

ABSTRACT

The Vajrayana Monastic Tradition in a Changing Time: A Study of the Lifestyle of the Lamas living in the Monastery

The monastic tradition is an ancient way of life chosen and lived by the Buddhist monks known as the 'Lama'. Monasticism can be traced back to the times of Gautama Buddha where he left all the worldly affairs in order to live a life of solidarity attaining enlightenment. In Tibet, it was the foundation of Tibetan Buddhism. When the Dalai Lama established his community in exile, one of the most important steps he took to maintain and carry on as well as preserve the Tibetan culture was the construction of various monasteries and incorporation hundreds of monks into it. Monasticism is one of the most important characteristics of Buddhism. Throughout this research the term 'Vajrayana' is to be read and understood in reference to and as the Tibetan Buddhist tradition because the monasteries and the monks who are a part of this research follow this form of Buddhism. The Vajrayana monastic tradition that has been passed on from Tibet since the time of Samye, the first monastery in Tibet is still continued today by its followers and monks in the country of exile. The monastic tradition that has to itself many claims of renunciation, abstinence and hermitage has evolved over the time as changes occur universally and constantly. The tremendous leap in science and technology, fast-forwarding our lives and modernization occurring at a rapid pace has caused time and space to change consequently resulting in transformation in each and every aspect of our life, religion: the values, culture and tradition has not been spared either. Whether it is nature's call or human warfare, humans have been displaced over time and have been accommodated in spaces alien to them. The displaced have also always been seen trying to create their own little home in a country different to theirs by means of preservation and maintenance while putting in efforts to continuously remind themselves of their own identity with the help of memories and experiences brought along by themselves or passed on from their elderlies, all of this in a continuously changing time. The monastic tradition that is being maintained by monasteries and monks in the country of exile have also faced the consequences of various changes occurring time and space. This thesis aims to study the changes and continuities of this tradition in the recent times by understanding thoroughly the lifestyle of the monks in the contemporary era and subtly try and understand the degree of changes that have occurred which will signal

upon the future of the monastic organization as a whole whilst trying to understand the role and significance of the monks and monasteries on the social level, thus finding out the significance of religion and religious identity in contemporary time. The literature on this topic has been quite lacking behind as all of the documents in relation to the Tibetan Buddhism mostly focuses on the 'exile' factor with only a few mentions here and there on monastic tradition. However, there are a few books on detailed religious data and religious ideas but not many works have been found specifically relating to the lifestyle of the monks in the contemporary era.

The research is based in Kalimpong town as it houses mostly two important huge Tibetan monasteries. There are many other smaller monasteries as well but since these two monasteries, 1. The Sakya Monastery and 2. The Zang Dhok Palri or Durpin Gumpa are quite huge and houses more than fifty monks each, it has been specifically chosen for research. The study uses the mixed method, as it is imperative to do so. It uses purposive sampling in cases for life histories and snowballing for gaining access to quantitative data. For all the other qualitative data collections, participant observation was performed as a part of ethnographic study. This research aims to understand in a very simple sense but of course from a sociologist's point of view, the lifestyle of the monks in the present era. It tries to perceive the idea of how much a monk, a monk really is today when the various characteristics of monkhood that is very much traditional is placed in front of modern ways of life which is almost in contrast to each other. This work will also try to answer the concept of viewpoints as placed against each other in terms of the layman or followers and the monks. There are certain things that a layman might regard as an aberration if performed by monks as ordinary men. Is it really an aberration at all? This thesis will also focus on the monastery as a social organization and its role in the society. It will also aim to understand the relationship of the monks with common society and the function whether religious or social, they perform in the modern world. All throughout the study, the work will focus on the ideas of preservation and maintenance of religion and culture and the impact and role of monks and monasteries in it in a changing time.