

Globalisation and Tibetan Buddhism

Peter Oldmeadow

This paper explores the globalisation of Tibetan Buddhism that has occurred since the Tibetan diaspora of the 1950s and 60s. Two kinds of related changes have resulted: Tibetan Buddhism itself as understood and practised by Tibetans is changing; and new Westernised forms of Tibetan Buddhism are emerging. These two types of change cannot be entirely separated. This is not surprising since many of the same forces are operational in both cases. Nor is it surprising that these changes have involved Westernisation, since globalisation and Westernisation are difficult to separate. Furthermore, within Tibet itself, Buddhism has been faced by the challenge of communism, a secular ideology of Western origin, based on materialism and on the idea of social progress. Although secularising forces are strong, it cannot be assumed that secularisation, Westernisation and globalisation are necessarily concomitant.

As well as exploring some of the changes that are occurring, this paper will consider some of the responses to them. Do the changes promise a rejuvenation of Tibetan Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions or do they demonstrate the corrosive effects of the modern world and global forces on a once integral tradition? Are the changes simply a further readaption to changed circumstances?

Massive changes were precipitated by the Chinese occupation of Tibet which culminated in the flight of the Dalai Lama and approximately seventy thousand refugees to India in 1959. At this time Tibet was artificially divided between the 'Tibetan Autonomous Region' and parts of four Chinese provinces, and brought under the control of the Chinese. This subordination of Tibet to China was done in name of progress and freedom. The communist regime was intent on the destruction of Tibetan religious traditions which they saw as nothing but the expression of medieval feudalism. This led to destruction of thousands of monasteries, the imprisonment or death of large numbers of monastics and lay people, and the general persecution of religion.¹ The height of destructiveness within Tibet was probably in the mid 1960s during the 'cultural revolution' which aimed to eradicate the 'four olds':

¹ On this destruction see John F. Avedon, *In Exile From the Land of Snows*, New York, 1984.

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old ideology, old culture, old habits, and old customs. During this period many predicted the dissolution of Buddhism in Tibet and its decay and virtual disappearance in India among the exile community. A spectrum of responses to these changes ranged from celebration of the apparent end of an oppressive medieval feudalism to lamentation at the passing of one of the last remaining traditional civilisations, the passing of an integral culture tied to a religious vision linked to the past.¹

It has been clear for some time that the predicted destruction of Tibetan Buddhism has not occurred, although damage within Tibet has been very great and probably irreversible. Tibetan Buddhism has flourished in India and in areas of Tibetan culture not under Chinese control, notably in Bhutan and parts of Nepal. It has become a presence in other parts of Asia – perhaps significantly, the impact has been very strong in Taiwan. Tibetan Buddhism has established a strong presence in the West: in North America, Europe, Australia and other countries. It has attracted a large following of Western converts and sympathisers particularly among the educated ‘elite’ Buddhists.² In some instances it has attracted support from ethnic communities of non-European background.³

In India the Tibetan monastic system has been, in large measure, reduplicated. In both North and South India institutions have been established which offer traditional monastic training including the granting of monastic degrees. The system of reincarnate lamas, important in maintaining continuity of traditions in Tibet – the system of *tulkus* - continues (with associated political intrigues). Tibetan Buddhism has developed educational institutions which overlap with but go beyond the traditional monastic structure. For example, in Sarnath, the place where Shakyamuni Buddha began teaching the Dharma, the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies is recognised as a university within the Indian system. Likewise in Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile and home

1 Anagarika Govinda wrote, ‘Tibet has become the symbol of all that present-day humanity is longing for the stability of tradition, which has its roots not only in a historical or cultural past, but within the innermost being of man, in whose depths this past is enshrined as an ever-present source of inspiration.’ *The Way of the White Clouds: A Buddhist Pilgrim in Tibet*, Berkeley, 1971, p. xi.

2 On the distinction between ‘ethnic’, ‘evangelical’ and ‘elite’ Buddhism see Jan Nattier, ‘Visible and Invisible: The Politics of Representation in Buddhist America’, *Tricycle*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1995, pp. 42-9.

