in everyday newspapers. For happiness people need to look to their own minds with patience and gradual training exercised through trial and error. Followers need to look to the Dharma for practical teachings to advise them. Through the Dharma they will learn that everything is subject to change, reality is subjective, and there is no permanent expectation for anything. Frank also stressed the importance of practicing the nature of our minds, which involves both love and compassion.

The service is divided by a short break for tea. After the intermission, the second part of the service, which was meditation, began with the ringing of a bell (by Frank). Each week a different bodhisattva is chosen to idolize. While I was there, we meditated toward Tara. First we read from the “Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas.”

During the meditation the objective is to visualize yourself as Tara who represents wisdom, protection, and a basis of manifestation. The goal is to train in the selected bodhisattva’s path, which generally entails love, compassion, and kindness. During this part of the service I observed several people with prayer beads that they held in their hand and rotated throughout the meditation. The meditation involved Frank saying a line or

two followed by the whole group chanting lines in a different language. When we encountered certain parts many people in the crowd would play the musical instruments they had chosen. These parts seemed overwhelming and powerful at the same time. Meditation concludes with selected prayers from the “Prayer Book.”

As I attended the Tibetan Buddhist service at the Amitabha Foundation, I immediately compared that service to the service I familiar with, the Roman Catholic Mass. The first thing I noticed was that the Catholic Mass is more formal, incorporates more people, and is more structured. As people enter the Amitabha Foundation they take off their shoes, gather pillows, and find a seat on the floor of a small room. Before sitting they bow to the Buddha. Catholics enter a large church with an altar and pews to sit in, they dip their fingers in Holy Water and perform the Sign of the Cross looking toward a resemblance of Jesus Christ on a Cross. Before sitting in a pew, Catholics genuflect toward the tabernacle (which is similar to the Buddhists bowing), which holds the Eucharist (that will be blessed later and is believed to be the offering of the body of Christ).

Mass begins with an entrance song while the priest and ministers process from the back of the church to the altar where they genuflect and then find their seats. The Buddhist service did not begin in this fashion. It simply began with a short introduction by the director. Mass is led by a priest who wears special dress, where as the service is simply led by a man, Frank Howard who is casually dressed.

The first hour of the Tibetan Buddhist service merely consists of Frank, the director casually speaking. Frank sat on the floor in front of the audience. He spoke casually about the Dharma, how each person should live to become a Buddha themselves, and why and how people live they way they do, as a Tibetan Buddhist. Participants in the service sit facing the

Buddha and Frank. They sit on a pillow with their legs crossed and their hands relaxed in their laps.

A Roman Catholic Mass only lasts about an hour, most of the time it is shorter. The priest sits in a chair up on the altar in the front of church facing the crowd. When the priest speaks he stands up rather than sitting as Frank does during services. The people in attendance sit in pews at Mass. During certain parts of the Mass, members of the congregation may stand or kneel, where at the service, people remain seated on the floor the entire time.

Throughout Mass the priest and selected lectors will read from the Bible. Frank does not read from any sacred text, he simply talks about the Dharma teachings, as if the entire service is a homily. During the homily at a Mass, the priest relates the Gospel reading to practical, everyday life events to allow participants to have a better understanding of the Gospel reading (which is essentially what Frank does).

After the first hour of service at the Amitabha Foundation, there is a short intermission where members gather to drink butter tea. This is a tea that many Tibetan Buddhist's drink everyday. After the tea break is over, a bell is rung to call the service back to order. The second half of the service is meditation.

Parts of a Roman Catholic Mass are quite similar to these aspects of the Tibetan Buddhist service. During Mass, the Eucharist is blessed which symbolizes the body of Christ. It is offered to all the members in the congregation if they meet the criteria of having been baptized, received reconciliation and made their first communion. Some services also offer wine, but not many today. The wine represents the blood of Christ. This eating and drinking is similar to the drinking of tea performed by Tibetan Buddhists.

