

Buddhism Meets the West

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this research project were to observe and to interpret the shared experiences and common practices of the people who were practicing Tibetan Buddhism in Germany and how these experiences and practices changed their view of reality and the way they interpret the world. The methodology that I used was based on the methods developed by Nancy Diekelmann, with reference to interpretive phenomenology as she applied it to research in nursing. Having used this methodology, I found three common themes that came out in all the interviews. These themes are: changes in interpersonal views and practices, changes in worldview, and changes in views of reality.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years Tibetan Buddhism has been gaining more and more followers and is continuing to grow in the West. This is especially evident in Europe and, in particular, Germany, where there are over 100 Diamond Way Buddhist Centers. This is more than any other Western nation, by far. Given that the West has a primarily Judeo-Christian background, it is important to observe how the different belief systems and practices of Buddhism change the way in which people who are practicing it view their world and the effects that it has on their lives.

In a world where societies are losing coherence and where the traditional religions do not match people's needs as their religion once did, it is important to understand viable alternatives. When Tibetan Buddhism comes to the West and, letting go of its cultural aspects, can be understood as a Western practice, many possibilities emerge. One person in particular has played a major role in helping these possibilities emerge is the Danish Lama Ole Nydahl.

In the late 1960's Ole and his wife Hannah went to India on their honeymoon and while there met several Tibetan Buddhist masters. After studying with them for over three years and getting trained as a Buddhist teacher (lama), Ole and his wife were instructed to bring Diamond Way Buddhism to the West. Ever since Ole has been traveling around the world teaching and opening centers. He now has started around 400 centers in every continent except Africa.

In order to have an understanding of how Buddhism can change the Western worldview, it is first important to have a basic understanding of what Buddhism teaches. For this reason, I will briefly describe the goal of Buddha's teachings, the path to this goal, and because I focused my research on Diamond Way Buddhism, the role of the teacher.

Basic Principle of Diamond Way Buddhism

Goal of Buddha's teachings. The goal of all of Buddha's teachings is always enlightenment. To describe the experience of enlightenment is a difficult task, because in order to do this one must also talk about the mind. Kalu Rinpoche states, "The actual experience of the essential nature of mind is beyond words." (21) This being the case, I would still like to give some ideas that hint at what enlightenment is. It is described as the state where one experiences and has complete understanding of mind and everything that happens within mind. This is an experience where there is no ignorance and one sees everything in a beyond dualistic manner.

Kalu Rinpoche furthermore describes enlightenment when he states, "Enlightenment is the state of pure mind. It is non-dualistic knowing and is called primordial wisdom. Its experiences are authentic; that is, they are without illusion." (19) Enlightenment is also described as the end to all suffering. Kalu Rinpoche continues, "A real understanding of the nature of mind is liberating because it disengages us from all illusions and consequently from the source of the suffering, fears, and difficulties that make up our daily life." (32)

One main obstacle that keeps us from realizing the true nature of mind is ignorance and the belief in an ego-subject or an "I." Lama Ole Nydahl states, "The separation between an 'I' and a 'you,' a 'here' and a 'there,' causes disturbing feelings to arise: attachment to what one wants, and ill-will against what is deemed unpleasant." (11) This

basic ignorance is the cause of all the difficulties that one has. All of Buddha's teachings aim at removing this ignorance that takes the "I" or the self as real and as substance.

The Buddha also teaches that everyone is already enlightened, but due to our basic ignorance and how mind functions, we are not aware of it. Our inherent nature is essentially the same as the Buddha's himself, that being pure enlightenment. Kalu Rinpoche states, "It is because we each possess Buddha nature that it is possible to attain enlightenment. If we did not already have Buddha nature, we would never be able to realize it." (19) Just because we can conceive of enlightenment means that it is possible and it is realizing this possibility that is Buddhism's aim.

Path to the goal. Buddha understood that the same hat does not fit every head. Because of this understanding he gave many different types of teachings in, order to best benefit the many different types of students he had. Whereas every teaching that he gave was aimed at developing the student and helping them to experience mind's true nature, the Buddha's highest teachings, the Diamond Way, contain methods and explanations that guide the practitioner to enlightenment in the fastest way possible.

While meditation is the method described as the way to reach enlightenment in all of the Buddha's teachings, the Diamond Way methods of meditation are the fastest means to reach this goal. Kalu Rinpoche describes meditation as "the tool that allows us to recognize the nature of mind, its thoughts and afflictions, and to attain peace, happiness and freedom." (151) If this is a general definition of what meditation is, then how do the Diamond Way methods differ from that of other meditation methods and practices?