3 For example, Khejok Rinpoche, a lama of the Gelug school, is supported in Sydney by the Chinese community.

of the Dalai Lama, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives and the School of Dialectics are an integral part of the Indian tertiary education sector. In Bodhgaya, the place of Shakyamuni's awakening, the Tibetan presence has become the most noticeable both because of the institutions which have been established and because of the number of Tibetan pilgrims. The Dalai Lama teaches each December in Bodhgaya. This event attracts thousands of Tibetans and Westerners and is an affirmation of the continuity and vitality of Tibetan Buddhism.

Developments outside India and Tibet have seen the establishment of hundreds of centres and small communities in all parts of world. In Australia, for instance, centres representing all the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism can be found not only in the capital cities but also in regional centres throughout the country. It is not considered out of the ordinary that the biggest statue in the world of the Buddhist Bodhisattva Manjushri is being built near the Victorian regional city of Bendigo.

Most centres in India and the West represent nodes in larger international networks which are not tied to particular places and often not even to a particular ethnic following. If one examines the hundreds of Internet sites representing different Tibetan Buddhist groups it is difficult to say where many of the leading lamas (spiritual teachers) are permanently located: in India, USA, Europe, Australia? The lack of rootedness of people in a particular place is illustrated in another way by Namgyal Monastery in the United States which is populated entirely by Tibetan monks.

Reincarnate lamas (*tulkus*), recognised as reincarnations of previous teachers in the Tibetan tradition, have been identified among adult Westerners - including at least one woman.¹ *Tulkus* have also been recognised among children born to Western parents trained in India. These children will, no doubt, rise to positions of power within the system.

We can dismiss any image of Tibet as a timeless and unchanging 'Shangri-La' or spiritual paradise.² We can also dismiss the images of Tibet as a place of unparalleled brutality, superstition and sorcery.³ Tibet has always been a complex society with its saints

¹ Catherine Burroughs, now known as Akhon Norbu Lhamo.

² On such images, see Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La*, London, 1989.

³ For example, as depicted in Chinese propaganda over the past forty years and in some early orientalist writings. On the latter, see Donald S. Lopez, 'Foreigners at the Lama's Feet', in Donald S. Lopez (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, Chicago, 1995, pp. 251-95, esp. pp. 259-63.

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and sinners; its wars and power struggles. It has also been a civilisation of great cultural achievements which have been, in the main, tied to Buddhism. It was certainly not unchanging – influences ranged from the indigenous traditions, especially Bön, to Central Asian influences particularly through the ancient kingdom of Zhang Zung in Western Tibet. China has had an influence through Chan (Chinese Zen) Buddhism and other traditions. And, of course, Indian Buddhism has been the primary outside influence through the earlier (eighth century) and later (eleventh century) disseminations of the Dharma. The complexity of these influences is evident in certain tensions in Tibetan Buddhism which are still present today. Tibetan religious history has been punctuated by attempts to purify and refound traditions in relation to an ‘authentic past’ usually identified with India and the authoritative scholars and practitioners there.¹

The truth is that Tibetan Buddhism has always changed. The central issue has been continuity of traditions: the preservation of learning through the transmission of texts and intellectual traditions; the continuity of monastic ordination; and the transmission and preservation of lineages of practice and realisation. The system of reincarnate lamas (*tulkus*) has been integral to this.

Change has occurred within these frameworks. But the frameworks also change. For example, the *tulku* system itself evolved only after the twelfth century.² Within slowly evolving frameworks continuity of learning, ordination and practice were maintained. It is this continuity that was threatened by Chinese invasion and the changes that followed. The central issue is continuity, not change. Can Tibetan Buddhism accommodate itself to these changes and to global forces; forces involving modernisation and Westernisation? Can structures be maintained or can they change while maintaining continuity?

Let us consider globalisation of Tibetan Buddhism in relation to Tibetan Buddhism in the West. What kinds of changes are taking place? How much do they have in common with other forms of Western Buddhism? Which are particular to Tibetan Buddhism or are especially important to it? Do they represent a threat to the

¹ For example, the reforms of Tsong Khapa (1357-1419) which saw the establishment of the Gelug School aimed to renovate Tibetan Buddhism in conformity with Indian ideals.

