

## **Tibetan Nationalism and Perversion of the Dharma (When Good Religions Go Bad)**

I could no more live life without its religious dimension than I could live without air. However, those atheists who claim that organized religion is responsible for the majority of the suffering in the world, certainly do not lack evidence to support their case. While there are some atrocities that claim no religious support at all (such as the massacres in Rwanda), and some relatively rare conflicts where the influence of religion has actually been somewhat helpful (such as the role of Thich Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist monks in the Vietnam War), the vast majority of truly appalling episodes in human history have been precipitated, aggravated, or excused by organized religion.

The question of what worldly actions our religious practice should lead us to is a difficult one. Completely refraining from worldly action seems to be a cop-out (though definitely preferable to some of the alternatives.) It would seem reasonably safe to take actions that would be agreed to be positive even by those who do not share our religion – actions such as caring for the sick and injured, and providing food, shelter, and education to those in need. Even these actions are not easy to do without making errors, but such errors are forgivable and do not greatly affect the karmic value of the action. For example, Mother Teresa's care for the orphans of Calcutta was medically and culturally inappropriate in some respects, but that pales in comparison with the great love and devotion behind her care.

However, one area where we need to be extremely vigilant is when we start to advocate, in the name of religion, projects that (by an amazing coincidence) benefit precisely those who share our religion, at the expense of those who do not. Such projects include the Crusades, Jihad, and the post-war establishment of the new state of Israel. The crusade for Tibetan autonomy or independence is becoming another such project. Such projects lead one straight to Hell.

Video of the recent riots in Lhasa includes:

- An interview with the only survivor of a group of 5 women, of whom the other four were burned to death by Tibetan rioters
- A group of Tibetans pulling an elderly man off his moped and apparently stoning him to death
- Monks kicking in the doors to stores owned by small Han and Hui shopkeepers, so looters can drag all their goods out into the street and set fire to them.

This is what I mean by Hell. You may not have seen the video: there is a reason why you have not seen it. The Western media have not been showing it, and at first I wasted a lot of energy blaming media bias, before I realized that it is not their fault at all. They are not showing the video because *we do not want to watch it!* If forced to watch it, we will deny its authenticity. If forced to recognize its authenticity, we will minimize its importance. If forced to recognize its importance, we will personally attack those who have publicized it

and thus spoil our beautiful case for our beautiful project. In short, will behave exactly like addicts in denial. The Chinese, of course, have seen the video hundreds of times because it supports their case. Their resulting anger, while not pretty or of course in accordance with the Dharma, is a lot more excusable than our denial.

The failure of the media to show the video is not only because Tibetan Buddhists don't want to see it, of course. The Western public doesn't want to see it either, because if we can all pretend that the demonstrations were peaceful, then we have a wonderful stick with which to beat the Chinese, whom we resent with a combination of ethnic hatred, economic jealousy and fear, similar to that which led to persecution of European Jews in the early twentieth century. If and when the Tibetan Buddhist community gets its own house somewhat in order, we would be much better employed trying to uproot these ugly and destructive tendencies in our society, rather than making common cause with them. However, at present we are not equipped to do even that in a skilful way.

The injured will have hospital bills and may well be missing work. The families of the dead will be grieving, and may well have financial problems both short- and long-term. The owners of the small stores that were ransacked and burned have lost their livelihoods, and may well owe large sums of money to family members that they are now unable to pay back – essentially, their entire lives have been destroyed. And all we Western Buddhists can think about is not how we can help to alleviate their suffering, but what this means for Tibetan independence, the Olympics, the Dalai Lama, the geopolitical situation of China ... Pure compassion is our very last thought, whereas it should have been our first. It took me over a month before the thought even entered my head, even though I have been wrestling night and day over these issues. Even the Dalai Lama himself, while he has stated that he regrets the violence, has not expressed any sympathy for the victims as far as I am aware, and has certainly not offered to help them.

To me, our reaction to these events means that we need to face the fact that we are totally in the thrall of our kleshas, and that not only have we obtained no benefit from the Dharma, but we have used it as an excuse to justify and amplify our very worst tendencies. This is not due to any defect in the Dharma, but to our limitless ability to defile and pervert anything and everything in the service of our own ego. The same kleshas that we originally came to Buddhism to eliminate are not only still in charge, but have hijacked our Dharma, so that they are ten times more dangerous than they were before – like a criminal who has stolen a gun from the police officer who came to arrest him.

I am attempting to see if there is any charity, or any other way, to compensate the victims of these riots (by which I mean, for these purposes, those who suffered from them and did not participate in them.) A month ago this might actually have done some real good – now it would probably be mostly symbolic. This is not be an act of 'compassion' or 'generosity', since I think we have to face the fact that we are so lost that we do not even know what those words mean. It is not even an attempt to dig ourselves out of the vast karmic hole we have fallen into. It is rather a way to recognize that we have dug this hole

for ourselves and fallen into it, that no-one is responsible for that but us, and that while we may still not know how to get out of it, we can at least aspire not to dig it any deeper.