The majority of meditation methods involve a practice of watching one's breath. This leads to the calming and stabilizing of one's mind, along with a sense of compassion and desire to help others. Much realization can happen with these methods. However it is said to take many, many lifetimes to reach enlightenment using these methods. With Diamond Way methods, however, enlightenment can be reached in one lifetime.

Lama Ole Nydahl states: "Working from the level of consequence and inspired insight to transform all experience into self-liberating meaning and natural purity, it [the Diamond Way] employs methods of total identification with enlightenment for the quickest results."(21) While meditation on one's breath can bring very beneficial results, the total identification with enlightenment and seeing all experience as a meaningful and potential for growth is by far the fastest method.

Another method that is central to the practice of the Diamond Way is the idea that everything that happens is pure potential for growth. If something is enjoyable and pleasant then it is a blessing; if something is painful or unpleasant, then it is purification and an opportunity to learn. Being able to view life and its experiences in this way is called having the pure view. If one is able to hold the pure view at every moment, nothing can possibly go wrong; and one will experience everything as fresh, joyful and rich with potential.

Initially the pure view is obtained during meditation with the goal of holding this pure view through-out one's daily life. Using the Diamond Way methods of both the formal meditation and the goal of holding the pure view throughout the day, development and understanding of the nature of mind happens very quickly. Because of the speed and effectiveness of the Diamond Way methods an experienced guide is essential to help us on our path towards enlightenment.

The role of the teacher. In the other methods that the Buddha taught the teacher, or lama, is not necessarily an essential part of the path towards the goal. For the Diamond Way however this is not the case. Kalu Rinpoche describes the lama in the Diamond Way when he states, "For the Vajrayana (Diamond Way) practitioner, the lama is exceedingly important. He is Buddha's equal in his qualities, and even more esteemed than any other aspect of Buddha because of his kindness in transmitting the teachings to us. It is this essential relationship that allows the transmission of the blessing and provides spiritual direction at the deepest level, the Vajrayana (Diamond Way) level."(178) The lama in the Diamond Way holds the transmission of enlightened energy and mind that has been passed down from lama to student and then again from lama to student, going all the way back to Buddha Sakyamuni.

Another reason that the lama is so important in the Diamond Way is because of the mind's inability to see itself. A Buddhist proverb states, "The eye can not see its own pupil." Kalu Rinpoche adds, "Likewise, our own mind does not have the capacity to see itself; it is so close, so intimate, that we cannot discern it."(15) The lama therefore acts as a mirror to mind so that one can realize its true nature. The lama effortlessly and spontaneously reflects back to one's self all of the enlightened potential that is present and inherent in mind itself. It is this capacity of the lama to act as a mirror to mind that is a central component in Diamond Way practice.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research project were to observe and to interpret the shared experiences and common practices of the people who were practicing Tibetan Buddhism in Germany and how these experiences and practices changed their view of reality and the way they interpret the world. I chose Germany as the site for this research for three reasons: First, because Tibetan Buddhism is the most widely practiced in Germany; second, because it has been practiced the longest in that country; third, because for some reason the Germans are more open than any other country to this spiritual practice.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology that I used was based on the methods developed by Nancy Diekelmann, with reference to interpretive phenomenology as she applied it to research in nursing. This methodology involves:

- a. interviewing individuals on their worldview and its effect of their daily lives,
- b. collection in the process narratives by taping their stories,
- c. transcribing these narratives and interpreting them for common practices and shared experiences,
- d. gathering these practices and experiences under categories that emerge from the individual narratives,
- e. elucidating and clarifying the common themes that have emerged,
- f. writing a report that summarizes and interprets these findings.

Before going to Germany Dr. Kenneth Maly and I developed a set of questions that I would ask every individual interviewed. Once in Germany, I attended a two and a half week long meditation course offered by Lama Ole Nydahl. There were over 3000 students of his from all over the world that attended this course. During this time I taped interviews with twenty German practitioners that came from various areas of Germany. They varied in the time they had practiced Buddhism from 6 months to 23 years.

When I returned from Germany, I listened to and transcribed these narratives and removed all identification of the individuals involved. With the help of Dr. Maly and Dr. Miller I then read and studied these narratives with the goal to draw out the common practices and shared experiences. After finding many common themes, I developed categories that helped to clarify and elucidate these themes.

RESULTS

Having used the methodology described above, I found three common themes that came out in all the interviews. These themes are: changes in interpersonal views and practices, changes in worldview, and changes in views of reality.

Changes in Intrapersonal Views and Practices

There were two general practices that were described that helped to bring about the change in their persons. The first one is specifically the Diamond Way practice of formal meditation, which I have described in the first section of this paper. When asked to describe how the experience of formal meditation helped to bring about this change, most said that it helped to develop a pure view of the world around them and to increase overall awareness. Many described having the experience that the more they practiced formal meditation the easier it was for them to see the world as a positive place full of opportunity.