² Düsüm Kyenpa (1110-1193) is reckoned to be the first in the series of Gyalwa Karmapa reincarnate lamas, the oldest series of rebirths recognised in Tibet. Rangjung Dorje (1285-1339), recognised as the third Karmapa, may have been the first child to have been formally recognised as a reincarnate lama.

continuity of the tradition?

The differences between Western and Asian Buddhism are most evident in three areas. In Western Buddhism the laity has a more central role, while the ordained *sangha* and monasticism are less important; there is greater participation of women as practitioners and teachers; and there is a greater orientation toward issues of social justice and change. Other differences include more fluid, even blurred, boundaries between traditions and a primary focus on practice rather than institutions. These differences are all reflected in Western forms of Tibetan Buddhism. The role of the laity and place of monasticism will be considered here.

Traditionally, in most Buddhist countries, the laity has tended to be seen primarily as supporters of the monastic *sangha*, that is, of the ordained monks and nuns. Serious spiritual practice and religious learning has been seen, by and large, as the preserve of the *sangha*. The monks, and to a much lesser extent the nuns, represent a 'field of merit' and those supporting them can accumulate merit through the meritorious deed of giving, which will help win the donor a better rebirth, perhaps with the opportunity to become a monk in another life. In the West this has changed with the majority of practitioners and a high proportion of Buddhist teachers being laity.

The contrast in relation to the laity between Asian and Western forms is most pronounced within the Theravada tradition which, in South East Asia, has been overwhelmingly monastic in its orientation.¹ The change to a greater lay focus has certainly been evident in Tibetan Western Buddhism but it has not occasioned such a radical rethinking and reformulation of the tradition as it has in Theravada Buddhism. The reasons for this lie in the structure of Tibetan Buddhism itself. There has always been a variety in styles of practice in Tibetan Buddhism. While the reformed Gelug School (founded 1410) has been predominantly monastic, within the older traditions, particularly within the oldest school, the Nyingma, there have been traditions of lay practice and an acceptance that lay people can achieve high states of realisation. Advanced practitioners have been found amongst the ordained *sangha*, among yogis and yoginis who have their own non-monastic vows, and amongst at

¹ Some have even argued that an entirely new kind of Theravada Buddhist community or *sangha* is emerging in the West based not on monastic institutions and seniority but on lay practice and meditative attainment. On the emergence of this non-traditional 'vipassana sangha' see Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*, Chicago and La Salle, 1997, pp. 3-7.

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least a few laity. Furthermore, the central figure in Tibetan Buddhism is not the monk but the lama. The authority of the lama does not rest on ordination or seniority within the monastic system but rather on spiritual attainment and power, especially in the performance of tantric ritual. Scholarly accomplishment may also be an important factor in a lama's status.¹ The lama may be monastic or lay and may be single or married. This accounts for the fact that many of the lamas who have come to the West as teachers have made the transition from monkhood to lay life without any serious erosion in their status.

This is not to say that there have not been serious changes in this respect in Western Tibetan Buddhism. Although the lama in Tibet may have been married he was nonetheless a religious 'professional' whose life was centred on practice and spiritual matters. The practice of ordinary lay people was, with few exceptions, confined to meritorious acts of generosity and so on. and to receiving blessings and empowerments. In the West the majority of practitioners, even some of the most committed and serious ones, are lay people who cannot be described as 'professionals'. Some Tibetan lamas having had contact with Western lay people committed to practising the deeper teachings are now puzzled by the lack of interest in these teachings among the Tibetan laity.

There is a much greater involvement of women in Western Buddhism both as practitioners and teachers. This is closely related to the greater role of the laity. Among the Western lay practitioners more than half are women. The women drawn to Tibetan Buddhism in the West are for the most part well educated and concerned with issues of equality, opportunity and recognition for women. The basis for equality can be found within the Vajrayana tantric tradition which, in theory, accords equal status to women. The reality, however differs markedly from the theory. With significant involvement and financial (and political) support coming from the West, the tradition is changing not only in the West but also slowly within Tibetan communities.

The issue of the place of women also has a monastic dimension. There were no fully ordained nuns within the Tibetan tradition and the status of nuns was very low. The full ordination was either never transmitted to Tibet or was lost. The few women who became significant figures within the tradition were tantric practitioners

¹ On the status of the lama in Tibetan Buddhism see Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, Washington and London, 1993, pp. 29-36 and *passim*.

