

A Sip of Tibetan Buddhist Culture

When I visit Kathmandu, Nepal my favourite place to stay is Bodhanath. At dawn each morning you are awoken by the crash of cymbals and the deep rich blowing of Tibetan horns to usher in the day and mark the commencement of the day's prayer rituals. Usually I am happy to listen from my bed as the waves of deep rich sounds waft over all within a few hundred metres of the many Stupas and Monasteries. On occasion I will venture from my bed and take a quite unobtrusive place at the back of the ceremonial hall. With my fleece jacket zipped to completion and a crimson shawl wrapped around me to prevent the early morning chill breeze from biting my bones, my bare feet dance on the cold stone floor avoiding permanent contact. Ahhhhh I sigh and can't hide the grin of joy on my face as the gravel chants (imagine Barry White with a sore throat doing an impression of a bumble bee) offered up by the monks waft over me. As I shut my eyes I feel more "at home" in this life than ever before. A tear catches the corner of my eye as the musty incense fills my lungs and I look into the eyes of a broad Tibetan smile. Another crash of symbols and few more toots of the horn, higher this time, like a parakeet trying to catch your attention. And attention they have as monks march in clashing yet more symbols and beating drums, all in the procession have amusing yellow hats, reminding me of an oversized parakeet's plumage this time. Do they have parakeets high up on the Tibetan plateau? As the procession noisily settles down with much coughing, clearing of throats. This is no stuffy church pew with sideways glances to anyone who mumbles or murmurs. And best of all you are allowed to be comfortable as the monks in unison gustily plump and reset their cushions again and again. Junior monks charge up and down the isles with steaming kettles of salty butter tea and hand out great doughy dumplings to sustain all through prayers. And then the chanting begins. A low melodious drone, with the monks rocking from side to side in their crossed legged sitting positions. We go on a journey as the rhythm of the chant takes us. Slowing down and then gaining momentum as the poignant part of the phrase is drummed home. The richly coloured Thangkas (paintings of deities hung in cloth) that hang from the walls and the huge Buddha statue at the front too seem to start swaying with the Rhythm. Soon it feels like all in the room and the room itself are one, shimmering like a holographic image. Then we are the sound waves vibrating from the hall and wafting over Bodhanath.

Alluring as I find all the ritual and pomp around Tibetan Buddhist practices and how I find much of what I have experienced of them an excellent crutch to accessing the states and feelings desired of in my practice (in Tibet there is no such thing as a Buddhist you simply practice the guidelines to enlightening your mind – the removal of ignorance – through adhering to the guidelines laid down by the Buddha, much as a western doctor practices medicine, he/she is not the medicine itself, but the one he applies it). Yet they are not the essence of the collection of wisdom we call Buddhism. Take away the yellow hats, the dumplings and the smoke and that wisdom still remains. It is all pervading, it is simple a correct analysis of how "it" is and a set of instructions from how to get from "where IT isn't" to "where IT IS". A nice place to be by all accounts.

All of the major religions centre around a central God of creation of which we are either a part and or we have been created by. **And generally they involve worshipping this God in various forms and with various methods. In order to evoke your love for life and bring His/Her blessings into your life.** Except Buddhism that is. In Buddhism there is no mention of God, there is even the teaching of no-soul. This may appear like a rather nihilistic and grim set of beliefs at first. { Yet allow me to set the scene from my imagination for the arrival of Gautama Siddhartha, the man who would bring these teachings into being. As most of us know he was born in what is now known as Nepal and spent most of his time in what is now the northern part of India. It was about 2600 years ago and most of the people had spiritual practices similar to what Westerners with their fascination with grouping and classifying called Hinduism (the stuff Hindu, those of India, do). }