In Tibet it was common for monks to spend years of their lives in meditation retreat. Since meditation is central to Diamond Way Buddhism and since it is not possible or practical in western culture to devote years solely to the practice of meditation, I asked how they saw the daily practices and meditations fitting into their own lives. Most of the people said that it was hard at first to find time every day to devote to meditating. However they described having the experience of being able to tell by their thought patterns and amount of disturbing emotions when they had been meditating every day versus when it had been a while since their last meditation.

The other main practice that is directly related and linked to the formal meditation is what is called practicing the pure view, which I have also described in the first section of this paper. The experience of trying to hold the pure view in every situation of life was described as being very difficult at first. Most said that when they first

started trying to hold the pure view they began to realize how many negative and pessimistic thoughts and attitudes they had everyday. Eventually however, and with continued effort they were better able to maintain this view throughout their entire day.

With the integration of these two practices into their daily lives several themes emerged concerning changes in interpersonal views and patterns. One theme was the experience of having an increase in positive thought patterns and a change in the way they view disturbing their emotions. Those interviewed stated that, gradually, the more they worked with the methods provided by Buddhism the more optimistic they became. People also described themselves as having a greater distance from their disturbing emotions and because of this distance not taking the negative emotions as seriously.

Many stated that before they began practicing Buddhism they would get easily caught by whatever disturbing emotion happen to come up. Eventually however the more they meditated the more they experienced a distance from their disturbing emotions.

The second main theme that was present in every one of the interviews was the increase in fearlessness, compassion, joy, and clarity. Not everyone directly attributed these feelings to the same cause, yet everyone described experiencing them. Most people however pointed to the meditation practices that Buddhism offered as the cause of the increases. Another reason some explained as the cause for the increase was the distance that they could have from situations and disturbing emotions so that they would not get as caught-up in them as before.

Worldview

Those interviewed also expressed a change in the way in which they view and interact in the world. These changes seem to stem largely from the interpersonal developments and practices that were described in the previous section. One main theme described was the developing view that everything is an opportunity. This is directly related to the practice of pure view described earlier. Where in the past, they would have gotten frustrated or had a hard time in certain situations, now they see things that happen in life and in the world as an amazing opportunity to learn and grow.

Another change in worldview that everyone described was the feeling that they personally, were no longer the center of the universe. Before many described the feeling that everything that happened in life was either directly related to themselves or had something to do with them. One person stated that whenever someone would pull in front of him while driving he was sure that the guy did it just to make him angry. The same man explained that now instead of getting mad at the person that cut him off he, just thinks the guy must be in a really big hurry or just didn't see him. He had developed the view that it was not a personal attack on him. This type of view was common throughout the interviews.

Many also explained that gradually there was an overall change in focus. Before practicing Buddhism many described being on a search and mainly focusing on how to obtain happiness. Most also described a desire to help other people but not really knowing the best way to go about doing so. Because Buddhism offered methods which brought the desired happiness and stability of mind that they looked for and also gave answers to many questions of how the world works that were based in experience and not faith, their habit of taking most things personally and usually trying to help themselves first shifted to trying to help others. Instead of trying to see what they could gain from someone, they became more interested in what they could do for them.

Also they described having less anxiety and more patience when interacting with people in their everyday lives. Most felt that they were of more benefit to people they interacted with because of this.

Probably the most interesting shared experience, with regards to their worldview, was the change in which they viewed death and dying. When I asked them about death and their feelings before and after meeting Buddhism, well over half said that whereas they had had a very distinct fear of death, after going to a meditation course specifically about death and the dying process, they had extremely little to no fear of death. Because of this most of the anxiety that goes along with the uncertainty had disappeared.

One person told a story of his mother's death and all the emotions that went along with it. He stated that because of the practice that he learned at a course on conscious dying he was able to help his mother after her death and that her death was turned into a very joyful experience instead of a painful and negative one.

Because of the view that Buddhism offered they, were not as focused on their own issues. One person said, "I realize that I am only one person and that there are many others out there that I could possibly help. So it just seems to make more sense to work for others."

Change in Views of Reality

As Westerners our views of what is really real have been influenced largely by the Judeo-Christian metaphysics- whether one was brought up in a Judeo-Christian home or not. Judeo-Christian morals and values are engrained in our culture and society; and because of this, we also hold many of these values. Buddhism offers an alternative view of what is real to those that decide to practice its teachings.