(*yogini*) practising outside the monastic system, either alone or with a male practitioner as a consort.

The only full ordination lineage for nuns to have survived until the present day was maintained in China. There is a move to introduce the full ordination for women into Tibetan Buddhism but it is not a straightforward matter because different ordination lineages are not interchangeable. Despite this and other problems, a number of Westerners have travelled to Taiwan or Hong Kong to take full ordination within the lineage preserved there. In the 1980s eight Tibetan women travelled to Hong Kong, with the support of their lamas, to take the full ordination. The prospects for nuns within the Tibetan tradition seem much more positive than within the Theravada tradition where the reestablishment of a nuns' *sangha* is fervently opposed by many influential monks.¹ Much of the impetus for change has come from Westerners but it does have the support of significant number of important lamas including the Dalai Lama.² The Dalai Lama also supports the establishment of new nunneries, and Tibetan women practitioners are being encouraged to take a more public role within the tradition. Added impetus is being given for these changes and for more female-friendly teachings from the West where many regard the issues as urgent. With the blessings of her Tibetan teachers the English nun Tenzin Palmo is leading an effort to reestablish female yogic traditions within the monastic system.³

In the emerging Western forms of Tibetan Buddhism, monasticism does not have the same role as it did in Tibet. Tibetans themselves have different views about the desirability of this change. Tibetan views partly reflect sectarian allegiance. Lamas of the most monastically oriented school, the Gelug, have tried to replicate something like the Tibetan monastic structure in the West and have been keen to encourage ordination for the dedicated male and

1 See Nancy J. Barnes, 'Buddhist Women and the Nun's Order in Asia', in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (eds), *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Albany, 1996, pp. 250-94.

2 In his autobiography, the Dalai Lama says of his visit to Taiwan: 'As Dalai Lama I was also particularly eager to learn about the Chinese Buddhist tradition of *bhikshuni*, that is to say of full ordination of nuns. We in the Tibetan tradition do not at present follow this practice but I intend to introduce it.' Tenzin Gyatso, *Freedom in Exile: the Autobiography of the Dalai Lama of Tibet*, London, 1998, p. 310.

3 On Tenzin Palmo's plans for a nunnery and women's yogic practice centre in Northern India, see Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow: A Western Woman's Quest for Enlightenment*, London, 1998, pp. 153-62.

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female practitioners.¹ Other lamas, particularly those belonging to the Nyingma School or followers of the Dzog chen ('Great Perfection') teachings which have been traditionally associated with the Nyingma have generally encouraged lay practice.² Some of these teachers believe there were too many monks in Tibet and that this led to an imbalance in Tibetan society. Significantly, the Dalai Lama, although he belongs to the monastic Gelug school, would like to see fewer monks and believes there have been too many monks of mediocre calibre and commitment.

In Tibet the monasteries were not only centres of religious practice but also institutions of learning. High accomplishment in learning was embodied in the figure of the *Geshe* in the Gelug School or *Khenpo* in the other schools. A long period of study, usually spanning twenty years or more years, was required to reach this level. Learning within the monastic system focused on textual, exegetical and philosophical studies. A sophisticated system of scholastic learning and practice was dedicated to preserving, defining and defending Tibetan Buddhist traditions.³

The monastic structure is not sufficiently developed in the West to serve this function. Dedicated Western students have travelled to monastic centres of learning in India to pursue traditional intellectual studies.⁴ Given the predominantly lay orientation in the West it is perhaps not surprising that Western tertiary institutions and the Western Tibetan Buddhist communities are beginning to interact in ways that could play a significant role in the self definition and continuity of the tradition in the West. Some prominent Tibetan lamas, including holders of the monastic Geshe degree, have established themselves in universities through programs in departments of Religious Studies, Asian Studies, or Languages. Geshe Wangyal in the Altaic Languages Department at Columbia University and Geshe Lhundup Sopa in the Indian studies Program at the University of Wisconsin, among others, have influenced a

¹ The Fellowship for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition founded by Lama Thubten Yeshe in 1975 and now directed by Thubten Zopa Rinpoche provides a good example from the Gelug School of this approach.

² The Nyingmapas only became monastically organised in the seventeenth century.

