

The Interacted-ness: The Inherent Value of Tibetan Buddhism on Environmental Conservation

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Abstract: The article focusses on the value of environmental conservation in Tibetan Buddhism. It first discusses the origin of this awareness through analyzing the two religions that Tibetan Buddhism originated from. Then the article aims at explaining different ways for the conservation value to be accepted by the public. A specific case study is used to exemplify how this value can be converted into individual conservation acts.

1. Introduction

The village of Nasuni, at the margin of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai, is chosen to conduct a 5-year project to observe the actions that villagers undertake for the protection of the surrounding environment and analyze the relationship of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the motivations behind such behaviors. People living there share deep connection with the nature; their environmental protection awareness is superior to their level of education and modernization. In Qinghai-Tibet, were a vast amount of believers of Tibetan Buddhism, conservation is never a topic which excludes the poor. In contrast, every individual who believes in the religion have a will to contribute to purifying the sacred land they live on, and many rise up to take the lead.

However, the source of conservation awareness, the motivation of the actions, is yet to be determined. What kinds of beliefs drive Tibetan people to think of the environment so seriously? How Tibetan Buddhism, both ideologically and practically, enable the interplay between local communities and environmental conversation? Who are the discursive voices in the local communities behind the religion? This research report attempts to examine the correlation of environmental preservation and Tibetan Buddhism behind the scenes. With discussions of the key concepts in Tibetan Buddhism that relates to conservation, efforts taken by local communion, and individuals inspired by the religion, it seeks to address the main concepts in Tibetan Buddhism that links the religion to conservation and identify the medium that delivers these thoughts to Tibetan society.

2. Ideas and Beliefs: The Awareness of Environmental Conservation in Tibetan Buddhism

Being spread to Qinghai-Tibet during the seventh century, Buddhism had gone through more than a hundred years of conflicting and merging with the religion of the area at that time – Bon – the celebrated and mysterious religion that had been thriving in Qinghai-Tibet until the two finally united into Tibetan Buddhism. It is predicted that “Tibetan Buddhism is a mixture of Buddhist thoughts, the remnant of Bon, and other cult.” (Alderfer, 64) Being the product of the two distinctive religions,

Tibetan Buddhism forms a system that unites the concepts from both religions and inherits their values, which correlates to conservation. As a result, environmental conservation has been so closely bound with Tibetan Buddhism that not only it functioned as an indispensable part of the religion but also been spread to all the believers through this religion.

As a religion once dominated the Tibetan area, Bon was a type of worship to the nature itself formed in extreme living conditions, a time when people still mainly lived a nomadic life. (Dajie, 96) Therefore, the core of the religion is human-nature relationship

Like many ancient religions, Bon believes that natural disasters are caused by gods as a punishment on humans. (Tsewang, 64) However, it is not the case that a sole god creates the nature and species. Instead, it believes that the universe is created by the combination of four elements: wind, earth, water, and fire. A strong wind initially emerged in the infinite space, and under its motion elements of wind, earth, water and fire were formed, which eventually constructed the whole universe. (Nuori, 14) The gods and species coexist in the nature with no one superior to another. In other words, the relation between gods and humans are not that between creators and creations or master and servant; rather, gods and human respect mutually as two equal and coexisting species.

However, gods do contribute much to establish peaceful relationship between nature and human. The gods in Bon can be categorized into three types: the god of ground, the god of year and the god of dragon. (Nuori, 17) People must pay their respects to these gods who inhabit in every substance or else they are going to be curse of disasters. Being out of the fear of natural disasters, believers of Bon often exhibit strong sense of revere, respect, and equality to the nature. In their belief, digging the ground, logging the forest, or hunting certain species may infuriate the gods that rest in those area and therefore leads to drought, lightning and heavy rains or other bad consequences. This in return ties the religion with one of the most progressive conservation awareness which is yet possessed by some of the poorest people in the world.

Buddhism is another component constitutes the organism of Tibetan Buddhism. It is believed that the religion was introduced into the area from both India and China in the early to mid-seventh century A.D. (Alderfer, 64) That is to say, both Indian Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism have an influence on Tibetan Buddhism. However, for the conservational thoughts in Tibetan Buddhism, the origin is more likely to be mainly from Chinese Buddhism.

As the origin of Buddhism, Indian Buddhism is thought to be teaching that release humanity from sufferings. It believes that human is born in an environment that is full of sufferings. As a result, nature in Indian Buddhism's belief is thought to be the origin of the sufferings, which is imperfect and should be surpassed. (Chen, 473) However, in Chinese Buddhism, nature is considered more of a tutor that human should look upon and learn from, which embodies the beliefs and ideas of environment conservation.

