

[The Karma Of Buddhism](#)

Category : [April 1998](#)

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INTERVIEWS

The Karma Of Buddhism

Will Tibet's venerable faith again prosper?

In 1997, Don Farber traveled to India and Nepal on a Fulbright scholarship to photograph the religious life of Tibetan refugees. Farber, whose wife is Tibetan, has photographed Buddhist life for over twenty years. He was fortunate to gain access to the Dalai Lama and other key leaders. He specifically sought their insights on how religion and culture will be perpetuated among Tibetan youth. Some excerpts:

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, at his residence in Dharamsala, India, July, 1997.

Children: In a typical Tibetan family, the practice of Tibetan Buddhism is just reciting a few mantras and then offering something. But they do not know much about Buddhism. Recently, I have been telling people that parents should be the guru of their own children. The guru in the ordinary sense, that comes much later. Once parents become the guru of their own children, they teach what is Buddha, what is Buddhism, what is Sambogakaya, what is Dharmakaya, Nirmanikaya, Four Noble Truths, and more, so in the whole society there can be genuine Buddhists. That's my main idea.

Faith: There are two kinds of Buddhist faith. In the scriptures, also, this is mentioned. One faith is faith which is completely relying on someone, for example, someone saying Buddhism is good--just relying on that. That, the scriptures say, is not at all reliable, not genuine faith. The other faith is where in the beginning one remains skeptical. You study, investigate, experiment, then gain some understanding. Faith which comes from that understanding is genuine faith. We should have that kind of faith.

Science and religion: I never criticize other religions. All of them have great potential and benefit. But you see, other religious concepts are difficult to explain through science. The interest, respect, appreciation or faith in religions among young people is now decreasing. Our parents consider Buddhism to be very important, due to blind faith. But if Tibetan youth think that Buddhism is about blind faith or superstition, then they may think that Buddhism has no relevance in today's world.

Challenge of conflicting belief: In Tibet the people take it for granted that Buddhism is best. So, there is no need for argument. Today, although we are Tibetans, we live in an entirely different environment. Not only are there ancient, non-Buddhist philosophies, but also radical, materialist and atheist ones. In facing so many different ideas and influences, Buddhist study should include learning in the original comparative way taught by the early Indian Buddhist masters, especially in the midst of so many different views. Then, among them, one should know how Buddhism compares, have a deep knowledge of Tibetan Buddhist explanations, and know what is the fault of a particular philosophy's concepts. Without

that, you can't survive.

Impact of Western respect: The younger Tibetan generation who have turned away from Buddhism and also the Chinese must be finding it very intriguing that in the West, professors and scientists in the most respected educational institutions are showing genuine interest and taking teachings from some stupid, dirty Tibetan lama! (laughs). You can't say all these scholars and scientists are stupid or crazy.

H.H. Penor Rinpoche, head of the Nyingma lineage, was interviewed at his monastery in Bylakope near Mysore, Karnataka State, South India. This area has the largest number of Tibetan refugees in India, and his monastery, with more than 1,500 monks, is among the the biggest in the country, and much larger than any Hindu monastic community. He fled Tibet in 1959.

Religious survival: Buddhism is not only for Tibetans, but for all sentient beings who have the karma to learn and practice it. In recent times, due to the rule and rigid control of the Chinese in Tibet, religion has almost disappeared. Despite all this, people with faith hung on to their religion and its practice in their hearts and home. We who escaped from Tibet had a lot of hardships in the beginning, but were later able to teach and build monasteries according to our respective capabilities. We used to think that after the persecution of almost all the learned religious teachers the fate of Tibetan Buddhism was sealed. But it was not to be so. Those who survived helped it flourish with renewed fervor and devotion.

On young Tibetans not learning Buddhism: First and foremost it depends on the karma of the people or an individual. For those who have the karma, they will study and become learned. And those who don't work hard and are lazy don't have the karma.

Ganden Tri Rinpoche was interviewed at Drepung monastery, at Mundgod, also near Mysore in South India. He is the head of Tibet's three largest Tibetan monasteries, Sera, Ganden, and Drepung, in Lhasa, Tibet. All three have re-manifested in South India with thousands of monks.

On tradition: The Tibetan culture and way of life is passing through one of its most crucial times. The old Tibetan traditions are facing a slow erosion. If people find that this age-old Tibetan tradition is of some use to the world as a whole, then it does not matter whether the people who are striving for its upkeep are Tibetans or not. If there is a person who truly feels that this tradition, if lost, will be a great loss to mankind, then that person should help; otherwise, there is no reason for clinging onto it like some kind of wealth or land.

On Tibetan youth: After they finish their school, they should study any of the four sects of Tibetan Buddhism for some time. Then they will get the essence of our tradition. It need not necessarily be at a monastery. It can be any of the many religious or cultural institutions. If they study hard, it will be a deterrent to this erosion of our culture.

The venerable Gona Tulku Rinpoche of the Sakya lineage is a

respected monk living in Himachal Pradesh. Especially noted for his powers of divination, he provides counseling for Tibetans in India.

On why Tibetans lost their country: In Buddhism, we have the doctrine of karma, taught by the Buddha. The people of Tibet were unable to stick by these virtues preached by the Buddha, even though they have been told or taught about it. So, it was not only that the Chinese were too strong, but it was also the karma of the Tibetans which led to losing our country. It is not due to one or two person's fault, but is the manifestation of our collective karma. The karma does not have a time period of one life but of many lives. Only a Buddha can understand it, not us.

TIBET TIMELINE . . .

On Buddhist Resurgence: Those who were devout in the past are still devout now, but those who were not, still aren't. So that will be so in the future.

200 bce: King Nyatri Tsenpo founds Yarlung Dynasty, first record of Tibet.

700 ce: Buddhism introduced to Tibet under King Songtsen Gampo, tempering the Tibetan warrior spirit. His empire extends into China, Nepal and north India.

800: Buddhist teachers invited from India. Tibetan written script introduced.

1000: Indian Pandit Atisa in Tibet.

1100: Uniquely Tibetan form of Buddhism emerges.

1278: Tibet sends delegation to Genghis Khan, comes under Chinese suzerainty.

1368: Tibet regains independence, first monastic government.

1447: Gendun Drubpa, first Dalai Lama.

1642: Fifth Dalai Lama becomes temporal and spiritual ruler of Tibet. Good relations with China.

1876: Birth of 13th Dalai Lama.

1904: British invade Tibet.

1905: China invades Tibet, 13th Dalai Lama takes refuge in India.

1913: 13th Dalai Lama expels remnants of Chinese army, reasserts independence.

1933: 13th Dalai Lama prophecies, "The future holds darkness and misery," dies.

1935: Birth of present 14th Dalai Lama.

1940: 14th Dalai Lama enthroned.

1942: Tibet ejects China's liaison officer.

1949: People's Republic of China founded.

1950: China invades Kham region of Tibet.

1954: Dalai Lama meets Mao Zedong.

1959: People of Lhasa rise up against the Chinese to prevent seizure of Dalai Lama. 100,000 killed; Dalai Lama escapes.

1966: "Cultural Revolution" begins in China, all but nine of six thousand Tibetan monasteries destroyed.

1983: Systematic immigration of Chinese settlers into central Tibet.

1989: Dalai Lama wins Nobel Peace Prize.

1995: US Congress passes resolution that Tibet is a nation under foreign occupation.

1996: Photographs of the Dalai Lama are outlawed in Tibet.