Until, that is, you understand the circumstances in which the master teacher Gautama Sidhartha was born into on the Indian Subcontinent about 2,500 years ago. In my imagination the cultural context into which he was born was of a country of deeply spiritual people yet they put their efforts in praise and supplicating God and various deities to bring them blessings. There was a strong interest and adherence to the laws of Karma so much so that it was almost a case of a lottery. “Oh shit I’ve been born a road sweeper. Better do some pujas so that next time I’m a prince. But I’m a lowly sweeper so my pujas are no good. Booo hoooo hooo”. Or, “I’m a Prince, I am lofty in the eyes of God. I don’t need to pay that sweeper he is lucky to even cast his gaze on me”. Yes the caste system was rigid and neglected the soul. Buddha came along got enlightened (I make it sound so easy) and told people that yes these differences do exist yet in the mind, so change the mind and you change the circumstances. If you change the gear in the middle all the outward cogs turn in a way that accommodates this change. (We won’t go into this too much here, except to say that when Buddha talked about the mind he didn’t mean what emanates from the brain but really the whole dream of creation. What we mean in the West when we say our mind is really that part of the mind working through that part of my brain – which itself is a part of mind. For want of a better word the Mind Buddha spoke of is the fabric of creation all of creation itself). Buddha welcomed people of all castes and creeds to learn from the wisdom he accessed and long before ladies in London were burning their brasiers and jumping in front of horse races Buddha ordained many women. Really Buddha can be seen as a great social reformer of his time. He didn’t do this by marches or protests or hunger strikes looking to worldly power for breaks and changes of rules nor did he look to other worldly power for miracles or favour he simply turned people inwards to make the changes themselves and he gave them the technology (no microchips, simply ways of working with and understanding ones mind) to do so. In clear, concise and logical steps. Very much a flow diagram of how to get out of a cluttered mind to one of restful peace to a mind that subsides and allows that which we call Source through. Buddha never said there wasn’t a God. He simply put people’s focus firmly and squarely on themselves and what they could do to help them. Whether what many of us call God blew their particular ship of self identity sailing or floundering in the seas if the mind favourable winds or not was up to this thing called source (often determined by how you had sailed the seas to date). Simply put “you focus on what’s in your hands lad, and let God focus on what’s in his. He/She probably has a better idea if

what to do anyway, no advice needed there.” So Buddha squarely put not only the responsibility for where each individual is at in their life at their own feet he also put the responsibility for the saviour there too.

Buddha also taught one other major thing. Compassion. In Pali, the language he spoke, the word that he used literally translates as “the quiver of the heart”. The vibration of the heart? The energetic field that the heart transmits when it is clear and we focus our mind there? Yes. Jesus called this love. It is looking at somebody and seeing the love within them rather than the external faults. It is knowing that the way they show up in the world is the best they can do and the result of how they have reacted to a long chain of events in the past, and maybe I would be in the same boat if I had faced the same circumstances. There but for the grace of God go I. Yet they can make different decisions in response to the world from now on and they can change, because they are not how they show up, that is simply the mind they have created around them. Now it is my imagination that the major spiritual practices before Buddha came along focused around the third eye – the believed seat of the soul. Hindus today mark this spot on their head with dyes. Cleansing the energy system here brings great clarity. The cleansing of it can also fan the flames of the ego. When we place our mind at this point we see the world through the eyes of individuality; “this is me, that is not me”. At the heart we see the world through the eyes of unity and camaraderie. Eventually all roads will lead to Rome. The path of the heart is softer and paved with petals and best of all there are plenty of companions to soothe the blisters and keep you company. And most importantly, what’s the point in getting to Rome alone – bring people with you to party with.

Many religions and indigenous wisdom carry large chunks of the buddha’s teaching. Even science the study of matter and how it interacts covers part yet it only deals with the parts of the mind measurable by instruments. Yet only Buddha had the complete set of information and set down in a step by step manner. Really your mind and how to transform it from a raging torrent to calm still breeze and then to subside into.... Why, because he was fully enlightened, he lived long enough to do so and he lived during a relatively peaceful time in a relatively peaceful place in a relatively advanced civilization and was able to attract to himself many scholars to teach and who could chart the path to salvation in their writings.

And amazingly 2600 years later in the west this information is starting to seep out into the mainstream of society contextualised with the language brought up to date for all sections of society to access and set themselves free from a wayward existence of following sense compulsion and remaining a victim to the whims of life. Power to the people. Not through guns, the vote or even money. Simply through understanding how you mind works and how to get it working for you.

