

The Path of Buddha: Tibetan Buddhism

There are different facets to the history of Buddhist Tibet. It is said that Tibet was unified in the 7th century, as part of the empire of King Srong Tsen Gampo, which extended from Afghanistan to China. The mighty king demanded wives from Nepal and China. These women brought the art and religion of their Buddhist kingdoms with them, which opened the way for Padmasambhava to bring Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th Century.

Buddhists strive to end suffering by focusing the mind, to enter the Enlightenment of the Buddha. Buddhism, like all religions, has many paths, with different practices and beliefs. Gurus transmit the practices to disciples in a lineage, aiding them in developing the clarity which arises out of meditation. Tibetan practice, with the understanding that one person's liberation is incomplete until all other beings have been liberated, undertakes to end the suffering of all beings. In the words of the Dalai Lama, "For as long as space endure, And for as long as living beings remain, Until then may I, too, abide, To dispel the misery of the world."

Before the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, close to 13000 monasteries involved almost the entire Tibetan population in the Buddhist traditions. Art and music played significant roles in this Buddhist way of life, but these practices have faced many difficulties since the mid 20th century, and the Tibetan government lives in exile, in India.

In 1966, Jack Wise received the Canada Council Senior Fellowship for Travel and Study of Tibetan Art in India. He also journeyed to Tibet at that time, and sought to learn the painting of the mandala. At a later time, Jack gained an audience with the Dalai Lama, a revered figure in Tibetan Buddhism.

Buddhism is a complex and fascinating religion, one that determines everything from food to music in Tibetan culture. Respect for all living things and the discipline devoted to attaining Enlightenment, and helping others to do the same, are the basic principles. Although there is much to be learned about "The Path of the Buddha" in Tibet, one of the most important aspects, today, regards the suppression of Buddhist practice and the systematic abuse of human rights by invaders of that land. The arts of Tibet, including the mandalas that were so significant in the painting of Jack Wise, have been destroyed, and the chants of the monks no longer resonate through the mountains.

Human Rights and Global Responsibility

One million Tibetans have perished during the invasion and occupation by the army of the People's Republic of China since 1950, and the destruction of religious and historic temple and monastery sites began even before the Cultural Revolution. Today, more than a quarter of a million Chinese troops are stationed in Tibet, and the violation of basic human rights, including the oppression of the practices of Buddhism continues.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948 (www.un.org/Overview/rights.html) states in Article 2 that:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

These human rights have not been respected in Tibet, and the religious and social organization of the Tibetan people has been corroded. Monasteries have been closed and figures like the Dalai Lama forced into exile for reasons of safety.

Action: Amnesty International

Amnesty International (AI), an international organization that works against human rights abuses, has devoted efforts towards the situation in Tibet. One of the ways in which AI takes action is through letter writing campaigns. Visit their web site at www.amnesty.ca and find out how you and your classmates can help to end the oppression in Tibet. Or, go specifically to www.amnesty.ca/library/1999/ASA1712.htm for archival information on their Tibet campaign.

Action: Your School's Awareness!

Find a newspaper article about a recent event in Tibet. Does it mention a human rights issue? What do you think an abuse of human rights is? Explain how the article helps or does not help people in Canada to understand what is happening in Tibet.

Interview another student at your school. Ask them if they know where Tibet is and what is happening there. Think of other questions you could ask, such as:

*What can Canadians do to help end Human Rights abuses in Tibet?

*Have you ever met or spoken to a Tibetan Buddhist monk? (many have travelled to Canadian towns and cities to raise awareness about Tibet)

*Have events like the Free Tibet concerts and awareness from bands like the Beastie Boys increased your consciousness about Tibet?

Bring a small tape recorder or take notes, and write an article for your school newspaper, or post the answers on the internet.

Action: A Look at the Dalai Lama

Jack Wise met and spoke with the Dalai Lama, a man he greatly respected. The Dalai Lama, who refers to himself as a simple monk in spite of his fame and spiritual importance, spoke these words:

Because our every action has a universal dimension, a potential impact on others' happiness, ethics are necessary as a means to ensure that we do not harm others... genuine happiness consists in those spiritual qualities of love, compassion, patience, tolerance and forgiveness and so on. For it is these which provide both for our happiness and others' happiness.

In 1989, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Visit the official Dalai Lama web site at www.dalailama.com and read his Nobel Peace Prize speech at www.dalailama.com/html/nobel.html

Who is the Dalai Lama, and what is his role in Tibetan Buddhism?

Have the peaceful ways of the Tibetan Buddhists been effective in their struggle?

How does the Dalai Lama see that peace, well being and the environment are tied together?

Can the Dalai Lama's plan for Tibet's future work?