In Chinese Buddhism, one popular conservational thought is Buddha-nature in all wheat. The concept of this idea was first proposed by Zhan Ran,¹ a celebrated monk in Tang dynasty (618 A.C. to 907 A.C.). He believed that, even though the nature does not have feelings like animals and humans, there is Buddha-nature in it. (Dou, 89) In other words, the nature is in status of achieving the inner peace of Buddhism, and that human should learn from the environment to understand the greatest truth of Buddhism. The concept actually contradicted with both the trending beliefs in Chinese Buddhism and Indian Buddhism at the time. The former believed that only the objects with feelings embodied Buddha-nature while Indian Buddhism suggest that the nature was full of chaos and therefore humans should regard it with reverence.

However, Zhan Ran took the relation between water and wave as an example to support his claim. He pointed out that there was no wave without water and no water without wave; pure or muddy,

¹ Zhan Ran was the sixth patriarch of the Tiantai school of Chinese Buddhism.

there would always be water in wave and wave in water. In the same manner, having feelings or not, the Buddha-nature and everything in the universe is bounded together; nothing could exist independently. (Dou, 89) This led to the sanctification of the nature, upon which many believers of Chinese Buddhism took it as the subject of their meditation. In the sense of being an embodiment of the Buddha-nature, the concept of the Buddha-nature in all wheat encourages a lifestyle that humans respect the nature as their mentor and observe it to deepen the understanding of the wisdom of Buddhism, which results in a high level of awareness and motivation towards environmental conservation.

Incorporating thoughts from Bon and Chinese Buddhism that share the same animism base, Tibetan Buddhism believes that there is spiritual essence in nature, which will bless those who praise it while punish those who show disrespect. Also, it claims equality for every creature and the responsibility to respect them. These concepts form a system of beliefs that drives the believers to show their greatest respect to nature, with environmental conservation as their heavy responsibility. It plays a significant role in producing conservation awareness and motivation among the believers who will pass the religious belief to the next generation. In Qinghai-Tibet, child was born in the rich atmosphere surrounded by religion. Before learning reading and writing, children are taught to perform ritual activities and obey the religious disciplines, for example, many students who may even drop out of standard education system and continue their study in temple schools. (Li, 201) Living in such an environment, they would fancy no other life without Tibetan Buddhism and consider the religion to be as realistic and important as the nature. In this way, the religion in fact drives not solely the monks but every believer to perform environmental conservation, so that an inner peace will be achieved by fulfilling their responsibilities.

3. Self-Identification: The Religious Role of Tibetans that Encourage Conservation

Since Tibetan Buddhism has profound foundation of animistic belief, Tibetans hold great respect to the nature. However, these beliefs serve no function in facilitating individuals to actively engage in the protection of the environment. Therefore, other reason must contribute to drive people to conduct conservation acts.

To understand the action of individuals, it is vital to analyze the reasons behind such actions, which often relates to their value and beliefs. In this case, one essential aspect to analyze the motivation behind environmental protection is to discuss how Tibetans different to others in identity, which impact on both value and belief.

One idea that Tibetan people hold is rebirth, which means that death is not the ultimate end but the separation of the life principle from the body. (Goss, 380) However, the identity of a soul within different lives can be different. In other words, a human could live his or her next life as an animal, and a cow or dog could live a life of human after the current life. The role of the next life is not decided random. Instead, it is determined based on the performance conducted in this life. If one commits no sins and only do good to the other, he can live another life as human. However, if one lives a sinful life, he may rebirth as an animal as a punishment.

Holding this believe, Tibetan people identify themselves not only as a human in this life but also the traveler that has endless life ahead. In this way, people may not act in favor of personal benefits in this life, but in a way that will let them remain human in their next life. Therefore, instead believing in human exceptionalism, they are more likely to act in an altruist way.

It is important to realize that because of the animistic nature of Tibetan Buddhism, the idea of altruism in a Tibetan Buddhism setting does not solely involve doing good for other people but refers to the act of kindness toward any kind of beings, including animals and the environment.

Additionally, for Tibetan people, especially those who lives in marginal areas, a healthy and

sustainable environment is crucial for their survival. These people may feed cows, grow vegetables or rely on tourism for a living. For these people, the motivation of conservation does not just come from religious believe but also for material needs and individual success.