³ On the applicability of the term 'scholasticism' to Tibetan Buddhist see José Ignacio Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*, Albany, 1994, especially pp. 11-26.

⁴ Important centres in the Indian sub-continent include monasteries in Dharamsala in North India, in several places in South India, and Kathmandu in Nepal.

number of Westerners to integrate academic studies and practice of the Buddhist path. Some of the Geshe's students have gone on to distinguished academic careers and to act as interpreters of the tradition to Western audiences.¹ Georges Dreyfus illustrates another possibility. His academic training took place within the Tibetan monastic system. After completing fifteen years monastic study in India and being awarded the highest level Geshe degree, Dreyfus has left the ordained *sangha* and now holds an academic post in an American University.²

Many Western scholars of Buddhism, especially those concerned with Tibetan tradition which places a premium on intellectual learning, began their intellectual training in a traditional environment before turning to the academy. A significant proportion have some Buddhist commitment or identify themselves as Buddhist.³ They are becoming an increasingly important voice within non-academic Western Buddhism and may help fill a lacuna in Western Tibetan Buddhism by partially taking over the role that scholar-monks had in the Tibetan tradition. An increasing number of scholars no longer feel it necessary to disguise their Buddhist affiliation out of fear of losing academic credibility. There is wide acceptance that Buddhist studies need not only be done from the supposedly neutral ground of descriptive studies or the social sciences. Some take Buddhist tradition as normative, and the practice of 'Buddhist theology' within Western tertiary institutions is emerging as a possibility.⁴ Publishers which specialise in Tibetan

1 The first ordained Western Tibetan Buddhist, Robert Thurman, studied with Geshe Wangyal and Sopa and now holds the Je Tsong Kha Pa Chair of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University.

2 See the introduction to Georges B. J. Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakirti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, Albany, 1997, on the methodology he now adopts in interpreting Buddhism.

3 See Charles S. Prebish, 'The Academic Study of Buddhism in America: A Silent *Sangha*' in Duncan Ryuken Williams and Christopher S. Queen, *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, Richmond, Surrey, 1999, pp. 183-214

4 The term 'theology', although fraught with Christian overtones and etymologically implying systematic reasoning about God, is used deliberately in order to bring out the normative and tradition-centred nature of the enterprise. For an exploration of the implications of this by a variety of Buddhist scholars, see Roger Jackson and John Makransky (eds), *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, London, 2000. For a thought provoking review of this book by a Christian scholar of Buddhism, see the review by Paul J. Griffiths in the on-line *Journal of Global Buddhism*, No. 1, 2000, <http://jgb.la.psu.edu>.

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'dharma books' such as Wisdom, Snow Lion, Dharma Publishing and Shambala are now including a high proportion of academic titles along with the more traditional material.

It is too early to assess the long-term impact of secular education institutions on traditional Tibetan Buddhism. In India the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath and the School of Dialectics in Dharamsala are part of the Indian tertiary system. In a significant departure from the norm where different Tibetan schools operate separately, scholars from all the main Tibetan schools work together in Sarnath. Interaction with and visits by Western scholars are encouraged.¹ The dialogical process that emerges out of this may well influence Tibetan perceptions of their own traditions.

There is no general agreement on the extent to which contact with the modern and postmodern world represents a threat to the Tibetan tradition. The postmodern world is characterised by plurality and by ambiguity or uncertainty. Postmodernism recognises that there are many perspectives in the world (if one can even speak of a single 'world') and that these are tied to particular historical situations, to particular cultures, and to fields of knowledge. The perspectives are always located in time and subject to the forces of history. In this framework, it is difficult to mount and maintain a defence for any position as absolute. All absolutes begin to look suspicious and there do not seem to be any universally shared criteria by which to make judgements as to which view is correct or even preferable. Some see Mahayana Buddhism with its philosophical teaching of emptiness (*shunyata*) and relativity and its refusal to affirm absolutes, as able to accommodate this situation.² But there is much more to Buddhism than *shunyata*. There is the traditional framework in which practice is located and makes sense. This can easily be undermined by the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' with which much modern scholarship approaches Buddhism, as everything else. Contemporary scholarship is often purely corrosive: it is very good at deconstructing but not good at providing synthetic vision. The scriptures, historical figures, the role of the spiritual teacher, forms of the meditation deities, authenticity of the lineages, traditional stories, and so on are all open to question. They can be deconstructed in terms of the

¹ An exchange programme between Sarnath and the University of Tasmania in Australia was set up by Professor Jay Garfield. Since Garfield's acceptance of a post in a North American university the future of this program is uncertain.

