

Tracking the Buddha

Tibetan culture is at once a magnet for the West, a treasure to be preserved, and a commodity imported around the world.

by *Dean Nelson*

The village and monastery of Drigung is built into a mountain face so severe, the temple and dwellings seem attached by Velcro. Villagers carry dead bodies, tightly wrapped and covered in blankets, up a narrow winding path to a fenced-in site surrounded by prayer flags. There are few human witnesses to the special ceremony celebrating the belief that life continues after death, but there are thousands of winged ones— all vultures.

A body is placed before skilled workers—who wear caps and aprons for good reason. They methodically filet the skin off the body and carve out the organs, slicing the parts into pieces. Then they let the vultures take over. It is a noisy, ravenous feast, with birds flying in and out of the area for hours, brushing over the heads of those still standing, picking the skeleton clean. Later, the workers hack up the remaining bones and mash them with heavy stone mallets, forming a paste of bone, tendon, marrow, and a sprinkling of barley flour. Then the vultures swoop in again. When the “sky burial” is complete, there is literally nothing left on the ground.

While the extreme and graphic rite was hardly typical of the experiences I absorbed each day in Tibet, it was enough to make me ask myself why I was there, almost 10,000 miles from home, watching one of the most gruesome, bizarre, yet strangely spiritual scenes I could imagine.

Maybe it was because Tibet is a place still relatively difficult to access and explore, and has what appears to be an evaporating culture. Maybe it was the hope of finding a religion as authentic as it sounds. Maybe it was to overcome Richard Gere’s sappy stereotyping of his Asian Noble Savage. Or maybe I simply wanted to experience something, or some place, sacred—an increasingly difficult prospect in American culture.

So I spent time trekking in a region that for more than 1,000 years has been considered the most sacred place on the planet; where, as Lama Anagarika Govinda described it, “the roles of heaven and earth are reversed.” And where a steady momentum and a persistent dedication have conspired to successfully export spiritually rich pieces of tradition and culture in the face of an increasingly suffocating environment.

For centuries, Tibet existed in isolation as an ancient theocratic society. After surviving a brief British invasion in 1904, global interest rose dramatically as the Chinese Army invaded (the government uses the word “liberated”) in the 1950s, killing monks and nuns; destroying temples, artifacts, and monasteries; and forcing Buddhist leaders into exile.

Since the Chinese takeover, Tibet’s autonomy has eroded considerably. Lhasa, the largest city in the region and the last Tibetan residence of the present Dalai Lama, is now a bustling Chinese urban center with modern hotels, appliance stores, Internet cafes, traffic, roadways, and a railroad under construction that will connect the

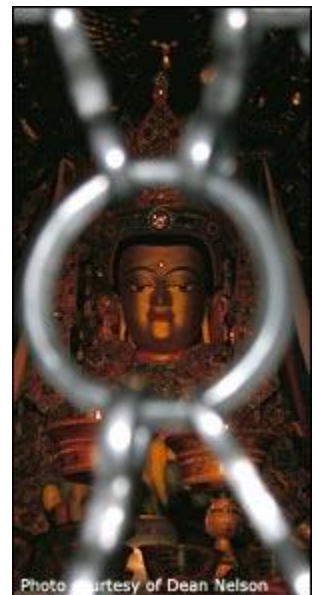


Photo courtesy of Dean Nelson

city to the masses of China within two years.

But the intrusion of modernity is countered by the enduring strength of Tibet's history—embodied both by its native people and its spiritual resonance throughout the Westernized world. In the center of the city stands the Jokhang Temple, built in the seventh century and still one of the most sacred sites in the entire region. While the perimeter of the square around the temple is lined with vendors selling souvenirs (prayer wheels, yak bone ornaments, turquoise, monk costumes, and cowboy hats), the square is filled with pilgrims prostrating themselves before the temple doors. Some have traveled for more than a year, taking the pace and even the form of an earthworm: walk a few steps, bring hands together in front of face, drop to ground knees first, then body, then face, extend hands on ground past head, stand, walk a few steps, repeat. The stone floor leading to the temple has been worn into smooth indentations from the thousands of prostrations every day and night for 1,400 years.

Monks sit outside the temple chanting, some reaching notes in a lower register not common among humans, some singing more than one note at a time. There is also a subtle, hummingbird-type sound underlying the vendors, monks, and hands scraping the pavement. It is the constant chant of thousands of people walking clockwise around the outside of the temple, spinning prayer wheels; all of them softly saying, *Om, mani padme hum*. The air near the temple is filled with the white smoke billowing from giant urns, where pilgrims burn bales of barley as an incense offering. Inside, the temple exudes the sticky fragrance of yak butter candles.

“The treasure of Tibetan culture is Buddhism,” a student told me. She and several other Tibetans are studying English and Chinese languages at a Beijing university. “If our religion is destroyed, it would be a great tragedy,” one of them said. They wanted to talk about Tibet, but were fearful of reprisal from the Chinese government if I named or photographed them.



The Communist Chinese government declared the Dalai Lama an enemy of the state and forbids his photos or icons in temples and homes. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sacred sites were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Today, while the government allows Tibetan Buddhists to practice their religion, it limits the number of monks allowed to study in the monasteries and requires political classes to be taught as well, thereby maintaining control over how the religion is passed on.

“The old way of learning about our religion was studying it through the monasteries in our towns, or through monks visiting our small villages,” one student said. “Now it is taught in schools the Chinese way—the official way of understanding Tibet.”

“I want to translate the Tibetan story so that every person in the world will know what is Tibet,” said another student, studying English in Beijing to help spread knowledge of Tibet. “When people know us, we hope they will help us.”

In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche wrote, “The Tibetan people face extinction, and the glory of their own culture in their homeland has been almost entirely obliterated.”