The motivation for people to follow the guidance of Tibetan Buddhism in conservation results from multiple reasons, ranging from divine religious believe, the hope for a better after life to achieving personal success and ensuring their abilities to sustain the family. All those aspects forge into a strong awareness of environmental protection, leading the community to a achieve better in the protection of the beautiful plain.

4. Medium: The Deep-Rooted Social Hierarchy of Lamas and Monks

With such concepts revolving around environmental conservation, however, these thoughts and ideas require a medium for instillment and dissemination. For a thought to be implanted in a large population, the medium must be efficient, mature, and deep into people's daily lives. For Tibetan Buddhism and the conservation awareness within, the lamas and monks serve as the active medium to develop strong bond between the Tibet community and the religion.

Religious leader once had a very high social position in the autonomous Tibet, holding a combination of political and religious power. (Ramsay, 76) With the dramatic transformation in government during the 20th century, the ruling power has been incorporated into the central government of PRC, while the social status of monks and lamas in Tibetan society has remained the same. In most places, celebrated monks are rated even higher than the local government, with people piously following their instructions. Therefore, the voice of lamas and monks still has a dominant impact in making important decisions of the community. For instance, monks will be invited to determine the location of significant structures, such as monuments and temples. In addition, the moral standards that they hold will be considered in the legislation of community rules. Moreover, monks and lamas also serve as important counselors for decision making. People will go to them for advice on their career, housing, marriage and even the name of their children. Having a family member as monk is thought to be an honor. Tibetan families usually have more than two children, one or more of them would be sent to the temple to become a monk from a very early age when the kid has not even received any education. Being reward, the monks function as a bridge to connect the community with Tibetan Buddhism. That's to say, as long as Tibetan people determine to maintain their tradition and accommodate the tradition with the modern society, along with the career of being monks keeps on thriving in the area, the bond between local communities and Buddhism will remain strong and become even more unbreakable.

Being the most royal believer of Tibetan Buddhism, lamas have devoted themselves into practicing the doctrines and spreading their beliefs. Their duties not only closely bind the religion to the Qinghai-Tibet area, but also boost a lot of preservation activities. One of the most typical and successful projects might be the construction of a 0-waste community in Jianzuo village located in Yushu, Qinghai. Jianzuo village is a small village in the margin of Yushu where people live a semi-nomadic life and share deep connection with the nature. Due to the increasing popularity of the region's breathtaking views, tourism has developed rapidly in the area. However, one problem that tourism has generated is plastic pollution along the paths. The waste that tourists left along their journey is mostly the non-degradable, causing lasting damage to the environment. Observing such tragedy, a celebrated lama who purposed the idea of a life with zero waste, which means no waste from daily life damages the environment. To embrace this lifestyle, one must give up using any plastic item, from foods and beverages in plastic packages to plastic containers.

It is hard for everyone to abandon the convenience of plastics and embrace a totally new lifestyle just for the better good — environment protection. Not to mention that those who are asked to do so

are in very tough living condition. For example, in order to find enough grass for the herds of yak, people must live on the mountains in a small tent with no supply of water or electricity. They may have to go to the river nearby with two plastic containers attached to their motorcycle when they need water. The containers used in the tent for storage of foods are also made of plastics. Under this condition, it will cost a great deal of money to replace the plastic items with more eco-friendly materials and cause much inconvenience.

However, this did not stop the lamas to devote themselves in the development of the 0-waste community. With the help of environment activists, a system that is suitable to the actual condition is designed. The system includes a plan for every villager being responsible of cleaning the wastes within miles of their house hood and in the nearby river. To encourage most villagers to enroll in the program and properly fulfill their assigned jobs, a fund was raised to provide essential financial support for those who enrolled for investment and emergent use. The money would be loaned out with no interest. Everyone who wish to borrow the money must provide an insurer who would pay off the debts if the person is unable to. The whole fund would be managed by the village council under the supervision of the lamas and local non-profitable organization. To convince the people of the importance of conservation and promote the system, lamas, especially a local celebrated monk, spent months persuading the people of the idea to live peace with nature the symbolic value of such action. Ultimately, people in Jianzuo agreed to change their lifestyle. The villagers were then giving lectures on how to properly deal with all kinds of garbage and reduce its production. With the regular meeting and supervision that the lamas have on the village, the community successfully transformed in to the first 0-waste community in this area.

