



# **The Lessons of History**

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Nearly thirty years have passed since I first became involved in Buddhism. I was nineteen at the time, dizzy with the optimism of the 1960's and the thrill of having travelled overland from England to India. I remember walking up the mist-drenched hills above Dharamsala into the hushed village where the Dalai Lama and his followers had settled. The Tibetans had been in exile from their homeland for just over a decade. The Dalai Lama was only thirty-seven years old and had yet to visit the West.

None of us who stumbled across the Tibetans then had any inkling of the extent to which Buddhism would have spread in our own homelands a quarter of a century later. The present availability of books, magazines, centers and retreats throughout the Western world, not to mention the meteoric rise to international prominence of the Dalai Lama, were merely the stuff of fantasy. We stayed in impoverished Tibetan refugee communities because we were enthralled by the exploration of a virtually uncharted terrain under the guidance of extraordinary teachers who had literally stepped out of an ancient Buddhist civilisation into the modern world.

The adoption of Buddhism has often started in small and unremarkable ways like this. For the first two hundred years after the Buddha, for example, the Buddhist community appears to have been just one among several orders of wandering mendicants (sramanas) in northern India. Although the Greek envoy Megasthenes lived for ten years in the very heartland of where the Buddha had taught only one hundred and fifty years earlier, he makes no mention of Buddhism when describing the religious practices of India. Yet within less than a century after Megasthenes had returned to Greece, Buddhism had been adopted by Emperor Ashoka and was rapidly spreading across the subcontinent. The endorsement and patronage of Ashoka transformed Buddhism almost overnight from a small community of monks and nuns into a powerful religious force which was destined to expand far beyond the borders of India.

A similar process occurred when Buddhism made its way along the silk route through Central Asia to China in the first century C.E. Initially, itinerant Buddhist monks were treated as Taoist sages from abroad: detached renunciants in the mode of Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu, dedicated to simplicity, contemplative discipline and wisdom. Over time, as more and more scriptures were translated into Chinese, as temples and monastic orders were established by powerful benefactors, Buddhism came to define itself as a distinctive movement with specific goals and ambitions. During the golden age of the

Tang (618-907), it came close to becoming the state religion, until an Imperial edict in 845 introduced a range of anti-Buddhist measures as an indigenous backlash against the increasing power being wielded by the "foreign" religion. Although Buddhism survived as a force in Chinese culture, even on occasion becoming actively involved in nationalist political movements, it was never again to achieve the dominance it had achieved under the Tang.

It was during the Tang period in China that Buddhism was introduced to Tibet by the first kings who succeeded in uniting the country under a single dynastic rule. In contrast to China, though, Buddhism was valued as a unifying religious force, which served to cut the ties that bound Tibetans to their regional beliefs and loyalties. Although this initial endeavour to establish Buddhism suffered a serious setback in 842, when, as in China, indigenous interests sought to reverse its fortunes, Buddhism eventually prevailed as the state religion. Resources were then channelled towards the achievement of spiritual excellence much in the same way as modern societies direct resources towards technical and economic excellence. In the end, though, the complex buddhocracy of Tibet was unable to resist the expansionist pressures from its larger neighbor and the Buddhist state collapsed in 1959.

Similar stories of the waxing and waning of Buddhist institutions are to be found in the histories of all Asian societies where the dharma has taken root. Buddhism has demonstrated a remarkable capacity over the past two thousand years to cross cultural frontiers and then adapt itself to the needs of new situations. Entire civilisations have been created from what were often very humble beginnings: a handful of monks founding a small temple and eking out an existence from a few devout families, a charismatic teacher persuading a local warlord to practice meditation. In the course of its travels, Buddhism has likewise succeeded in generating an extraordinary diversity of forms: listen to a Theravada monk from Sri Lanka, a Pure Land priest from Japan and a Nyingma yogi from Tibet and you might be hard pressed to understand what unites them as "Buddhists."