When I asked if they perceived a change in what they viewed as “real” I got similar answers in varying degrees. They described a difference between actually experiencing what Buddhism says reality is and understanding it on a cognitive, logical level. For example Buddhism says that everything is an emanation of mind and that the only thing that is constant and ever present is mind. Most described being able to understand that concept and also even having slight glimpses of it in meditation or other powerful experiences in their lives. However on an everyday basis most said they did not have the experience that everything is emanation of mind.

Those that had been practicing the longest however, did describe a larger change in the way they viewed reality. They described it as a gradual process that has been developing slowly with their experience. One person, having practiced for around fifteen years, explained that at first he did not fully believe everything that Buddhism said about the way things are in the world; but eventually, after checking it out with his own experience he saw that his experience and what Buddhism says was pretty much the same. The experience of a change in the way they view reality was not based in faith or opinion but was based in direct experience.

CLOSING THOUGHTS AND MY OWN EXPERIENCE

There are a few important themes and thoughts that many of those interviewed had in common that did not fit exactly into these categories and yet are still important to get a full understanding of the potentials that Buddhism offers. Also I would like to share some of my own personal thoughts, observations and experiences.

One of the questions that I asked was how they felt Tibetan Buddhism fit into the Western culture. I got close to the same response every time, namely that the Tibetan cultural aspect of Buddhism was not very important to them and that they were glad that Lama Ole could take the essence of Buddhism and leave the cultural Tibetan stuff in Tibet.

One person who had been practicing Buddhism for around 20 years had a very useful response to this question. He said, “The Buddha always said his teachings are like a crystal. They shine blue if you put them on a blue surface and if you put them on a red surface they shine red. Buddha’s teachings in Tibet shine on a Tibetan surface. We do not want the Tibetan surface because we are not Tibetan. We are German or Europeans or Americans or Western people and we function differently. Our minds are the same. The essence of mind is the same but we function on a completely different political, social, whatever background. So the surface will be different.”

Since the style of Buddhism that is being practiced by the Germans who I interviewed was relatively free of Tibetan cultural aspects and yet still maintained the essence of what the Buddha taught, the possibilities for it to influence their lives and the lives of many other Westerners seemed to grow exponentially. I am certain that if the Tibetan cultural aspects were still in place the amount of benefit would be greatly reduced for those that practice it and that Buddhism would turn away more people than it would attract.

Another central theme was that the longer those interviewed had been practicing Buddhism the more of they reported experiencing all the changes I described above. I did not interview a single person that after having practiced Buddhism for several years felt as though they had become less joyful, compassionate or fearless. Every person expressed an overall increase in awareness and quality of life. This to me was the most impressive common theme in all the interviews that I performed. It seems to show more than any other theme that Buddhism can and does do what it claims to do.

When I presented these findings at the undergraduate research day, someone asked why I thought the Germans were more open to these practices than any other Western people. There are two main factors that I think play a role in this. First, the Germans are pretty much only Christian by name. Because of this there is not as much social pressure to stay with Christianity, which also allows them to be more open to Buddhism in general. Also, Buddhism offers a lot of space to move around in and does not give a lot of rigid rules to be followed. In a relatively stiff society with a lot of rules that are followed very strictly, I think that Buddhism provides a much needed release.

My own experience with Buddhism is very similar to those of the Germans I interviewed. I started practicing Buddhism about one and a half years ago after I met Lama Ole Nydahl at a meditation course he offered in New York. I was very critical of many of the ideas that Buddhism had to offer. Because I had been turned off by Christianities emphasis of faith, it was a relief to find that Buddhism was based in experience and that any kind of question was welcomed and fully explained.

Because I was still very critical and wanted to check out what Buddhism had to offer more, I applied for and was rewarded this research grant. This enabled me to travel to Europe and spend over seven weeks traveling between different European Buddhist centers in Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Germany. The culmination of this trip brought me to Kassel, Germany, and a two and a half week meditation course.

During the two and a half weeks I spent in Kassel I had many powerful and life changing experiences. I have struggled to express these experiences to family and friends ever since and it is no easier now. It seems impossible to adequately put into words what I felt during my time in Germany. What I can say is that as a result of the two and a half weeks, I am absolutely certain that there is a power and validity to the practices that Buddhism offers and that these practices are extremely applicable to the Western world. This certainty has been continually reaffirmed through my own frequent powerful experiences in meditation.

Since I returned from Europe I have experienced a continual increase in joy and everything that is wonderful in my life. There are of course times where I have gotten down or angry but these periods have never lasted such a short time. Overall I have never been happier. I have no doubt that the cause of my happiness is the views and practices that Buddhism offers me. My confidence in this is not based in faith but in the continued experiences that I have while meditating and living my life. The Buddha's last words were, "Now, don't believe my words because a Buddha told you, but examine them well. Be a light onto yourselves." Whichever road you choose to take, this is also my suggestion to you.

REFERENCES

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