Perhaps so, but the crackdown and controls placed on Tibet have had some unintended consequences, such as worldwide attention and sympathy to the plight of oppressed Tibetans, and the rock-star status of the fourteenth Dalai Lama—their charismatic, joyful leader-in-exile, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 and whose books become instant bestsellers.

And perhaps most surprisingly, Tibetan Buddhist teachings are now known everywhere, with hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist centers in Europe and North America alone, and thousands of followers.

“What had for centuries remained largely inaccessible and unknown due to geographical and cultural barriers has been forced out of its Himalayan fortress and made available to interested seekers worldwide,” says Richard Power, a professor of Asian philosophy in Beijing.

It was made available in at least two ways in the 1960s: through people from the West who studied in India and learned from Tibetans in exile, and through monks and lamas traveling to the West, who taught and opened Buddhist centers.

In his 1966 book *The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda explained why the fate of Tibet and its Buddhist teachings would find such resonance in the world.

“Tibet has become the symbol of all that presentday humanity is longing for ... the stability of a tradition, which has its roots not only in a historical or cultural past, but within the innermost being of man, in whose depth this past is enshrined as an ever-present source of inspiration.”

Today, that longing remains.

“People realize that, even though reason rules and everything must be provable in a double-blind study, that position eventually becomes constraining,” says Anne Klein, a professor of religious studies at Rice University in Houston who studies Tibet. “There is a ripeness in the United States, even more so in Europe, for something deeply spiritual.

“Any system that tells you it is good to sit and collect yourself is attractive,” she continues. “But especially in our culture, the attractiveness of Tibetan Buddhism is in part due to the well-developed set of philosophical positions, the cultural energy and articulation, and their carefully laid out human states of perception.”

Klein believes the Internet, the media, and the steadily rising popularity of the Dalai Lama have combined to focus global attention on Tibet. When news and entertainment outlets portray other religions as dogmatic and threatening, Buddhism becomes particularly attractive, she says, also citing a growing openness to the teachings of compassion and mindfulness.

Still, there is a lot of mythologizing and romanticization in how Tibet and its religion are viewed around the world, says Melvyn Goldstein, an anthropology professor and co-director of the Center for Research on Tibet at Case Western Reserve University.

“The myth of the simple, pure Tibet is the same as if Christians would say, ‘The message of Jesus was to turn the other cheek and love everyone,’ and then say, ‘America was this, but then Canada took over and made it an atheist country,’” he says. “Tibetans are no more religious than you or me. But their country was based on a theocracy, and Buddhism was institutionalized in their country, similar to the institutional religion of medieval Europe.”

Buddhism’s popularity in the West is from the teachings of the lamas in exile, which were brought out of India by upper-class intellectuals, Goldstein says. “Buddhism really connected with atheists and Jews,” he says. “It turned out to be a great source of recruitment for sympathy for the situation of Tibetans.”

For more than 1,000 years, it was a religion content to live in isolation. The sudden and forced diaspora of Tibetan Buddhists is a dramatic fulfillment of the founder of Tibetan Buddhism’s eighth-century prophecy: “When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels,” Padmasambhava said, “the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the Earth, and the *dharma* will come to the land of the red men.”

Related story:

“Dude! Thanks for Coming!”

Whether or not I experienced the sacred while traversing the world's rooftop is still an open question. But while visiting the traditional sacred sites, I most certainly experienced the following:

- Six hours of neck-snapping roads west of Lhasa is Namtso, which means “sky lake.” There, monks live in caves, and the clouds’ reflection on the lake, at 15,000 feet, has been said to reveal spiritual insights and apparitions for centuries. After hiking to the top of a peak to watch the sun set behind the mountains, I spent the night in a tent by the shore of the icy water—one of the largest saltwater lakes in all of China—and listened to the loudest thunderstorm I have ever experienced.



- On the outskirts of Lhasa is the Drepung monastery, a vast, maze-like complex that housed 10,000 monks at its peak, and was the Dalai Lama’s original home before the Potala Palace was built. Each afternoon, hundreds of monks gather in a woodsy, shaded courtyard to debate—continuing a tradition that dates back more than 1,000 years. They pair up, with one sitting on the ground while the other stands above him, arguing logic and philosophy with great enthusiasm and force. To emphasize a point, the standing monk claps his hands, extending one toward the face of the seated monk. They do this for hours each day, all under the watchful eyes of the master teachers.

- Sometimes the monks came to where I, and others, were standing and clapped their hands at us, as if they wanted us to participate in their discourse. We didn’t speak Tibetan. They didn’t speak English. We clapped our hands back at them. They almost fell over with laughter.

- One monk tried to get our hands in the proper interlocking position while they chanted and we watched. We couldn’t get it. After a lengthy chant ended, about 600 monks bolted from the space the way school kids do when they hear the recess bell. Many whacked us on the arms, smiling broadly as they passed by, as if to say, “Dude! Thanks for coming!”

- A young man on a pedicab, hauling two of us to the Potala Palace, was having trouble making it up a hill. The sprockets on his bike were worn so low that they were spinning through the chain. A passer-by didn’t hesitate to push the cab from behind until we reached level ground. When we got to the palace, my friend gave the driver a ten-yuan note— about \$1.25. The driver looked at it, then reached inside my friend’s wallet and pulled out a five-yuan note instead. He would not take a tip. He smiled and waved goodbye.

Were these encounters with the sacred? Perhaps they were more like evidence of the sacred that seems to be in every corner, village, lake, mountain, and person in that region. And now that the teachings of Tibetan Buddhists have been scattered like ants across the Earth, perhaps the evidence is all around us, wherever we are.

—Dean Nelson

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