As Buddhist teachings and practices are adopted in the modern secular democracies of America and Europe, we find ourselves witnessing a process that has already occurred many times over the past centuries in Asia. Once again, Buddhism is crossing a cultural frontier from one place where it is an established religion to another place where it is largely unknown. Yet while the broad outlines of this cross-cultural process may be similar, the specific details (as was the case with each distinctive Asian society) are unique and unprecedented. Because of communication technologies and higher standards of literacy, greater amounts of information about the dharma can now be disseminated far more rapidly to far more people than was ever possible in the past. Likewise, the religious freedom allowed in modern societies coupled with the ease and speed of travel has enabled a far wider variety of Buddhist traditions to appear in a far shorter time than was ever the case when Buddhism made its way into an Asian country.

Highlighting these self-evident differences between the present and the past might, however, only serve to obscure a more crucial difference that could, in the long run, make all the difference. This difference is to be found not through a comparison of the historical events themselves but in the way in which we understand the very nature of historical events.

Historical consciousness is so ingrained a feature of the Western psyche that we might only notice it when suddenly confronted by someone who does not share such a view. It may seem "obvious" to us that one main reason why Tibetan Buddhism, for example, differs so much from Chinese Buddhism is because Tibet is such a very different place -- historically, culturally, geographically, economically etc. -- from China. Yet this may not be at all "obvious" to a traditional Tibetan or Chinese Buddhist. From their point of view, such differences might be superficial and irrelevant. Tibetan lamas I have spoken to find the very use of the term "Tibetan Buddhism" offensive. "The dharma we teach is not 'Tibetan'," they would retort, "it is the pure and complete teaching of the Buddha, passed down through an unbroken lineage of enlightened beings."

Historical consciousness is founded in an awareness of the contingency of any cultural or religious form. Thus Zen Buddhism, for example, can be seen to emerge contingently out of the encounter between certain contemplative practices of Indian Buddhism and a complex set of conditions that prevailed in China around the beginning of the Tang period (and then later on in Korea and Japan). Such conditions would include everything from the spiritual aspirations of the Chinese people to the economic and political circumstances of Chinese society at the time. As part of their rhetoric of legitimacy, though, Zen Buddhists have constructed a lineage of teachers that famously traces itself back uninterruptedly to the moment when the Buddha held up a flower and his disciple Mahakashyapa smiled. Without seeking to diminish the significance of such a claim for practitioners, the historicity of this "lineage" simply does not withstand critical scrutiny.

The legitimacy of Zen (or any other form of) Buddhism does not, however, need to rest on belief in the timelessness of an essential Zen Buddhism that has miraculously been preserved unchanged over centuries. Cultural forms of Buddhism can be compared to living organisms that survive through successful adaptation to the changing pressures of their environment. As long as the environment remains relatively stable, then that form will be able to prosper. But any dramatic change, such as a natural calamity, military invasion or political revolution, can endanger its very survival. While some forms might succeed in adapting to the new situation, others may simply wither and die.

Since they arise from conditions, schools of Buddhism share the very nature of the conditioned things they tirelessly describe as transient, imperfect and empty. This is true even of the original Indian form of the dharma at the time of Gautama himself. To say that Buddhism is "empty" is to recognize how it is nothing but an emergent property of unique and unrepeatable situations. Such an insight into the nature of things is entirely in keeping with the central Buddhist understanding of the inescapable contingency of existence (*pratitya samutpada*). "Whoever sees contingency," declared Gautama, "sees

dharma; and whoever sees dharma sees buddha." This core insight into contingency emphasizes how everything emerges from a shimmering matrix of changing conditions and is destined to change into something else.

Seeing Buddhism as contingent enables us to understand the very emptiness to which the teachings of the Buddha point. This emptiness does not deny the reality of Buddhism but reveals each of its forms to lack a solid, fixed essence. A tradition -- be it Theravada, Vajrayana or Zen -- comes into being as a dynamic display of conditions. Only as such can it function as a living path to awakening. If it possessed an unchanging essence, it would, as Nagarjuna insists, be inert and ineffective. In this way the non-essentialist vision of the dharma converges seamlessly with an evolutionary and historical understanding of life.

