

Jesus in a New Age, Dalai Lama World: Defending and Sharing Christ with Buddhists (Excerpts)

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International Tibetan Buddhism

The West has held a long fascination with Asia, going back to the days of the fanciful kingdom of Prester John in the Middle Ages. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the advance of science, technology, and economic development in the West left many people disenchanted by the loss of simplicity, spirituality, and mystery in their lives. Just as their ancestors sought hope in finding the spiritual kingdom of Prester John, so modern Europeans longed for a fairytale kingdom where the values that had been lost in their own societies could perhaps be regained. In this subliminal fantasyland, rulers of sublime spirituality governed a peaceful realm of beauty, harmony, natural balance, and spiritual liberation. As the Asian land most isolated and different from the West, Tibet was a tempting metaphor for these romantic dreams, which were just waiting to be exploited by writers of sufficient talent.

The first such author was Rudyard Kipling, whose 1901 novel *Kim* featured a Tibetan monk who becomes attached to the novel's namesake hero. As depicted in the novel, the monk's highly romanticized religious beliefs seem much more at home in London than Lhasa.²⁷⁹ A line of much less talented theosophists, escape artists and con men (such as the Englishman who passed himself off as the so called "Lama Lobsang Rampa"²⁸⁰) continued to romanticize Tibet in the popular press during the early years of the century. But no one did more to embed Tibetan Buddhism in the West's romantic imagination than the British screenwriter James Hilton, whose 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* told the story of four unlikely adventurers (including one dreadfully stereotyped Christian missionary) who are swept away to a mythical Tibetan valley called Shangri-La. The story's escapist theme made it an instant success during the economic depression of the 1930s. Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountaineer taken prisoner by the British during the war, escaped to Tibet from an Indian prisoner of war camp, and remained in the country for seven years. His naively sympathetic picture of Tibetan Buddhism was published in 1953 as the book *Seven Years in Tibet* (which, like *Lost Horizon*, was made into a popular movie).

When the Chinese asserted control over Tibet in the 1950s, the Dalai Lama's government and thousands of monks fled to refugee camps in India. There they preserved their traditional culture as best they could, and tried to gain international support for restoring the Tibetan theocracy. Desperately short of resources, the Tibetan exiles in India appealed to the West for funding and political help. All the conditions for Tibetan Buddhism to spread internationally were in place by the middle of the twentieth century: a class of people who were disenchanted with modern life and who held a highly romanticized view of Tibet, a Tibetan exile administration in need of funding and political support, and the ability of both groups to travel internationally. As small groups of Tibetan refugees settled in Europe and America, the Tibetans saw a chance to raise support for their cause. In the early 1960s the first monks and lamas began to arrive in Europe. By 1963 the first European Tibetan Buddhist meditation center had been started

by Lama Chogyam Trungpa in Dumfriesshire, Scotland. In the 1970s Tibetan Buddhist meditation centers opened in France and Sweden, and by the end of the decade a Tibetan Buddhist movement was spreading widely in Europe.

Tibetan Buddhism entered North America somewhat earlier. In 1952, a group of Kalmyk Mongols who had escaped from the Soviet Union settled in the eastern United States. One of their spiritual leaders, the Mongol Lama Wangyal, started the first Lamaist study center open to Americans. Tibetan lamas soon followed, many of them setting up Tibetan studies centers at major American universities. By the 1970s they had established Tibetan departments at state universities in Washington, California, Colorado, Wisconsin, and Indiana. All four sects established meditation centers in major cities across North America, and by the end of the twentieth century there were monasteries or Tibetan Buddhist study centers in major cities around the world.

How had an obscure, complicated, and deeply superstitious religion made such a successful transition to Western culture? First, it found a ready audience among those who felt alienated from a society which they perceived as fragmented, hurried, unspiritual, materialistic, and disconnected from the natural environment. Not a few became Buddhists because they felt the Church had failed them. Such people were ready for a spiritual remedy from the mysterious East; a (literally) magical cure that offered solitary meditation and control of their own spiritual destiny. Second, Tibetan Buddhists skillfully used the entertainment industry and the international human rights movement (as well as certain aspects of the environmental, peace, and popular psychology movements) as bridges to mainstream Western culture. Third, the form of Tibetan Buddhism taught in the West was a highly philosophical form of tantric Buddhism, from which the superstitious elements of folk Buddhism had been discarded as not appealing to Western taste. This “refined” form of Tibetan Buddhism spread internationally during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

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Christ and the Western Buddhist

The Tibetan Buddhist philosophical system that many Western Buddhists find so attractive is in fact a living fossil, formed in the thought world of ancient India and preserved in the bedrock of Tibetan scriptural tradition. Even in modern Tibetan Buddhism, important philosophic arguments are based on ancient superstitions and dogmatic assumptions thousands of years old. Profound assertions about the nature of man rest upon occult concepts of ideal body fluids, mystic channels, energy winds, and other ideas scientifically discredited and abandoned long ago. It could be argued that with its spread outside Asia, Tibetan Buddhists will have to reconcile their beliefs with the facts discovered by Western science and other philosophical systems, but there seems to be little evidence of this. At least in its native literature, Tibetan Buddhism has yet to take other, non-Asian and non-Buddhist worldviews seriously. It remains just as inward-looking and self-absorbed as it was a thousand years ago. It remains firmly rooted in an ancient system of dogma and intellectually ingrown commentary. What does this mean for those who are concerned to bring Christ to Western Tibetan Buddhists? Many Western Buddhists bring to this philosophy a set of assumptions and a non-Asian way of looking at things, that is fundamentally at variance with basic Tibetan Buddhist teachings on karma, rebirth, emptiness and two-level truth. The Christian can gently and tactfully encourage a Tibetan Buddhist friend to think critically about these doctrines in the light of the way they live and work in the secular world.

This is not to say that Western Buddhists can be argued out of Buddhism, by themselves or anyone else. People do not choose one of the world's religions by deciding whether it is logically plausible, but by seeing if there is some degree of "fit" between their needs and what a religion offers. But pointing out logical inconsistencies may be a first step in helping a Western Buddhist to think through some key issues, which itself may begin a process of spiritual growth. Meeting arguments and hostility against God with love, tact, and patience will help this process. A good starting point is to focus on the person and not their beliefs. Who are they? What personal needs have led them to seek fulfillment in Tibetan Buddhism? Why Tibetan Buddhism and not another spiritual path? Is Buddhism a passing interest or are they deeply committed to it? In what ways can Christ's love be made real (demonstrated) to them? A person-centered (how can I demonstrate to them who Christ is?) rather than a doctrine-centered (how can I prove to them that the Gospel is true?) approach is usually most helpful at the beginning of such a relationship. Confrontational approaches are of little use in sharing Christ with Western Buddhists or anyone else. Cornering people with Bible verses, denouncing Buddhism as Satanic, or pushing for on-the-spot prayers to receive Christ will not only make Western Buddhists feel manipulated and resentful, they will raise barriers of prejudice which will be hard to overcome later. There is certainly a place for Bible verses and prayers to receive Christ, but probably not in most initial encounters with most Tibetan Buddhists. Coming to Christ takes time, and that time is more often measured in months or years than in minutes.