Talk about all the contemporary Buddhist teachings out there, the work finding itself into all avenues of life –diamond cutter, Buddhism for mothers, Sophia college---psychology and book studying how Buddhism has reached out into the community

I hear a call from upstairs. It is 2am and my turn to walk with our 2 week old daughter as she faces up to the realities of a physical body and the colic she is experiencing. This for the moment is my practice, my focused meditation, staying present with her and her suffering even though my eyes and body are weary. She is the master assisting me in cultivating compassion. There are no yellow hats or the clash of cymbals yet this is the cauldron in which my practice is most emphatically honed. Her name interestingly enough is Sophia.

Glorious Kalachakra

Buddhism can be split into two main schools, Hinayana and Mahayana. The Lesser Vehicle, Hinayana, focuses on the teachings of the Gautama Buddha as recorded in the lessons known as sutra that he gave whilst in the flesh on the physical plane. With these teachings the intent is to rid one's mind of mental afflictions in order to free oneself from suffering. The Greater Vehicle, Mahayana, as followed by His Holiness (H.H.) Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people, adhere to sutra as well. Yet they take it one step further. The purpose for attaining an enlightened mind is so that you can then be in a position to assist all sentient beings. If carried out sincerely this pledge generates great compassion and a feeling of interconnectedness – the oneness of all. It is called bodhicitta, and can act as the fuel to propel one toward the ultimate goal. Once there you realise the true interdependence of everything – or so I'm told.

The Mahayana teachings can be further divided, as there is a set of "secret" teachings. The fact that they exist is no secret and you aren't required to roll your trousers up and do a funny handshake to receive them. They are secret because the masters only revealed them to the students of the highest intent and greatest mental capacity. Often to receive the teachings it requires taking the Bodhisattva Vow, in which the student vows to remain in the cycle of existence until all sentient beings are saved (enlightened). Quite a big thing, a little bit more than giving up your seat on a packed bus for someone else and waiting in the rain for the next one – it could mean several hundred more incarnations of suffering, losses and frustrations whilst the murderer down the street gets his act together and probably even means you helping him. It both comes from and generates the knowledge and feeling of the interconnectedness of life – a big part of the goal.

These secret teachings are called Tantra or Tantric Teachings. Don't get too excited, there is no actual cavorting – not on the physical plane at least. And most of the highest Tantric Masters are virgins! It is more to do with channelling and transmuting energy, sometimes sexual, for higher spiritual attainment.

The Hinayana path just follows the teachings orated by Shakayamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha also known as Gautama Buddha) to his disciples whilst in his home of flesh. It is believed by the Mahayanists that Buddha was simultaneously teaching his

more advanced students the secret Tantric teachings on other planes of existence. Some Hinayanists dispute this.

The Tantric teachings are then split into a hierarchy of four; with Kalachakra being in the elite bracket known as Anuttara Tantra (Supreme Tantra). This does not necessarily make it the automatic first choice for one's spiritual practice, as there are many factors to take into account when making a selection of this manner – a Porsche doesn't suit everybody's needs.

Before I get on to the juicy stuff, just let me share with you a little of how a Tantric practice works. The aim, as in all Buddhism, is to achieve an omniscient mind and Tantra is the superhighway to achieving this goal. It works by meditating on the effect – basically you pretend that you already have a perfectly enlightened body. More than that, through the empowerment conferred by the Tantric Master, you actually merge various aspects of your bodies both physical and subtle, with the Tantric Master and/or the deity in question. Modern day personal development practices employ similar strategies to this; from axioms like “be the change you want to see in the world” and “fake it till you make it” to advanced NLP (Neuro Linguistic Psychology) processes where you merge yourself with and become your future selves. With Tantric Guru Yoga and Deity Yoga practices you mix your energy bodies with those of enlightened beings. You can see why it's the superhighway.

But before you can gain access to this wonderful freeway to Nibhana and beyond you require to be initiated. That's where the Kalachakra Empowerment comes in. A lot of us have received Reiki empowerments. When done properly this too is a Tantric Empowerment. Well, the Kalachakra empowerment is not dissimilar in principle, the difference is it will often take four or five full days, and you may be taking it simultaneously with as many as 250,000 people if you attend a ceremony on the Indian Subcontinent or a mere 10,000 if the ceremony is in the West. To receive the empowerment you require to take certain vows of general behaviour and respect for the teachings and to receive the full empowerment you must take the Bodhisattva Vow. It is only for the open-hearted and those intending to be this way. Kalachakra attendees choose which vow they wish to take and the tantric teacher imparting the Kalachakra gives different practices for people taking the different vows.