In Asia when Buddhism was introduced from one cultural setting into another, people did not, as far as I am aware, step back and reflect on how a similar process had happened elsewhere in the past. It did not seem to occur to the first Tibetan Buddhists, for example, to consider how Buddhism had moved from India into China some centuries before it came to Tibet and within the intervening period had already evolved into distinctive Chinese schools such as T'ien-tai and Ch'an (Zen). They did not seem to regard such considerations as at all useful in coming to terms with what was currently taking place in their own country. Yet such reflection seems an entirely natural and reasonable thing to do for anyone raised with a sense of historical consciousness.

"Those who do not learn the lessons of history," famously remarked the American philosopher George Santayana, "are doomed to repeat its mistakes." The history of Buddhism provides us with an invaluable resource for understanding how from humble beginnings Buddhism has grown into powerful institutions aided and abetted by ruling elites. We can learn how such institutions have both supported a flowering of Buddhist practice and culture and also ossified into large, authoritarian, inflexible hierarchies that seem incapable of adapting to change. The twentieth century bears tragic witness to the breakdown of Buddhist institutions in China, Tibet, Mongolia, Cambodia and Laos in the face of pressures they could not resist.

In keeping with the non-essentialist outlook of Buddhism, such an historical perspective would question how any particular form of Buddhism could be intrinsically superior to any other. For the diversity of Buddhist traditions reflects a diversity of responses to the needs of historical Asian cultures. The different traditions resemble each other much in the same way that members of a family resemble each other. For a tradition to be accepted as "Buddhist" does not require that it comply with a definition of what Buddhism essentially "is" any more than to be accepted as a member of the Smith family requires compliance with a definition of "Smithness."

Such an historically informed, non-essentialist view would emphasize how Buddhism is a dynamic cultural process unfolding over time rather than a fixed body of ideas and practices that is preserved without change in a timeless vacuum. Buddhism's capacity to exhibit such startlingly different forms is an inspiring demonstration of its vitality. As a

cultural movement Buddhism has survived and will survive not by preserving some hypothetical essence but by freely and creatively reinventing itself in response to changing circumstances.

The recreation of Buddhism begins as soon as the translation of its teachings from one language into another begins. Even the monk who seeks to preserve the uncorrupted purity of his lineage participates in the transformation of Buddhism as soon as he allows what he says in his native tongue to be rendered into English. For any act of translation, even the most scrupulously "literal" one, is an act of interpretation.

When translating a classical Buddhist term into English, the translator is invariably confronted with a choice between several English words. The Pali/Sanskrit word *citta*, for example, is currently translated as either "mind," "heart," or, rather clumsily, "heart-mind." Arguably, "psyche" or "soul" might be preferable. (In French and German, meanwhile, it becomes respectively "esprit" and "Geist", i.e. "spirit.") Although each of these words may catch well a particular nuance of the term *citta*, none of them can match its exact range of meanings and associations. The English words too carry associations of their own that are not implied in the original. The translator finds him or herself in a constant dilemma: in order to convey what is said, one is forced to choose a term in the knowledge that its meaning is incommensurable with that of the Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese or Tibetan.

Given these difficulties, it seems almost miraculous that we manage to communicate across linguistic frontiers at all. But we know from history that this has happened successfully again and again. On each occasion the choices made by translators have allowed access to previously unknown Buddhist ideas and at the same time helped trigger the emergence of another distinctive culture of awakening. Each such culture was neither utterly identical with nor entirely different from the one that preceded it. Like an evolving organism, Buddhism has survived by retaining a recognizable continuity with its past forms while at the same time adapting to the needs of present and future conditions.

The translation of texts from one language into another is analogous to the broader task of explaining to a non-Buddhist audience what Buddhism is about. As soon as a traditional teacher replies to questions from his Western students, he may be forced to interpret where his tradition stands on an issue that may simply never have arisen in his home culture. What, for example, is the Buddhist position on homosexual marriage or genetically modified organisms? How does Buddhism regard the teachings of other religions such as Judaism or Christianity? What is the role of psychotherapy on the spiritual path? What does Buddhism have to say about the scientific understanding of the natural world? In responding to such questions, a teacher cannot always just refer back to classical texts and doctrines. Unless he dismisses such questions as irrelevant, in answering them he will be obliged to risk an interpretation of traditional views, thereby making a fresh claim as to what Buddhism is about. Whether he likes it or not, he finds himself participating in the transformation of the very tradition he seeks to preserve unchanged.