This experience is known as ‘conviction of sin’ in Christianity, and is the first of AA’s Twelve Steps – to realize that we are totally helpless in the face of the addiction that is controlling us. The corresponding concept in Buddhism is the First Noble Truth, the Truth of Suffering, but unfortunately it does not carry the same punch – we tend to think that this suffering is something impersonal, just some kind of law of nature, rather than what it is – something that we are constantly inflicting on ourselves, and more importantly on others, every second, due to the overpowering intensity of our defilements. If any good is to come out of this situation, perhaps it is to force us not only to face this truth, but also to do something about it.

Tibetan Buddhists – Western Buddhists, Tibetan emigres, and ethnic Tibetans still in Tibet – have completely excluded the Han and Hui citizens of Tibet from the circle of our compassion. This would continue if ethnic Tibetans were to gain independence or autonomy - meaning that what would follow would be a bloodbath of slaughter and destruction visited on the Han and the Hui, of which what we have seen so far is only a tiny sample. This bloodbath would be unhindered by us in the West, and in fact we would probably have lost the power to stop it if we ever had any, but its karmic guilt would also be upon us.

To those who believe that the Dalai Lama would prevent it from happening, I would like to offer the life of Mahatma Gandhi as a counterexample. He devoted his whole life to achieving independence for India through nonviolence, and was revered almost as a God, particularly among his own Hindu religious community. Finally in 1948 a date for independence from the British was set, and the very first thing his own religious community did was to start massacring Moslems by the hundreds of thousands. When the Moslems attempted to flee by train to what are now Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Hindus stopped the trains and slaughtered every man, woman and child on board. Gandhi was astonished and horrified and appealed for peace, but no-one, including those who had followed him with such persistence and dedication in the Independence struggle, listened to him. The slaughter continued and even intensified. He was assassinated a few months later for even daring to talk about peace: it is generally believed that he felt his death was a merciful release. This doesn’t mean that Hindus are any worse than the rest of us: this is just what we do, as a species, it’s hard wired into us in the same way our sexual impulses are, and the capacity of religion to prevent it is very limited.

Examples of this complete lack of compassion among the worldwide Tibetan Buddhist community are to be found by the hundred on virtually any Tibetan Buddhist website. I will give just three – one from the emigre community, one from the Western Buddhist community, and one from the Tibetans still in Tibet:

**Tibetans Still in Tibet:** Accounts by Western tourists in Lhasa at the time of the riots recount several occasions on which they themselves, or other tourists, despite being vastly outnumbered, intervened to save the victims of beatings and sometimes of

attempted murders. They do not mention a single case in which any one of the hundreds of Tibetans present, supposedly demonstrating for the freedom to worship Chenrezig, the embodiment of universal compassion, made any attempt whatsoever to save anyone<sup>1</sup>.

**Tibetan Emigres:** This is an extract from an article entitled ‘Was It Violence’ by Jamyang Norbhu, which appeared on Phayul.com, Meyul.com, and several other Tibetan Buddhist websites, and elicited a mostly favorable response. The main criticisms had nothing to do with its lack of compassion, but with its reference to the Dalai Lama:

*[Tibetan leaders should be careful] that their statements do not provide any kind of opportunity for Beijing (or its apologists in the West) to misrepresent what really happened or cast doubts on the essential righteousness of the Tibetan cause. His Holiness’s threat to resign also made it appear then that Tibetans in Lhasa had done something quite dreadful.*

*We know that in Lhasa some Chinese were beaten up in the first few days of the protests. A few quite badly. Shops were torched. There was no real looting, in the sense of stealing, for we have reports that the protesters pulled out goods from the shops, piled them in the streets and set them alight. It was a political statement. The worst thing that happened was the death of four young women, three Chinese and a Tibetan who were hiding inside a shop when it was torched. As terrible as this was, I think we can be fairly certain that no one intended to kill these young women. Official Chinese reports state that fourteen people were killed and China’s propagandists have used these deaths to whip up anti-Tibetan feelings among Chinese worldwide.*

*There was more than justifiable provocation for the Tibetan outburst...*

Please, please tell me that we have not sunk so low that I actually need to point out the complete lack of correspondence between this and the Buddhadharmā, or even normal human decency. Again, this is not one isolated crazy person: the majority of his readers approve, so he has lots of company.