It is with the guidance of lamas and monks that all those ordinary people who live under tough condition with very limited education are inspired to undertake such hard but meaningful tasks. The inherent concept of environmental protection in Tibetan Buddhism is the light that gathers people to protect the environment unrequitedly and binds their lives deeply with nature, and those divine believers are those who are lifting the candle high for people to see it.

5. Case Study: The Second Zero-Waste Community --- Identity and Value

During the summer of 2021, an on-site study of the second Zero-Waste community, the Nasuni village, was conducted. The village is located in the marginal area of Qinghai deep in plateau. Since most of the male villagers have left for jobs in big cities, the population mainly consists of women and children. Without adequate labor force, the elder children of the family, usually 15 to 16 years old, would take up the opportunity of taking care of the yaks as well as being the main support of the family. Their living conditions are very challenging. For example, with the high altitudes and poor transportation, it is difficult for housing constructions, therefore the majority of the villagers have to choose to live in tents, which provide little protection from wild animals. Also, since the supplies of daily necessities largely depend on deliveries from the city, residents here have to store a large number of dry foods and water for long-term consumption. Given their critical financial condition, the only container that they can afford is those made out of plastics. As a result, the plastic waste production is extremely high, which no doubt contradicts with villagers' religious belief that instructs them to respect and protect nature.

A Turning-point appeared when Three Rivers' Origin Protection Association, an organization that devotes the conservation work of the area, approached the idea of a Zero-Waste Community, the village expressed immediately a strong will of cooperation to switch to a more environmental-friendly lifestyle. Three Rivers offered wooden or iron equipment to replace those household plastic items, while the villagers promised not to use a plastic item ever again. Even bringing a plastic package or bottle home is not allowed; they have to deposit them properly in the city. Regular voluntary works

of cleaning up waste around the area would also be required.

This program has benefited the villagers, but it has also increased their burden since they have to spend time on conservation work, sacrifice their convenience and increase their daily expenses. People even donate more than a half of their annual income to build a house in the middle of the plateau, so that they can have a place to hold meetings and events about environmental conservation. Therefore, there must be some other reason behind the personal benefits that contributes to their decision making. By carefully examining the interviews with each family, religious belief seems to be the most significant factor for their choice.

To discuss how Tibetan Buddhism impacts the village, the critical situation that these people are in must be addressed first. For these villagers who live a nomadic life, the main financial incomes are from raising yaks and digging cordyceps sinensis. Both tasks not only need hard work, but also very much depend on nature. For example, if the weather is too cold or too dry for enough grass to grow, people have to travel to farther places to find adequate food for the animals. The weather would also greatly impact the number of plants that grow in the year, which directly makes a difference to their annual income. People in the urban areas may consider education, hard work, and job opportunities as the keystone to their success, people living in the marginal villages have to do their best to show respect to the gods and therefore have adequate resources to survive. In this sense, people consider themselves as the receiver of nature; all their gains are not the work of their own but the gifts from the gods. Treating nature in a way that may favor their convenience for now, but to protect nature is a matter of their sustainable prosperity, the investment for their next life, and the gratitude toward those gods who have given them all.

The followers of Tibetan Buddhism believe that the best way to achieve success or become satisfied in life is to express their thankfulness to the gods who have been blessing their race for centuries. When there is an opportunity to get rid of the old lifestyle that they had to have for survival, they would take it with no regret. With such strong belief, all the families in the interviews expressed a strong will of changing their household tools into eco-friendly materials. Furthermore, most of the families have stated that they have already started cleaning activities on a regular basis near their residence. For example, before our arrival, many people had been picking up garbage when they were going to work or watching their cows.

An interesting factor observed during the research is the drivers that drive the crowd to the village from the city. Car rental can be very expensive to reach the village since the location is deep in the mountain. Fortunately, a bunch of volunteers would like to drive the investigators for free. They were actually not environmental protection activists as assumed. Instead, all those drivers are successful merchants and business owners in the area. The reason behind their generosity turned out to be that it was out of respect and thankfulness to those who are willing to help the local people make the environment beautiful and sacred once again.

6. Conclusion

Being one of the religions that shares the deepest connection with the nature, Tibetan Buddhism merges the ideas from the two distinct religions and forms a wholesome system of encoding environmental protection awareness into the value and self-fulfillment of its believers. With the popularity of the religion in Tibet and the high social status of lamas and monks, this system can be introduced and pass among Tibet people that invoke conservation awareness and call for immediate action. Together, Tibetan Buddhism and its followers facilitate the most environmental-friendly region on the Earth, and it is only their spirits can protect this divine land's sacred nature and magnificent sights.

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