There is also a similarity in that after these acts of eating and/or drinking, there is a time of meditation. After members receive communion at Mass, they return to their seats,

kneel down and pray or meditate silently to themselves. Meditation at the service is very loud, cymbals, drums, a conch and other instruments are played. At Mass there are guided citations given by the priest and lines recited back by the congregation as well as pieces read by everyone together. This occurs in a mass during the penitential rite, Kyrie (Lord have mercy, all: Lord have mercy...), the Gloria, Nicene Creed, during the liturgy of the Eucharist, the communion rite, as well as in the concluding rite, therefore it occurs throughout the entire Mass. All of those parts of Mass exemplify how a Catholic Mass is structured; there are defined parts of Mass with specific actions performed within each part. A Tibetan service is only structured by two parts, the Dharma teaching and the meditation. The Dharma teaching alone is as long as a mass, with far less activity performed by the guests. There are definite divisions in each religion's service.

Music is also played throughout Mass at certain parts, however there is usually a choir gathered together to lead the singing. These members are the only members playing instruments. The Buddhist service entails members to have music making instruments with them at their seats to participate in the meditation. Members from both religions can be seen rotating prayer beads in their hands. In Roman Catholicism these beads are called a rosary. The rosary is used to keep track of the prayers recited depending on which bead is held.

Just as a certain bodhisattva is chosen to be worshiped each week at a service, each day a different reading from the Bible is chosen from a different author, therefore, in both the service and the Mass, each day brings about a new story or different aspect of life being looked at and taught depending on which author or bodhisattva the day is dedicated to. Each of these comes from a book or booklet used during both services. Mass ends with a small prayer just as in the service, however we were dismissed from the service as soon as the prayers were concluded. At Mass you are not dismissed until after the priest exits the Church.

The experience I had at the Amitabha Foundation was different from any type of religious service I have ever attended. The most emotional part was during the meditation. The playing of all of the instruments and the blowing of the conch were very powerful; I believe it would qualify as a numinous experience.

The quality of the religious experience gave me chills as if there was an element of a “wholly other” or as if I was encountering something significant. Everyone at the service was very involved and seemed very determined to make the mediation experience as successful and meaningful as possible. As the music progressed, the noise level rose, a man blew into the conch harder, the drummer beat stronger, people rattled the maracas faster, and it seemed as if everyone was concentrating more to reach out and achieve more strength, to keep up the fast pace of performing and meditating. The noise was so loud and brought such a large amount of energy and strength to the room, it seemed to drive everyone’s participation and fascination with the service. The playing of all the instruments definitely caught me by surprise and I found myself awestricken and speechless, it was so overpowering and almost frightening. I felt out of place because I did not know what to do with myself, primarily because I did not completely understand the meaning of it or what I was supposed to be doing.

The purpose of the meditation is to become more like Green Tara, the Bodhisattva the group had designated to meditate toward. The members attempt to live like Green Tara who serves with wisdom, protection, and is the basis of manifestation. They also intend to do so with compassion, love and kindness to achieve an ultimate goal of Enlightenment, to experience Nirvana, and avoid suffering.

The narrative that was employed in the service I attended was the story of Enlightenment. Enlightenment is when one has achieved a state of being without desire and suffering. The narrative gives reference to the Buddha who is the fully enlightened one and

the primary teacher of the Tibetan Buddhist religion. The Buddha lived a life among a path with open eyes, that bestows understanding, brings peace of mind, and higher wisdom, which is what one must perform to achieve enlightenment. This narrative is important because it is essentially the establishment of the religion. This is the one story everyone refers to in order to decipher how the Enlightenment and the tradition of trying to achieve Nirvana originated in Tibetan Buddhism.

The ritual aspects of the service that I encountered were the bowing performed toward the Buddha and the meditation which is the heart of Buddhism. These acts are rituals because they are predictable and repetitive behaviors that employ many significant symbols to the religion. The bowing to the Buddha occurs before the service, but after members settle into the shrine room. This bow is performed three times by each individual. The main ritual is the meditation in which members gather on the floor and sit with their legs crossed “Indian style” with their hands coming around their legs. They sit in this position for about an hour while they recite prayers and hymns aloud (they follow the leader). As some sayings are said, the members perform interesting hand motions to elaborate the meaning of what is being said. They also repeat “Om mani padme hum” several times (in the book you read from, it says to say it as many times as you can) which means “Om, the jewel in the lotus.” Members participate in the service by playing musical instruments at designated points.