**Western Buddhists.** Consider the following post and reply from lioncity.com, a prominent Buddhist website:

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<sup>1</sup> I don’t mean to imply by this that Tibetans are less compassionate than Westerners. To give an opposite example: I was walking in Western Tibet with a mixed group of Tibetans and Westerners, when a dog that had been following us attacked and seriously injured a marmot. The Westerners took a brief look at the marmot, decided it was probably too seriously injured to survive, and walked on. The Tibetans took over an hour finding the marmot’s burrow, carrying the marmot to it and distracting the dog so it would lose the scent, while a young girl sat in meditation reciting ‘Om Mane Peme Hung’.. Even more impressive, the Tibetans who had thrown sticks at the dog and shouted and screamed at it, as soon as the marmot was safe, showed it no animosity but petted it and encouraged it to walk along beside them. We all have Bodhicitta and we all have our kleshas. What I am trying to do is to point out some of the Tibetans’ blind spots, and suggesting that we are presently encouraging their kleshas, and by so doing are doing no-one any favors, including them.

**Post:** *To those who would actually attempt to justify the violence, first of all, I would say obviously that your Buddhism is not the same as mine, secondly, to tell you that I personally know, from my time in Lhasa, many of the shopkeepers who were the victims of the riots and they were nice, friendly people who wouldn't hurt a fly (not that this part matters in my Dharma - even if they had been Adolf Hitler it still wouldn't have justified these actions), and thirdly to post a picture of a young girl burned to death in the riots. How 'justifiable' do you think her death was?*



**Reply:** *I don't know how "justifiable" it was. You also do not know how "justifiable" it was. As Namdrol kindly pointed out, even the Buddha noted that there is justifiable breaking point. The thing here is, you don't know if that girl was prejudiced against Tibetans or not. Even the many shopkeepers you met, you do not know if they are prejudiced against Tibetans. Unless you are claiming the ability to read thoughts?*

The only thing this can possibly mean is that perhaps this girl was prejudiced against Tibetans, and if so, she deserved to be burned to death (and presumably the shopkeepers also deserved to have their shops burned.) That one person might say such a thing is shocking: however, every single person posting on this very mainstream board, agreed.

Everyone, of course, sees their particular nationalistic/religious project as 'justifiable'. Taking the previously-mentioned projects (the Crusades, Jihad, and modern Israel) as examples: How could anyone not see the righteousness of forcing heathens to grant inoffensive pilgrims access to the most sacred sites of the Holy Land? And how could anyone deny the necessity of forcibly converting Christians to Islam, since if they did not convert, not only would they go to Hell, but they would continue to slaughter thousands of innocent Muslims in the aforementioned Crusades? And have not the Jewish people, having had millions of their people slaughtered at the hands of the Nazis and having lost their homes and possessions, finally earned the right to 'go up', after two thousand years of wandering, suffering, and exile, to their sacred ancestral homeland? The one-sidedness

of these arguments is clear because they are not our arguments, but the one-sidedness of our own arguments, of course, is not. However, at least, perhaps, the ugliness of the above examples can show us how far astray this type of argument can lead us.

Several people who describe themselves as ‘moderate’ have expressed the opinion that we should not ‘descend to the level of the Chinese’. I think the callousness and viciousness of the above examples make it clear that we do not need to worry about that – we have already descended far below the level of the Chinese. The Chinese administration are intelligent, hard-working, and on the whole well-meaning technocrats (the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution have been over for the best part of 20 years.) They make no claim to spiritual attainment and are very suspicious of those who do (for reasons that are becoming more and more understandable to me.) We Tibetan Buddhists, on the other hand, are absolutely appalling advertisements for our religion and even for our species. We should at least clean up the worst of our own kleshas before we start lecturing the Chinese on how some country where almost none of us have ever been, should best be governed – let alone on religion, another subject of which we clearly also know nothing. However, I’m not holding my breath for that to happen.

I read recently of an acquittal in a vehicular homicide case, in which a driver talking on his cell phone crossed the median and crashed into a Mennonite family, killing the five children instantly. The parents were in the hospital for weeks, and have serious and permanent injuries. They regularly visited the other driver, who was also recovering in the same hospital, and on their eventual release from hospital began a friendship with him and would invite him for dinner on a regular basis. The prosecution failed in part because the Mennonite couple, while they of course told the truth under oath, otherwise refused to cooperate with the prosecution in any way. The members of the congregation came to the trial and prayed for the driver’s acquittal. I quote from the newspaper article:

*For him, the challenge has been to forgive Mr. Helm without expecting resolution, and to build a friendship regardless of the forces working against it. “It’s what the Bible teaches,” Mr. Schrock said. In an interview, the husband said several times that too much had been made of their forgiveness... Mr Shrock, who spent eight weeks in a wheelchair and still has trouble walking, said, ‘I really feel for him – I can’t imagine what he must be going through.’”*

This man (who elsewhere in the article acknowledges his own imperfections and how difficult the process has been,) has the essence of true religion. We do not. A lot of us do not even aspire to it, if we are honest. We want just enough ‘religion’ to reinforce our self-righteousness, but not enough to destroy it. We are hypocrites, and we need to either truly and completely let go of our kleshas, or stop kidding ourselves.