People attend a Kalachakra Empowerment for different reasons. A few because it is their chosen spiritual practice for this lifetime; some desire the imprint on their mind-stream to assist with their practices in future lifetimes and other people because of the blessing it bestows upon them in a more mundane sense. The amount of people of differing spiritual backgrounds who attend for the latter reason or out of curiosity is growing, particularly in the West. For this reason and because of the significance of the times in which we are living H.H. The 14th Dalai Lama (he is the same being that has reincarnated 14 times in a row to be a Tantric Master and leader of a Mahayana lineage) has greatly increased the bestowal of the Kalachakra in recent times. In long distant incarnations it may have been granted only once or twice in a lifetime with people flocking from far corners of the Tibetan plateau and beyond to attend, just to get the imprint to be able to practice in future lifetimes. Now H.H. Dalai Lama gives it twice a year, once somewhere in India and once in the West. In fact he will give it for the 30th time, in his current incarnation, next January in Amaravati, India. This will be a very auspicious ceremony, as it is in the

place where Shakyamuni Buddha first brought this powerful teaching into the physical plane. It is said that whilst the Lord Buddha gave a discourse at Vultures Peak in Bihar, North India, twelve lunar months after having achieved full enlightenment under the bodhi tree he simultaneously propounded The Kalachakra to a host of Buddhas, gods and goddesses near Amaravati in South India. King Suchandra of Shambhala (the Buddhist realm of spiritual warriors – a higher dimensional reality of peace and spiritual prosperity) miraculously descended to Earth to attend the teachings, record and take them back to Shambhala where Kalachakra became the spiritual practice of choice. And as legend would have, it is being held until such time as the world and human beings are ripe for it to be revealed en masse to assist in bringing about the fabled reign of Shambhala on Earth; an unparalleled time of peace and opportunity to practice spiritual advancement.

I speculate that it is no mistake that in this time of planetary change from the Piscean to the Aquarian age, the age many people believe to be the time as prophesied in the Book of Revelation and referred to by the Mayan elders many, many moons ago, that H.H. Dalai Lama has greatly stepped up the dissemination of Shambhala's prized teaching. Could the 1,000 years of peace spoken of in the bible be equated with the reign of Shambhala on Earth? Buddhists realise that for this to come about it requires a critical mass of people in society to take responsibility for their own mind and what it contributes to the collective interdependent whole. Hence the fields are ploughed and fertile now the seeds are being sown.

It is said that if you have received the seeds of a Kalachakra Empowerment in a previous lifetime you will be drawn to it again. The imprint will be on your mind stream and you will be strangely and irresistibly drawn to Kalachakra again. Perhaps the name will ring in your mind once you have heard it or you will have a strange fascination with the symbol or mandala. They may even cause noticeable activations in your body. You may, as I did, even feel the urge to fly half way round the world to sit on a mat on a dusty floor amongst 250,000 people in the baking heat, spending your nights huddled up in a mud hut just to attend it. Many thousand Tibetans travel by foot for weeks over high mountain passes, using up their life savings, to attend and get a glimpse of H.H. Dalai Lama. I think my hardships were minimal in comparison.

My understanding of the science of Kalachakra is weak, which makes it easy to keep my vow of not revealing too many details to people who have not taken the Bodhisattva pledge. I will however reveal a rudimentary explanation. Chakra as most of us know is Sanskrit for "wheel", and Kala translates as "Time". So Kalachakra is the "Wheel of Time". The teaching tells us that there are three wheels of time. The outer, which concerns the machinations of interactions between bodies in the world; from who we bump into on the way to the shops, to the moon dragging currents of water across the globe, to Jupiter's trajectory around the Sun and beyond. Then there is the inner, which is the internal processes within our bodies, physical and subtle; the things that you may say are you and of your sense. And then there is the Wheel of Time that is Kalachakra it is neither of the former and provides us with a gateway to enlightenment and out of sense phenomena. The whole body of teaching that forms Kalachakra is huge with its own astrology, psychology and much much more, a parallel universe, if you will.

