

# Aspects of Tibetan Buddhism

by Claudio Naranjo

Some characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism are, of course, characteristics of Buddhism in general. Other aspects have a specifically Tibetan character, which I believe is particularly important since Tibetan Buddhism can be seen as the growing tip of Buddhism, in the same way that California has been seen as the growing tip of consciousness within the United States. Of course, every religion gives birth to developments, but the religious attitude of the Western world has been perhaps surprisingly (given the Western emphasis on progress) traditionalist when compared to Buddhism, which has always been open to new formulations of the teachings and has readily incorporated new scriptures into the canon when they were felt to be valid. In fact, one of the most noticeable characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism is that it readily acknowledges this continual growth of the teachings through the creativity of each new generation. In its expressive form this is seen as the reception of the teachings directly from the *sambhogakaya*, this process being the intuitive and revelatory means through which the teachings are confirmed and expanded as time goes on.

That Tibetan Buddhism stands foremost in the living development of Buddhism may be seen from the fact that it has taken those two great basic and inclusive conceptions of Buddhism—the doctrine of *shunyata*, the open dimension of being, and *karuna*, compassionate action in the light of the vision of *shunyata* to their highest level of articulation and

elaboration. In this sense Tibetan Buddhism, or Vajrayana, incorporates the earlier developments of Mahayana and Hinayana. Vajrayana builds on the early *yanas*, specifically Mahayana. We can see how Mahayana emphasized compassion more than Hinayana, the earliest form of Buddhism, which seems comparatively drier than the later forms. For example, Mahayana introduced into Buddhism the conception of the Bodhisattva path, the ideal of Bodhisattvahood, or renouncing enlightenment in order to aid all beings. It is true that when the question of self-seeking in the pursuit of enlightenment is raised in one of the earlier discourses of the Buddha, he says that such seeking is not necessarily selfish: "This is what you are meant to do in a shipwrecked world—first of all you must put your own feet on firm ground, and then you can help others." But excessive seeking can lead to a kind of monks' disease or religious disturbance, a dangerous domain that has an aspect of truth but is unbalanced and lacks an equal concern about remaining in touch. There is a basic paradox in such exclusive seeking for enlightenment, which perhaps characterized earlier Buddhism; an excessive monkishness can interfere with the enlightenment that is being pursued, because enlightenment has to do with an ecological perspective. That is, enlightenment cannot be pursued exclusively because

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This article is an edited transcription from a talk given by Claudio Naranjo at the University of Southern California in June, 1975.

enlightenment has to do with a perception of the whole, with a view of oneself as one cell in a bigger organism of the human society and the cosmos. Moreover, a one-sided pursuit of enlightenment can easily be seen as a false solution for the problem which it intends to overcome, much like the false solution of the baby that becomes frustrated because it cannot get enough milk and is then fixated to sucking as the way out from frustration. The more he sucks, the less he gets. That is the paradox of psychological 'sucking', which psychoanalysis calls 'orality': the more you experience it in a one-sided manner as being out there, the less you are in touch with the fountain within. So the Bodhisattva ideal may be seen, from one point of view, as the solution to the problems raised by exclusive seeking. Mahayana builds on a balance between the extremes.

The compassion of Buddhism is not what we ordinarily understand when we think of love. The word *love* is sometimes avoided in Buddhism because it is so easily misunderstood. The great love which arises in the enlightened state is not anything like what we call emotions, because there is nobody who is the subject of the emotion. It is an emotion without an ego, or without a self, if you like. So there is a bliss without an enjoyer, and that bliss is inseparable from the activity of compassion, the pouring forth toward the rest of creation. Thus, Mahayana elaborates on the early insights of Hinayana which stress the impermanence of all that is and the absence of an ego, *anatma*, and the basic unsatisfactory nature of all existence in the samsaric world.

**C**orrelative to this is the great doctrine of *shunyata* which is sometimes rendered as non-ego and sometimes, rather unsatisfactorily, as "emptiness." This is the most difficult of all Buddhist concepts to render in words because it signifies experience which, while not beyond *human* experience, lies beyond the human ability to conceptualize. In fact, it is because we conceptualize and constantly label



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our experience that we do not realize the open dimension of experience, or *shunyata*, in which we would see through our "self" and many other mental fictions which we fondly take for granted. The doctrine of *shunyata* receives its highest and most extensive elaboration in Tibetan Buddhism, but because it is an experience which is far beyond our ordinary mind, any description will take the form of a negation. Our mind as we know it is the realm of the ego; that is, what we in our present state of awareness call being awake is being 'subject' to total samsaric conditioning through habit patterns, learned responses, constant conceptualization, and so forth. This endless merry-go-round of mental phenomena always seeks resolution in what is to come and ever harks back to what has been. Ever pushed by desire for something else, it turns in vicious circles. If we were to speak in Christian terms, we might

say we were ensnared by the devil. *Shunyata*, then, can be seen as the annihilation of all this tedious commonplace consciousness that is needed for another more holistic consciousness to supervene. Since this ordinary consciousness is everything we think we are, we need to develop the art of getting out of the way. In Christianity, and in the Western religious tradition in general, the emphasis has always been to seek what was on the other shore; for this reason it invokes and enters into dialogue with the divine being beyond the human condition, with transcendence beyond the domain of human experience and its limitations. Buddhism, on the other hand, rests on an awareness. We might say that it is not enough to invoke something outside', because however much we bark up the right or the wrong tree there is something intrinsic in the attitude of barking at the tree which is bound to leave us in the same predicament if we do not renounce our present state of being, if we do not cut or sever all the ties to the mental and emotional and physical habits, or conditionings, that define what we think we are. So this is an aspect of Buddhism involved in the idea of *shunyata*.