All of the instruments played throughout the meditation, the banners and the prayer flags in the room where the service takes place are symbols that represent something significant to Tibetan Buddhism. The lotus, is the core of the repeated line in the meditation. It symbolizes inner purity, as it grows out of the mud, blossoms above water, and faces toward the sun. The conch played by one member symbolizes the sounds of

Buddhist teachings being heard from everywhere. The banners that represent victory symbolize the preeminence of knowledge and wisdom over ignorance and confusion. The colorful prayer flags distinguish the Amitabha Foundation from other houses, which symbolize a center of Tibetan culture. Another very important symbol of this particular religion is the eight-spoked wheel which represents the Buddhist Dharma (wisdom and teachings) and the Noble Eight-fold Path of enlightenment. Enlightenment first began when the Buddha set the Dharma in motion and began rolling it. These symbols represent the core meaning of the teachings and values promoted by the Tibetan Buddhist religion, which spread the desired knowledge and wisdom to many generations.

As a result of the service, I believe the ethical implications arising from the participants include those beliefs set forth in the Noble Eight-fold Path. The Noble Eight-fold path involves following specific behaviors that should be performed. The pieces of the Noble Eight-fold path are: right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation. During the meditation, these are the things being perceived that the members are trying to achieve to ultimately reach nirvana. Another objective of Tibetan Buddhism involves avoiding desire and suffering to find compassion for all sentient beings. The Dharma is the highest ethical truth followed to experience life as the Buddha teaches it.

I believe this service makes a difference in the lives of its members in that it gives positive direction, assistance, and focus in life. It also explains what should be followed and what ethical implications should not be made. These are hints for a successful life full of love, compassion, kindness, wisdom, and knowledge that lead to Nirvana and most importantly Enlightenment.

The Tibetan Buddhist belief system is composed of a doctrine featuring the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths describe a Buddhist's prognosis throughout their life beginning with diagnosis. Diagnosis presents the fact that suffering is always present in life. Next is the belief that desire and craving cause suffering, the belief in the importance of one's self. Treatment is the third truth, which states, when desire and craving are overcome, suffering ends, which is the achievement of Nirvana (Nirvana ends suffering). Nirvana is the last truth. It is attained through meditation and by following the path of righteousness in action, thought, and attitude, which pertain to the Noble Eight-fold Path. Most importantly, the doctrine of Tibetan Buddhism is reincarnation, which is achieved prior to Nirvana. For rebirth to occur there are two instructions. The first is for transmitting one's soul into the pure Buddha lands (the great western paradise). The second is for choosing a womb door in the impure life cycle (or the coming back), which can happen many times depending on the consequences of following or not obeying the Noble Eight-fold path and the Dharma teachings. The trip to the pure lands is an outer experience, whereas experiencing the life cycle is more inner because one is trying to become a Buddha or as much like the Buddha as they can.

Tibetan Buddhists worship Buddhas, Dalai Lamas (a well achieved monk or a reincarnated Buddhist), bodhisattvas (future Buddhas), Taras (ferocious consorts of the bodhisattvas) and spirits. There is no particular God. Tibetan Buddhists are polytheistic idealists. They believe that there are multiple beings and when all they are all incorporated together, they make up the ideals Tibetan Buddhists are supposed to live up to and try to emulate to make their life as enriched and as free of suffering and desire as possible.

The Buddhist tradition entails the social dimension of religion through monastic orders such as monks and nuns. This organized form taken on by this religion was not directly displayed at the service however, Frank mentioned the Dalai Lama in the first half of the service as being a reincarnated Buddhist monk. What I believe provides the social cohesion is the respect for the great communities of monks and nuns that represent this small group. Even though they were not monks or nuns themselves, they took the service very seriously and close to heart. You could see their deep compassion, active involvement and dedication. They meet every Sunday for two hours to try to fulfill themselves to be the best Tibetan Buddhists they can possibly be and they look to each other for support. Frank, the leader is very welcoming to questions and concerns of all the members to make each individual's experience full and complete. The amount of dedication, support, acceptance, and concern about each other as well as the compassion among all the members at the service is what I believe allows a strong sense of community to be involved each week.

Overall I believe this field assignment was worthwhile. I was able to experience and understand aspects of another religion, which I never thought I would do. I found it to be very interesting especially when I compared the Tibetan Buddhist service to the Roman Catholic Mass I am familiar with. I found similarities that I did not realize before until I actually sat down and thought about them. In conclusion, studying Tibetan Buddhism was a very interesting and powerful experience. I am glad I have had an educating opportunity to learn so much about Tibetan Buddhism.

By: Corinne Bidnick