For the lovers of pomp and ceremony and beautiful intricacies the Kalachakra has it all, especially on the Indian Subcontinent. It takes about a fortnight for the whole event to take place. It's a cross between a University Conference and a Buddhist Jamboree, with monks by the thousands trotting around town. Makeshift food and accommodation tents are put up and there are market stalls with Tibetan goods and souvenirs. Even ferris wheels and dodgems, there certainly is a carnival atmosphere in the lead up, as everyone waits and anticipates Santa Lama and the spiritual gifts he will bestow. I think of it as Buddstock! It all starts with a few days of preparatory rituals to gain permission from the local earth spirits to perform the ceremony, they generally require appeasing. Then the meticulous construction of the sand mandala commences. The mandala is the palace and abode of the deity Guru Kalachakra and exists in the higher realms. Fantastically talented and dedicated monks construct a 2-D version of it out of coloured grains of sand. No glue and definitely no mistakes – probably the hardest jigsaw you are ever likely to find and several monks working round the clock for 5 days on hands on knees. Whilst the mandala is under construction the Tantric Master gives several days of preparatory teachings. Some directly relevant to Kalachakra but mainly vital Buddhist foundation teachings, with the message firmly drummed home that it is practicing the basic virtues day in and day out that is the basis of achieving Buddhahood, the higher teachings being the bauble or icing on the cake. After four or five days of preliminary teachings the excitement really starts to grow, more and more people arrive from out of town to receive just the empowerment, either because of time commitments or most likely using the same principle as licking off the chocolate and throwing the biscuit away. The excitement peaks as proceedings stop for a day, it's almost like the last day of term at school when you can come in mufty (casual dress). Everyone relaxes and there are ritual offering dances and other goodies.

Then to exams, or rather the initiation begins. There is one day of preliminary empowerments and then 7 empowerments spread over 3 further days. It is on the day of the preliminary empowerment that you can choose to take the Bodhisattva vows in order to be conferred the full empowerment or to simply receive the ceremony as a blessing. You are also given 2 blades of kusha grass, the short one for under your pillow and the big one under your mattress. That night you must pay particular attention to your dreams as some aspect of yourself will be revealed and the dreams interpreted the next day. I can tell you whatever happened in the empowerment that day, the dorm I shared with 500 Russian and Polish men, for the Kalachakra in Graz, Austria, snored like drunken sailors all night, previous nights of insomnia were well forgotten. In fact I found the whole 5 days of the empowerment fairly intense and powerful. Most of the participants walked round looking fairly internal. Especially those attending for the first time – or did I simply have greater obscurity to clear? I must have had, as I was in a fair amount of pain – it was some consolation when I was told my enlightenment body was being prepared, although a massage would have been more welcome. The camaraderie between Vajra brothers and sisters (those who have shared the same tantric empowerment) is truly beautiful to be a part of, an understated unspoken yet very deep love (compassion and interconnectedness). I seemed to float through the next three days, gliding in and out of the hall and spending a lot of time sleeping, resting and contemplating- contemplating

nothing, just a stillness of mind and very warm temples, my neurology being reconfigured no doubt. And then all of a sudden the 12 days were over and we were offering long life prayers for H.H. Dalai Lama. I didn't even feel animosity towards the people who had arrived in the nick of time to receive the empowerment, pushed to the front of the queue and then left early before we could make this small gesture of a morning's prayers for the H.H. to have a long life. Like giving a thimble of water in return for the ocean. And then I was following a parade of monks lead by the Dalai Lama and the sand mandala builders to throw the bag of multicoloured sand in the local river. Sand that ten minutes ago had been the most intricate and mathematically correct work of art I had laid physical eyes on, thereby demonstrating the impermanence of everything. One day this body and even this world will crumble to dust, only the interconnectedness and compassion I had felt for a vast and diverse gathering of people was real. I remembered back to H.H. open address on the first day, where he first and foremost, very warmly and completely genuinely welcomed the handful of Chinese people attending the empowerment before then turning to his beloved Tibetans and finally the Westerners. A tear drop ran from the corner of a previously cynical Londoners eye. Imagine if all world leaders were like this! Well practice Kalachakra and we might just make Shambhala now.

*I apologise in advance for any mistakes of explanation. In gratitude to Buddha Shakyamuni, His Holiness Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Most Venerable Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoche, Voulas Zarpani and the hospitality of the three Dmitrys.
I dedicate any merit obtained to all sentient beings.*

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