This subjective and individual aspect of *shunyata* also has its objective and cosmic correlative: it is perhaps not different than what is expressed: that behind all the forms of divine emanation and divine being there is the *dark* origin of light. It is said in the Quabbalah that God and world both exist and do not exist. And even some contemporary physicists, such as Dirac, have come to a similar realization. The constant search for the irreducible substance or form of the universe, as the atom was thought to be, has revealed a never-ending host of particles which now seem like conceptualizations of the same primordial non-material stuff, all emerging from a basic voidness. This aspect of *shunyata* is cosmological, an ontological no-thing-ness in the context of which the universe and our minds are transient blippings on and off. Our whole universe seems to be pulsating, turning on and off, quantum of en-

ergy flashing, and just as physics has shown that the spaces between particles are much vaster than the space occupied by them, perhaps there is more time we don't exist than time we do.

That the emphasis on *shunyata* is a foremost characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism is hinted at by the term used to describe the type of Buddhism developed in Tibet—Vajrayana, which means the "adamantine way." *Vajra* translates literally as "thunderbolt" and also means "diamond." What is suggested here is the hardness quality of the enlightened mind. It is fired through experience into a stability or permanence that marks all but can't itself be marked, unlike the samsaric mind composed of constantly changing fictions. The thunderbolt: which religious symbolism puts in the hand of Indra, Zeus, and Jehovah—evokes that aspect of the numinous which makes everything standing below quake and crumble. It pierces and penetrates the ego. This *shunyata* side of Tibetan Buddhism is symbolized by the *dorje*, or *vajra* symbol which you may have seen. Vajrayana practitioners hold in the right hand the three-dimensional *vajra* representing the realization of *shunyata* and in the other hand the bell which suggests the skillful means (*upaya*) used in compassionate action in the light of *shunyata*.

**A**nother way in which Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism differ from earlier Hinayana Buddhism is that they are much more intensely devotional. Generally, religions are classified into theistic religions, such as we know here in the West, and non-theistic religion, but already in the Mahayana, Buddha is addressed much as a divine being is, and in Vajrayana there is seemingly the invocation of many gods. What are we to make of a non-theistic religion with many gods? What happened was that from the Buddha, the individual prototype of the Enlightened One who served to open the path, evolved the doctrine of the cosmic Buddha. It was not that his in di-

viduality was lost sight of, but rather that the individual came to be seen as an embodiment of the potential and realization of Buddhahood, or enlightenment, which is inherent in all individuals and, indeed, in all of nature. In fact, Buddhahood came to be recognized on three different levels. There is the physical body, or the *nirmanakaya*, which is a manifest activity of the principle of Buddhahood; that is, it is any particular Buddha. Then there is the *sambhogakaya* body which exists in the more subtle world of forms and the creative imagination. It is this body which is seen as completely pure and radiant, existing on a level where all that is seen and heard is Dharma. Finally, there is the *dharmakaya*, or Buddhahood merged with the Absolute—that which is beyond conception of word but which informs all of what we call creation. It is this last body personified which is the Buddhist equivalent of the godhead. Buddhists, however, are always mindful of the tension involved in such a personification. This Buddha, then, is addressed exactly in the same way as the Christ is invoked—the cosmic Christ beyond the individual Jesus—and, Buddhism speaks of the inherent Buddha-nature as Christianity does of the 'Christ within'. Buddha then becomes the emblem or reference to the essence of the individual, and Sakyamuni Buddha was one who realized this essence fully—the fullest development possible to each of us.

Moreover, as you know, it was not only the Buddha who became an object of devotion. In Buddhist iconography, especially in Tibetan Buddhism, one sees many Bodhisattvas, especially such major ones as Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, and many others as well. These beings are seen as personifications of energies or qualities operating at levels intermediate between the human and the divine much like the angels and archangels which other religions depict. The interesting question here is how is this possible—a theistic context? How is it possible to have a devotionism and

a non-dualistic perspective? The answer lies in the "skillful means" which developed along with the Mahayana and was brought to perfection in Tibetan Buddhism. Two views are maintained at the same time: the gods don't "really" exist, but then you don't either. Nothing does. If anything exists, well, the gods exist a little *more* than you. Or your teacher has more existence than you as he is the one who has arrived at a higher plateau of being. "Refuge" is the name for this attitude in Buddhism and is the equivalent of what in Islam is "surrender."

Not far from the notion of Refuge is the importance of specific beings as sources of enlightenment, and not far from this is the notion of blessing. "Blessing" is a word which has lost most of its meaning in our modern usage. It has come to mean little more now than good wishes. But in the story of Isaac and Jacob in the Bible, you will recall, what is meant by blessing is a very definite event. Isaac gives his blessing to Jacob by mistake, because he was tricked. Jacob presents himself as the first born, and once the deed is done it can't be undone. This is not something which would apply to mere good wishes; it was a definite psychological event, or even, if you like, a psychic event—the passing on of a power. This same concept is present in Shamanistic cultures; sometimes the Shaman passes the power on to the body of another. This notion of a subtle form of positive contagion is universal. Of course, there is negative contagion too, and I think we are all familiar with both forms of contagion in everyday life. We often talk about people bringing us down, or conversely, the presence of certain others elevating or nourishing us. When we speak of blessing and of cursing we are dealing with the highest ranges of these phenomena.

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