This irresistible flow of changing conditions does not painlessly propel the dharma across new frontiers. As one might expect, such transitional periods in the history of Buddhism have been marked by turbulence, conflict and anguish. Just as Buddhism met with resistance from the indigenous systems of belief of China and Tibet, so it is liable to encounter resistance from the secular and religious traditions of the West. During its period of growth over the past thirty years, however, it has been allowed a surprisingly smooth ride. Buddhism and its most prominent advocates enjoy a remarkably "good press." The occasional scandals that have erupted within its ranks do not seem to have significantly tarnished its image in the public eye. History, however, would suggest that this honeymoon is unlikely to last. There have already been rumblings of severe disapproval from the Pope. If Buddhism continues to grow in prestige and appeal, it seems inevitable that a more sustained and rigorous critique of its views and practices will be launched.

Moreover, as Buddhism becomes more widespread in the West, increasing internal divisions are liable to become apparent within the Buddhist community itself. "Buddhism" does not denote a single coherent orthodoxy but serves as a loose generic term for a wide spectrum of schools, lineages, teachings and practices. Each historical Buddhist school, though, sees itself as either representing Buddhism as such or at least the highest or purest element within it. Such views are not merely claims to know what is true. They also lay claim to the authority and power assumed by those who know what is true. A quiet but determined struggle over who has the authority to represent "authentic" Buddhism in the West is already underway. The struggle is not only fueled by tensions between different historical traditions, however, but between "traditionalists" and "modernisers" within (and outside) those traditions.

Every Buddhist practitioner today would doubtless agree that he or she is charged with two tasks: to honor wisely the teachings inherited from the past and to respond compassionately to the needs of the present as it unfolds into the future. The difference between traditionalists and modernizers has more to do with interpretation and strategy than matters of principle. With the benefit of hindsight one can see how new cultures of awakening have tended to emerge out of the creative tension between the two positions. For whenever Buddhism has found itself at a critical juncture of social, cultural or historical transition, it has been subjected to the acute strain of holding on to the certainties of the past while being propelled headlong into the uncertainties of the future.

Shortly after Emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism in ancient India, for instance, a conflict erupted between the Elders (Sthavira), who claimed to represent the original teachings of the Buddha, and the Majoritarians (Mahasamghika), who articulated an alternative vision that was to become a key factor in the birth of the Mahayana. Rather than deploring such conflicts as destructive and schismatic, history suggests that they are the painful but unavoidable consequences of a vital tradition as it struggles to survive under abruptly changing circumstances.

The dharma is still in a very early and fragile stage in its transmission to the West. There is no reason to assume that the growth and expansion of Buddhism during the past thirty years will continue at the same pace. Its popularity might well decline. Yet the history of Buddhism in Asia teaches us that several generations of practitioners are required before one can meaningfully speak of a culture of awakening being established in a society. If the spread of Buddhism is comparable to the evolution and adaptation of a living organism, its transmission to the West will not be accelerated merely by greater ease of access to information about it. As the generation of those of us who travelled to the East in the '60's and '70's grows older, what signs are there of the study and practice of the dharma being passed on to the younger generation today?

The very fact of seeing Buddhism as a contingent, historical process might already be affecting the ways in which the dharma assumes form in the modern world. We may be learning to celebrate the diversity of traditions rather than to insist that each school be measured against the others on a hierarchical scale of authenticity. Instead of gauging the success of Buddhism in terms of the mounting size of its achievements (numbers of followers, sales of books, extent of properties, height of statues, etc.), we might come to see it in terms of individual fulfilment and empowerment, the emergence of small-scale, autonomous communities, and genuine commitment to a beginner's mind. Far from endorsing an "anything goes" pluralism, this historical and evolutionary perspective also recognizes how the survival of a tradition depends on its ability to meet and respond to criticism both from within and outside its own ranks. In an increasingly interconnected and transparent world, no form of Buddhism can afford to be an island.

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