² See, for example, Glen T. Martin, 'Deconstruction and Breakthrough in Nietzsche and Nagarjuna' in Graham Parkes (ed.), *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*, pp. 91-111, Chicago, 1991.

historical forces in operation, the prevailing power structures, the motives and purposes of the key players, and so on. When these features in the tradition no longer serve as anchors, disenchantment can easily set in. Virtually everyone who lives in the modern world who approaches the Tibetan tradition, or any other religious tradition, is aware of this, and at some point in their involvement feels the impact of the kinds of questioning that arises in a pluralistic and critical environment. Dangers are posed by the development of a 'liberal Buddhism' where commitment to anything at all is optional, or by retreat into varieties of fundamentalism which are cut off from critical analysis. Both these tendencies are evident in Buddhism, as elsewhere. Alternatively, Tibetan Buddhism, and Buddhism in general, could become subservient to various causes, feminism or psychotherapy, for example.

The Dalai Lama is leading the way in initiating changes in traditional Tibetan Buddhism. Of course, he is not the only influential individual. One might mention, among others, the sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa (died 1981), the leader of the Karma Kagyu School who foresaw Chinese control of Tibet and instituted various changes in Tibet, India and the Himalayan kingdoms from his seat in Rumtek, Sikkim. The Dalai Lama is in a unique position. He is almost universally accepted as the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people and as an incarnation of Chenresig (Sanskrit, Avalokiteshvara), the bodhisattva of compassion who is believed to exercise the function of protector of the Tibetan people. He is also leader of the Tibetan government in exile. What he is attempting is only possible because of the enormous prestige of his office and because of his personal qualities.

The Dalai Lama takes an optimistic attitude. He sees in the present situation the possibility of rejuvenating a tradition which was in danger of becoming stultified. The kinds of change he advocates have earned him criticism and have led to some tensions.

He has been instrumental in locating Tibetan Buddhism in a global context. He has adopted and advocated liberal, democratic and, to some extent, secular values. This has helped garner support for Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan political cause. He has helped Tibetan Buddhism become well known outside its traditional areas of support. In Hollywood, for instance, Tibetan Buddhism has received support from a number of well-known actors, and Tibetan issues have been represented in several films. To coincide with the release of the film based on his life story, *Kundun*, the Dalai Lama published a new edition of his autobiography with a new chapter

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added.¹ The Dalai Lama is a well-known advocate of environmentalism and an enthusiastic participant in ecumenical dialogue.² Both are global issues of great importance.³ He has been followed by a number of lamas keen to portray Buddhism as environmentally friendly and ecumenical in outlook.

The Dalai Lama promotes Buddhism in general, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, in terms of global benefit, as providing something of value, useful to all. By presenting Tibetan Buddhism as of universal relevance, as something able to answer contemporary needs and as flexible enough to adapt to different cultural and historical circumstances he has assisted in ensuring its preservation.

The Dalai Lama's public advocacy on the world stage is reflected in changes he promotes within traditional Tibetan Buddhism. His approach can be characterised as ecumenical, critical, democratic and engaged.

The Dalai Lama has emphasised and encouraged a non-sectarian approach within Tibetan Buddhism. He stresses the common ground and essential identity of the four major Buddhist Schools and is very receptive to Tibet's pre-Buddhist indigenous tradition Bön, recognising it as an authentic 'fifth school'. His closeness to Bön and Tibetan Buddhism's oldest school, the Nyingma, has led to tension. Opposition has come mainly from within his own school, the Gelug, which can be characterised as the 'established church' of Tibet. Tension has found a focus in the issue of propitiation of Shugden, a protector deity known for his sectarian allegiance to Gelug teachings and antipathy to other schools, especially the Nyingma. The situation has come to a head in the last decade with

¹ Tenzin Gyatso, *op. cit.*

² The Dalai Lama does not, in general, favour conversion and regards religious pluralism as a necessity. See *ibid.* pp. 306-7. His reflections on aspects of Jesus' teaching in the New Testament have been published as *The Good heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*, Boston, 1996.

³ Ian Harris, 'Getting to Grips With Buddhist Environmentalism: A Provisional Typology', *Journal of Global Ethics*, Vol. 2, 1995, on-line journal at <http://jge.la.psu.edu> argues for a close connection between 'eco-religiosity' and inter-faith dialogue. Harris comments on the political dimension to an endorsement of global environmental agenda: '...the Dalai Lama is clearly a man of the highest integrity. Nevertheless, as an international figure he must face in two directions at once, i.e., to his Buddhist countrymen on the one hand and towards influential international elites on the other. An enthusiastic endorsement of the contemporary agenda of the second group, with its emphasis on the global nature of the world's problems, may be the most effective means of eliciting their support for the Tibetan people's fight to regain their homeland'.

the Dalai Lama's prohibition of Shugden practice by any who wish to take teachings from him.¹ Critics within the conservative Gelug tradition claim that the Dalai Lama is undermining Gelug tradition and allowing it to be infiltrated by alien and hostile influences.² The ban has resulted in the breakaway of some segments of the Gelug School including the biggest Tibetan group in England, who in styling themselves as the 'New Kadampas', tacitly claim to represent the authentic tradition of Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Gelug School.³ Despite pressure from within the Gelug tradition the Dalai Lama has not wavered from his position and regards unity among the schools as essential to the survival of the tradition. Institutions such as the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath serve to encourage an ecumenical approach within Tibetan Buddhism. Traditionally Tibetan Schools have operated with little reference to each other and with a high degree of autonomy.

The Dalai Lama encourages an open and critical stance towards Tibetan tradition. He argues that only what is useful should be retained and he has abandoned and simplified many rituals. He is also open to critical scholarly investigation of the claims of the tradition. The impact of academic scholarship on the traditional Tibetan tradition is, to date, slight. With the meshing and constant interaction with Western Tibetan Buddhism the effects could be significant. The thorny question of who, in the long term, decides what should remain and what should be abandoned remains open,

The Dalai Lama advocates liberal democracy and is open in his admiration for democratic ideals. He says, 'I regard the continuing spread of democracy worldwide as a source of encouragement and hope'.⁴ Tibetan Buddhism, in contrast, has historically been hierarchical although without strong centralised control. The Dalai Lama, along with many Westerners, seems to believe in the coincidence of liberal democracy and Buddhism. Liberal

1 According to the Dalai Lama the restrictions he has called for are not to curtail religious freedom, but 'are actually intended to protect religious freedom'. Tenzin Gyatso, *op. cit.* 1998, p. 309.

2 For an illuminating treatment of this issue, see G. Dreyfus, 'The Shuk-den Affair: History and Nature of a Quarrel', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1998, pp. 227-70. Dreyfus was a monk in a Gelug monastery at the time the issue came to a head.

3 In founding the Gelug School Tsong Khapa claimed to continue the monastic heritage of the Kadam School founded by Dromdön in 1057. See Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, Chicago, 1998, pp. 193-6.

4 Tenzin Gyatso, *op. cit.* p. 309.

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democracy may be the ideal environment for Tibetan Buddhism but there is nothing self-evident in the idea. Traditionally Buddhism has thrived in hierarchical structures where the ruling powers have offered it patronage and protection. Issues concerning the relationship between democratic structure and spiritual authority have been pivotal in the development of Western Buddhism (although not treated in this paper) and may become critical if democratic structures are adopted within traditional Tibetan Buddhism. The whole authority structure could be called into question and undergo radical change.

Clearly there is a connection between the changes that the Dalai Lama is proposing and some of the features of Western Tibetan Buddhism. This is not to say that the Dalai Lama believes that Western Tibetan Buddhism will provide a blueprint for change within Tibetan tradition or that it is somehow superior. Rather, it reflects the fact that when Tibetan Buddhism is required to operate within a global context, the same forces that are instrumental in the emerging forms of Western Tibetan Buddhism exert pressure for change within traditional Buddhism. The Dalai Lama accepts and embraces the positive opportunities he sees in this situation. Whether the positive aspects can be incorporated into the tradition without the tradition being undermined by other global forces remains to be seen.